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Arius: The Alexandrian Presbyter

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Arius was an Alexandrian Presbyter, born in the middle of the third century. He spent most of his ministry as an unremarkable leader of a Christian church on the outskirts of Alexandria. When Arius was an old man he was suddenly labeled a heretic and was ostracized from his community. According to fifth century historian Socrates Scholasticus, the controversy began when Alexandrian bishop Alexander tried to expound upon the nature of the Trinity. Alexander asserted that the “Father” and the “Son” were co-eternal, and equally God. Arius heard Alexander’s assertions and took issue with them; he argued that, if the Jesus was begotten, as it states in the scripture, then there was, by necessity, a time before his begetting. Sozomen offers a slightly different account. He states that a conference was held in Alexandria to decide the question of the relationship of the Son – Jesus - to the Father - God. Alexander waffled on the issue but eventually sided with those who advocated the position that the Son is co-eternal with the Father. When Arius failed to recant his position, the controversy began.4

Any examination of the life and beliefs of Arius must begin with an acknowledgement of the limitations of extant primary sources.

1 Tertullian of Carthage, Prescription against Heretics, VII:1. 
3 Socrates Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History, Book 1, V - VI. 
4 Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History, Book 1, XV.
6 Articles

Most of the sources that have survived are the work of men who believed Arius to be a heretic,5 or, as Alexandrian bishop Athanasius declared him, “a forerunner to the Antichrist.”6 Additionally, what is believed to be the system of “Arianism,” is likely nothing more than a concoction of the enemies of Arius.7 Rowan Williams (scholar and former archbishop of Canterbury) believes that the term “Arianism” is an abstraction and its use should be abandoned.8 Regardless of what it meant to be an “Arian” in the 4th century CE, there was a man named Arius. He lived in Alexandria and was a popular presbyter, until he was exiled. Over time, his name became synonymous with heterodox theology and heresy. However, prior to this occurrence, he was long a successful presbyter. How was Arius successful for so long prior to his conflict with Alexander? Further, how did his transition from presbyter to heretic occur? Although the primary source materials provided by Arius’ enemies are valuable tools for understanding the opposition to Arianism, as well as for developing a biographical sketch, other information must be sought if we are to cease “play[ing] Arius’ songs in an Athanasian key.”9

Although accounts differ slightly, sometime between 318 and 322 C.E., something changed for Arius.10 He went from being a footnote in the history of early Christianity to being a universal symbol of corruptibility

8 Ibid., 4.
10 Scholars do not agree on the exact date. The conventional date is 318; however, 321 seems to be fashionable at present. The year 322 has been proposed more recently but is the latest that the incident could have occurred. See The Blackwell Companion to the Theologians ed. Ian S. Markham, vol. 1 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 10. for information regarding dating the Arian outbreak.
and theological error. Although the exact date of the outbreak of the heresy is unknown, it is clear that it occurred within ten years of Emperor Constantine’s “conversion”\(^\text{11}\) experience.\(^\text{12}\) Despite the volumes of scholarly literature available on the controversy that surrounded the teachings of Arius, surprisingly little is known about the specifics of the doctrines Arius espoused. Most of Arius’ writings that we do have are exclusively about God and the relationship between the God, the Father and his Son, Christ.\(^\text{13}\) Arius stressed “the absolute unity, otherness, and transcendence of God.”\(^\text{14}\) He almost always couples statements about God with the word “alone.” Arius reasoned that, if there was a Father and a Son, a subordinate relationship must exist. He argued that if the Son was begotten, there must have been a time when he was not yet begotten.\(^\text{15}\) Essentially, his argument was that the Son had a finite beginning, while the Father did not.\(^\text{16}\) Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh sum up the Arian beliefs by stating:

> [A]ll creatures, the redeemer notwithstanding, were ultimately and radically depended on a creator whose sole method of relating to his creation was by his will and pleasure.\(^\text{17}\)

Although this sketch provides some insight into the consequences and trajectory of the Arian phenomenon, it is lacking in context. How

\(^{11}\) Although the term “conversion” is problematic at best I will use it as it is the term used by Eusebius when writing of the event.


\(^{13}\) Logan, 15.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{15}\) The question of “time” is a little confusing in Arius’ *Thalia*. Arius contended that the Father alone is eternal, the Son is not eternal. However, the Son was begotten before all creation, and creation was then instigated by the Father through the Son. So, in a sense the Son was begotten out of time, at least prior to all other creation. It is clear from the *Thalia*, that Arius did not perceive the Son as eternal. Still, he certainly was not temporal in the sense that normal human beings are temporal. See Athanasius, *The Orations Against the Arians*, Oration 1:5-6.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Gregg and Groh, 5.
Arius came to hold the views that would get him into so much trouble is not known based on the sources available to modern scholars. Further, the question of timing is left unanswered. Why did the Arian controversy explode onto the scene when it did?

Examining Arius’ environment as well as the timing of the controversy surrounding him is vital to gaining a more complete picture of his life. We know he operated in Alexandria, Egypt, a Hellenistic society with a rich, philosophical heritage. Thus, to understand Arius, we must examine Arius the Alexandrian. It was in Alexandria that Arius became a successful presbyter and subsequently drew the ire of Alexander and his deacon Athanasius.

Arius and the Arian controversy might be better understood as a product of the unique situation that Christians faced in the third and fourth centuries in Alexandria. Two aspects of the cultural and ecclesiastical dynamic present in Alexandria seem particularly relevant. First, Alexandria must be understood as a city with a rich philosophical heritage coupled with a diverse population, where Hellenistic philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity interacted to inform the collective religious experience. Occasionally, the religious encounters in Alexandria erupted in violence; occasionally, they served to inform each other in a rich and meaningful way. Conflating Arianism and Greek philosophy has often been done by orthodox apologists attempting to explain how Christian theology could go so wrong. In 1889, theologian Henry Melvill Gwatkin wrote, “Arianism began its career partly as a theory of Christianity, partly as an Eastern reaction of philosophy against a gospel of the Son of God.” This prosaic remark might contain an element of truth, but

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18 For more on this see Roger E. Olson, The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform (Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 1999).
it conceals as much as it reveals. Arianism, like any ideology, must be understood in the context of its development. For Arianism, this meant Alexandria. Hellenistic influences had long been prevalent in Alexandria. For example, first and second century Jews in Alexandria understood that “reading scripture philosophically [...] meant [...] avoiding a superstitious literalism.” With this understanding of the philosophical-religious tradition in Alexandria, one can better understand Arius.

The second aspect of Alexandrian Christianity that aids in understanding the Arian phenomenon is the autonomy enjoyed by the presbyters. Without strong oversight, Arius was allowed to develop his theology for several years while gaining a following and without ruffling the feathers of his bishop or Alexandrian Christians outside of his church. Eventually, this autonomy vanished and with it any tolerance for diversity in Christian expression.

Alexandria as a Hellenistic and Philosophical Center

During the first centuries of the Common Era, Alexandria was second in prominence only to Rome. Located on the Mediterranean on the northern tip of Egypt, Alexandria was a center for Hellenization. This had been a focus in Alexandria since its founding by Alexander the Great as well as during the subsequent Ptolemaic dynasty. The city was also the center of constant conflict between all the factions present in the Roman empire, be they Jew, Pagan, or Christian, as well as between the Empire and the people of the city. The Byzantine Emperor Justinian, during his renovatio imperii, stated his frustration with Alexandria continuing to ignore his

imperial edicts.\textsuperscript{21} There was a unique element that ran through Alexandria that is present and continuous all the way from the time of Philo in the first century through the reign of Justinian in the fifth and sixth centuries. There is, through this discord, some coherence. It is a unique Alexandrian “factional individualism.”

The term “individualism,” as applied to Alexandria, must be qualified. It does not mean that in Alexandria there was what contemporary people recognize as individualism, where the focal point is on a single person. Rather, Alexandrian individualism denotes a stronger than normal identification with an individual sect. Alexandrians enjoyed an independent streak that colored their interaction with the Roman Empire outside their city and manifested itself in the interactions between rival groups within the city. Thus, “individualism” as it pertains to Alexandria can be understood as a strong factional group-identification within the larger matrix of religious practice. Further, it can be seen in the context of Alexandrian identification within the larger context of a Roman identity.

This factionalism might partially be attributed to the longstanding, divided nature of religious practices present in Alexandria. There was no single dominant religious force in Alexandria. Just as the Jewish community was strong, so too was the Pagan community. Eventually, the Christians would become a strong force in the city as well.\textsuperscript{22}

These constant interactions, often antagonistic, between different

\textsuperscript{21} Christopher Haas, \textit{Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.

\textsuperscript{22} Although the Jewish population in Alexandria was severely reduced by the revolts of 115-117 C.E., it was not obliterated, as has occasionally been argued. See Christianus Brekelmans, Menahem Haran, \textit{Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation}, Vol. 2, Magne Saebø ed. (Gottingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 479.
groups had an effect on those living in Alexandria. To live in the same city, each group had to conform with their neighbors to some extent, if only to communicate. The Jewish Philo, Christian Origen and Valentinus, and Pagan Hypatia for example, were from different times and religions, yet they shared Alexandrian values and certain beliefs and methods that rested loosely on Neoplatonist assumptions.23 This, in itself, does not display any uniqueness of the Alexandrian tradition; however, it is sufficient to show that these interactions did take place and the influences are undeniable. Thus, Alexandria was a place where people understood and reacted to Greek influences.

Neoplatonic themes can be found in some of the writings of Arius. According to Roger E. Olson, “Neoplatonism [...] emphasized the oneness of being so that ultimate being, God, would have to be the absolutely undifferentiated One.”24 This parallels Alastair H. B. Logan’s assertion that Arius was “determined to stress the absolute unity, otherness, and transcendence of God.”25

**Autonomous Presbyters of Alexandria**

Alexandrian factionalism had another effect. It enabled disparate groups to function within a specific religious community without being held to a rigorously “orthodox” line. As long as Christianity was competing with Paganism and Judaism for its existence, there was little incentive to fracture the whole with infighting over specific interpretations of the Christian message. There are notable exceptions where a group either strayed too far from the confines of the larger religious identification, or a

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24 Olsen, 105.
25 Logan, 16.
minority expression sought too much power. However, most groups, like the followers of Arius, were not considered too aberrant to tolerate. It is fair to assume, though it is speculative, that Arius did not have a “road to Damascus” experience. His views must have had at least some constancy. According to fifth century historian Sozomen, Bishop Alexander was the one who waffled on the issues Arius raised. He eventually sided with those, including Athanasius, who advocated what would become the co-eternal position. It was not Arius that seemed uncertain of his position.

Christopher Haas states that the religious factionalism in Alexandria had a decidedly topographical element. He notes that specific presbyters were chosen for their churches based on the desires of the parishioners. These parishioners were also devoted to their presbyter and his specific style. Arius, as a talented rhetorician and a noted aesthete, would not have been easy to control if the people that attended his church were supportive; and there is every indication that they were.

Athanasius marks a departure from the tradition of accepting the philosophical and rhetorical influences of the Greeks. Athanasius demonizes Greek philosophy. Cyril of Alexandria, one of Athanasius’s successors to the bishopric of Alexandria, shared the Athanasian distrust of secular philosophy. He is often implicated in the mob murder of Hypatia the Neoplatonist philosopher. Cyril’s immediate predecessor and uncle, Theophilus of Alexandria, was also aggressive in his opposition to Pagans and non-Christians and any influence that

26 Sozomen, XV.
27 Haas, 270.
28 In Dialogue I of *Immutabilis*, Athanasius has his character Eranistes state, “I hold the truth.” Orthodox responds, “So say the heretics and Pagans. But let us not be enslaved to preconception, but discuss the question on purely Scriptural grounds. This is to keep the straight road.” Athanasius, “Dialogue I of Immutabilis,” Later Treatises of S. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria (London: Parker and Co., 1881) 179.
they might have in the Christian tradition. These shifts in Alexandria correspond with the time when Christianity became a tolerated, perhaps even preferred religion, in the empire. Thus, the more aggressive attitudes of Athanasius and his successors may be attributed to the larger shift that took place in society. The religious struggle and stalemate in Alexandria had been broken; Christianity was the victor. Consequently, the way that Christianity related to itself in Alexandria changed dramatically.

Emerging Arius

Who is the Arius that emerges from this understanding of Alexandrian culture? We find a man that fully embraced the rhetorical and philosophical traditions of Alexandria. Orthodox writers verify that there was an aesthetic quality to Arius that would have been fully in tune with the climate of Alexandria. On such writer notes Arius’ aesthetic dress and eloquent speech. He declares, “[Arius] was unusually tall, wore a downcast expression and was [...] able to steal every innocent heart by his [...] outer show. For he always [...] was pleasant in his speech, and was forever winning souls round by flattery.”

Although this statement was intended as an ominous warning about the guiles of evil in general and Arius specifically, also present in his criticism is a flattering observation about Arius’s rhetorical skills. The vision of a monastic style of aestheticism emerges even more strongly when Epiphanius states that Arius took with him, following his expulsion, seventy virgin followers.

Arius was the manifestation of converging attitudes prevalent in Alexandria regarding Greek philosophy and pastoral autonomy. He

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31 Ibid.
32 Athanasius claimed that Arius had discarded “Moses and the other holy writers, and [...] put into their place a certain Sotades.” Athanasius, *Orations*, 12.
lived and preached in Alexandria for many years prior to the outbreak of the controversy regarding his “heterodox” teachings. Although we can be certain that the environment in which Arius thrived was one that encouraged exploration and understanding of the Hellenistic philosophical traditions of Aristotle, Plato, the stoics, and the rhetorical style of the Greeks, his scriptural knowledge must not be underemphasized. Arius’s *Thalia* contains numerous scriptural quotations. Athanasius wrote, “people may approve of the blasphemies of ‘Thalia,’ because it contains some scriptural words and phrases.” Still, the environment in which his biblical exegesis developed was one that was informed by Greek philosophy, a Hellenistic worldview, and constant interactions among competing religious factions. Equally important his “heretical” teachings were tolerated for a long period of time and, by all accounts, garnered him a substantial following in Alexandria.

It was in the ascension of Athanasius that Arius began his descent from an Alexandrian presbyter to leader of heresy and enemy of orthodoxy. Without Athanasius, it is possible that Arius would have remained a little-known presbyter of a large congregation in Alexandria. His opposition to “the Arians”, in turn, defined Athanasius. Whether the Arians that served as his foil were real or Athanasius’s own fictional creation, as Rowan Williams contends, they did serve to catapult Athanasius into the role of defender of orthodoxy. It is possible that, without Arius, Athanasius would not have been the controversial saint known throughout Christianity for his extreme means employed in defense of orthodoxy.

One thing that cannot be disputed is that Arianism, however defined, has been used throughout Christian history by writers from 33 Athanasius, *Orations*, 17.
Sozomen to Augustine and even by theologians in the 19th and 20th centuries to exemplify the ultimate and definitive heresy. Orthodoxy could then be defined as that which opposes Arianism. Arianism, as such an ill-defined concept, serves the purpose of negatively defining orthodoxy better than a more systematic heterodox theology. The term “Arianism” can be applied to all sorts of “heresies” like a theological variant of Godwin’s law.\(^\text{34}\) If a theology is unorthodox, and it questions the Holy Trinity, it can be labeled as “Arian” or “semi-Arian,” or later “neo-Arian.”

More importantly, however, is that out of this opposition to “Arianism” arose the Nicene Creed. Alastair Logan notes that “even if the concept of ‘Arianism’ has been shown to be dubious, the issues he raised concerning the doctrines of God, Christ, creation, and salvation exercised the greatest theological minds of several generations and led directly to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed of 381, one of the few threads still holding together the tattered robe of Christendom.”\(^\text{35}\) The same Arianism that emerged from the climate of religious interactions in Alexandria and was subsequently declared a heresy, was the impetus behind the creation of a unified orthodoxy. Following the First Council of Nicaea the Christian community still had conflicts. Not every altercation within Christianity was resolved; not every theological outlier was addressed. However, at Nicaea, the infrastructure was laid, the road paved, and the path cleared toward an established orthodoxy, and a largely unified Church. That Church would remain so unified, at least officially, for 729 more years.

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\(^{34}\) Godwin’s Law states that as an argument progresses the probability of one side being compared to Nazis approaches one.

\(^{35}\) Logan, 23.