

# ATHANASIUS



*Khaled Anatolios*

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS



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## ATHANASIUS

Athanasius was an enigmatic and fiery Egyptian bishop of the fourth-century Church. He was a principal architect of Christian doctrine and has been a controversial figure, from his own time to the present day. Much of his work focused on the question of the identity of Jesus Christ, and the nature of his relationship to God.

This book presents the fundamental elements of Athanasius's response to this question. It also provides a much-needed, up-to-date introduction to his life and work, focusing on the tumultuous doctrinal controversies in which he played a crucial part.

The majority of the book is made up of new translations of his key writings. These have been chosen with a view to presenting the rationale for Athanasius's fundamental theological positions: the divinity and humanity of Christ, human redemption, the divinity and work of the Holy Spirit, the logic of Christian worship, and the scriptural basis for the doctrinal formulations of the Council of Nicaea.

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# THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

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# INTRODUCTION

## Life and times

When Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria in 328 CE, at around the age of 30, he assumed leadership of the Christian community in one of the most prominent cities of the Roman empire. With its two great harbors, the *Portus Magnus* and the *Eunostus*, Alexandria was the major gateway of trade in the Mediterranean world, linking together the Roman empire with the markets of India, China, and Arabia. It was also a great manufacturing and producing center in its own right, famous, among other things, for its shipbuilding and for the production of papyrus, the most common writing material of the ancient world. Egypt, of which Alexandria was the administrative center, was virtually the breadbasket of the empire, its grain representing a significant portion of the food supply of Rome and Constantinople. Egypt was not governed by a “proconsul,” as was the case in other provinces of the empire, but by a “prefect,” a viceregal governor appointed by the emperor as his direct representative. The prefect of Egypt resided in Alexandria, his authority undergirded by a military commander, or “dux.” As well as being Egypt’s administrative center, Alexandria was also a major center of culture for the whole Roman empire. It had been the site of the majestic “Great Library,” which was reputed to have contained half a million papyrus rolls, and which was likely destroyed by a fire in the early 270s. Closely associated with the Great Library was “the Museum,” a society of scholars who shared erudition and common meals, and had a “Priest of the Muses.” All the major schools of philosophy were well represented there, and the city was famed for its contribution to the arts and sciences of the day. Ammianus Marcellinus, a fourth-century historian, lauds the intellectual vitality of the city, noting that “a doctor who wishes to establish his standing in the profession can dispense with the need for any proof of it by saying (granted that his work itself obviously smacks of it) that he was trained at Alexandria.”<sup>1</sup>

Sociologically, Alexandria was a melting pot of native Egyptians, Greeks, and Jews, as well as other immigrants. The combination was not always harmonious. The Alexandrian Jewish theologian Philo paints a lurid picture of a violent persecution of the Alexandrian Jews by the Greeks, during the reigns of Tiberius

# SELECTIONS FROM *ORATIONS AGAINST THE ARIANS*

## Introduction

The first two of the *Orations against the Arians* were written in Rome, ca. 339–340, during Athanasius’s second exile. Pope Julius, who was extending hospitality to Athanasius at the time, was endeavoring to arrange for a council to deal anew with the charges brought against Athanasius at the Council of Tyre of 335. It is quite possible that Athanasius anticipated that such a council (which did not in fact occur) would include a showdown between pro-Nicene and anti-Nicene forces, and the *Orations* could have been composed in preparation for such an impending battle. It is also clear from the contents of this polemical treatise that Athanasius is anxious to thwart a growing acceptance of “Arianism,” or at least a lessening of the opposition to it. Such a development was perhaps associated with the adjustment and selective attenuation of some of Arius’s doctrines by his supporter Asterius. In Rome, Athanasius had ready access to Asterius’s writings through his companion in exile, Marcellus of Ancyra, who had recently composed a refutation of Asterius. While the figure of Eusebius of Nicomedia occasionally makes an appearance,<sup>1</sup> the *Orations* show Athanasius in direct debate principally with Asterius and Arius, selectively exploiting both the similarities and the differences between the two in order to defend the Nicene doctrine of the full divinity of the Word as the only cogent and authentic version of Christianity. Athanasius veers eclectically from one “Arian” theology to the other, the various strands of his attack finding their center in the denunciation of the doctrine that the Son is not eternal and integral to the divine essence. Thus, he will mock Arius’s teaching that the Son is “foreign” to or “other” than the divine essence, and then argue that the Son can only be “like” the Father as his “image” (as Asterius taught) only if he is actually divine by nature. He will ridicule Arius’s assertion that God was not always Father, but then exploit Asterius’s teaching that God is always generative by insisting that the generated “Son” of the Father must be identified with the eternal Word and Wisdom of God. By creating an amalgam of “Arian” doctrine, he is able to exploit one anti-Nicene teaching to counteract another as well as to create the impression, which he often explicitly states, that such anti-Nicene teaching is self-contradictory and



# ON THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA (DE DECRETIS)

## Introduction

Athanasius's treatise in defense of the Council of Nicaea was written sometime in the 350s. A seeming reference to impending violence against Athanasius and his supporters ("in a little while, they will turn to outrage and after that they will threaten the cohort and the captain" (cf. Jn 18:12)) has led some scholars to place it ca. 351, when the anti-Nicene emperor Constantius was redirecting his attention to Church affairs after having been preoccupied with the Persian threat and an insurrection by the general Magnentius.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, it has been argued that it is a mere rhetorical trope to depict "the heretics" as threatening violence and that the overall preoccupation of the treatise, which is to defend the use of *ousia*-language, is intelligible only in light of the explicit rejection of *ousia*-language in the so-called "Second Formula of the Synod of Sirmium" in 357. Thus, the treatise would have been composed ca. 357–359.<sup>2</sup> While it is not possible to adjudicate the question with absolute certainty, the earlier dating seems more plausible. Certainly, the dissatisfaction with Nicene *ousia*-language did not erupt *ex nihilo* at the sparsely attended Synod of Sirmium in 357, though that event undoubtedly represented a climactic crystallization of a growing momentum.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Athanasius himself goes on to show, it was only with reluctance that the Nicene fathers themselves adopted such terminology. On the other hand, while the violence of the "Arians" is a consistent trope in Athanasius's polemic, there is a marked difference in tone between his allegation here of impending violence and his reporting of the misdeeds of his opponents once he is again sent away into exile in the winter of 356.<sup>4</sup>

The occasion of the letter is a dispute between some Nicene sympathizers and "Eusebians," in which the latter had criticized Nicaea's use of unscriptural terms in designating the relation of the Son to the Father as "from the essence" and "*homoousios*."

Characteristically, Athanasius quickly turns the tables, pointing out that it is the Arians who need to be on the defensive when it comes to the discussion of "such a great and ecumenical council" (4) at which they were condemned. Once again, his strategy of conflating all anti-Nicene factions as "Arians" gives him an

# LETTERS TO SERAPION ON THE HOLY SPIRIT (1:15–33)

## Introduction

The *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit* were penned ca. 357, during Athanasius's third exile (356–362), which he spent in the refuge of monastic communities in the desert of Egypt. They were written in response to a request made to him by his friend and supporter the bishop Serapion of Thmuis, who a few years earlier, in 353, was head of a delegation that had traveled to Milan to plead the cause of Athanasius.<sup>1</sup> Serapion alerts Athanasius to the existence of a group of Christians who accepted the doctrine of the full divinity of the Son but shirked from extending that confession to the Holy Spirit. Using the language of Aetius and Eunomius, this group maintained that the Holy Spirit was “unlike” (*anomios*) to the Father and the Son in being. Aside from the general observation that the Scriptures do not directly refer to the Spirit as God, the scriptural warrants offered on behalf of this doctrine were Am 4:13 (“I am the one who establishes thunder and creates spirit and declares to people his Christ” (LXX)) and 1 Tim 5:21 (where the apostle exhorts, “I charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing by partiality”). The first of these played an analogous role with regard to the doctrine of the Spirit, as did Prov 8:22 with regard to that of the Son; here, it was the Spirit that was claimed to be described as “created.” The verse from Paul’s *Letter to Timothy* was taken as an indication that the Spirit was an angel or “servant,” as seems to be indicated also in Heb 1:14: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent to serve, for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”

Athanasius’s response takes the form of a long letter, followed by two shorter ones which essentially summarize the contents of the first one.<sup>2</sup> The first half of the first letter (1–14) deals with the scriptural texts used by those who deny the divinity of the Spirit. With regard to Am 4:13, Athanasius examines an array of scriptural texts in which reference is made to “spirit” in order to conclude that there are two distinct significations of the term in its scriptural usage: without the definite article, it refers to the human spirit or to wind or breath; with the definite article, it refers to the divine Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Since the text of Am 4:13 refers to “spirit,”

## LETTER 40: TO ADELPHIUS, BISHOP AND CONFESSOR, AGAINST THE ARIANS

### Introduction

Athanasius's *Letter to Adelphius* was written ca. 370. Adelphius was the bishop of Onuphis, a town located on the Nile Delta, and he is listed as one of the signees of the *Tome to the Antiochenes*, which was the product of an Alexandrian synod convened by Athanasius in 362 to deal with the division among pro-Nicene camps in Antioch over Trinitarian terminology.<sup>1</sup> Adelphius is also mentioned among the names of pro-Nicene bishops who had been exiled during the tenure of George of Cappadocia,<sup>2</sup> and presumably it is for this reason that he has been granted the title of "Confessor." It is difficult to ascertain the precise contents of the doctrine being refuted in this letter, not least because of Athanasius's style of dramatizing his opponent's views by contriving self-damning monologues for them.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, given Athanasius's penchant for depicting anti-Nicene theology as being in organic continuity with all previous doctrinal error, his characterization of the teaching reported by Adelphius as "Arian" cannot spontaneously be taken at face value. Athanasius asserts that these "Arians" have now devised a new variation on their heresy, advancing from disbelief in the genuine divinity of the Word to a denial of the Word's becoming human. He accuses them furthermore of separating the Word from the flesh and of refusing to worship the Incarnate Word.

At first blush, it is difficult to see how such teachings are consistent with what we know of the doctrines of Arius and his supporters, which, even as elsewhere reported by Athanasius himself, do not include a denial of the Incarnation nor an outright refusal to worship Christ. Yet, once we take into account Athanasius's tendency to conflate his opponents' statements with what he considers to be their logical consequences, both of Athanasius's accusations can be made intelligible. With regard to the denial of the doctrine that the Word has become human, the issue in question is not simply whether an incarnation took place but who it was who became incarnate. Arius and Asterius taught that the Word who became incarnate in Christ is other than the Word and Wisdom who is an uncreated eternal attribute of God.<sup>4</sup> When Athanasius accuses the "Arians" of this letter of "separating the body from the Word" (3, 8), it is likely that he has in mind the

1  
 INTRODUCTION

- 1 *History* 22.16.17; English translation (hereafter ET): Bowman (1986) 224.
- 2 Philo, *Flaccus* 55, 65–71.
- 3 *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* 37 (SC 124).
- 4 Canon 6: “The ancient customs of Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis shall be maintained, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority over all these places, since a similar custom exists with reference to the bishop of Rome.” Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. I (1990) 8–9.
- 5 Roberts (1979, 54) conjectures that Valentinus and Basilides were teachers at the catechetical school.
- 6 See Stroumsa (1986).
- 7 Roberts (1979) contends that Irenaeus’s writings were available in Egypt “not long after the ink was dry on the author’s manuscript” (53).
- 8 We cannot be sure of the exact date of his birth. The date of 295 follows the Coptic *Encomium of Athanasius* in *Testi Copti* 21 (1968) 6–8, which states that Athanasius was 33 years old at the time of his consecration as bishop in 328. See M. Tetz, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Bd. 4 (1979) (hereafter *TRE*) 333. A later date makes more plausible the accusations later brought against him that he was below the canonical age of 30 at the time of his consecration as bishop (cf. *Festal Index* 3).
- 9 *Patrologia Orientalis* I, 4 (407).
- 10 *Patrologia Orientalis* I, 4 (408). Tetz summarizes this “little known story” and judges it to be “not unlikely”: *TRE* 334.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *History of the Arians* 64.
- 13 Cf. *Encomium of Athanasius* in *Testi Copti* 17.
- 14 Stead (1988) makes a plausible case that the letter “*Henos Somatos*” (Urk. 4b) was written by the young Athanasius.
- 15 Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 21:6.
- 16 On Athanasius’s affinities with Middle Platonic doctrine, see, especially, Meijering (1968).

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