

Arius, What Were You Thinking?

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ARIUS, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

History is composed of the sedimentation of moments in the lives of individuals, most of these “moments of the individual” are relegated to the inconsequential, but a diminutive few become foundational, altering the future of that individual and others beyond. Such an essential moment occurred in 318 C.E.¹, in the city of Alexandria Egypt; Arius, a local Presbyter, publicly criticized the Christological doctrine of his Bishop Alexander, igniting a theological fire that would spread to both the Eastern and Western dominions of the Church, burning for over six decades. When finally contained, the scorching debate would yield fertile ground for a forest of new theological growth, dense with Christological and Trinitarian definition.

Throughout the ages Arius has been typecast as the arch-heretic or “the villain in the piece,”² of the heresy which soon bear his name, Arianism. But did Arius really intend to set the Church ablaze, or was he simply warming himself by a parish fire, which fanned by theological winds from both the East and the West, got out of his control? Answers to these difficult questions are elusive, if they are to be found we must examine the kindling of the foremost personalities, events, and ideas influential on Arius preceding his confrontation with Alexander.

¹ All subsequent dates in this essay are of the Common Era, and the abbreviation (C.E.) will be omitted.

² J.N.D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 223.

A consensus of scholars agree Arius was born in Libya, supported by statements made by Epiphanius as well as correspondence between Arius and Emperor Constantine.³ His exact date of birth is more difficult to establish. Some scholars calculate Arius was born in 256⁴ while others will only say for certain that his birth preceded 280.⁵ More definitive is the date of Arius' death, reported by Athanasius to be a sudden event in 336. By Athanasius' account, Arius died the day before he was to be readmitted by Alexander (under an edict of Constantine) into communion, although his report appears melodramatic and semi-fictional.⁶ Irrespective of their fluidity, timelines established would certainly place Arius as a mature if not aged man when his conflict with Alexander occurred.

What little we know about Arius' education stems from a single word he uses in a letter to Eusebius the Bishop of Nicomedia. In this letter Arius refers to Eusebius as a "Fellow-Lucianist." R.P.C. Hanson observes the name Lucian could refer to several different persons, creating potential confusion over which Arius is referring to. He further notes that even if "Lucian" refers to the Lucian of Antioch, we know even less of his doctrine than we do of Arius.⁷ Rowan Williams agrees with Hanson regarding the dearth of knowledge about Lucian but allows for the conjecture that Arius could have

³ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God : the Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 30.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 79-82.

studied in Antioch with Lucian. Williams also entertains the possibility of “Fellow-Lucianist” being nothing more than an attempt by Arius to be on common ideological ground with Eusebius.⁸

Other scholars, including Roger E. Olson, promote Arius’ personal reference to indicate Lucian of Antioch, Olson further elaborates on theological constructs developed in Antioch.⁹ Olson states that many modern scholars consider Lucian as a root of numerous heresies in the early church; Lucian himself having been influenced by Paul of Samosata, a noted heretic.¹⁰ It is likely the Antiochenes had come to think of Jesus Christ as the incarnation not of God but of a great creature of God. This stemming from their notion of the Logos having a beginning in time and remaining forever subordinate to the Father, both in terms of role and very being. Olson further concludes many in Antioch tended to emphasize the human nature of Jesus Christ rather than his deity.¹¹ Bengt Hägglund concurs with Olson that Arius was a disciple Lucian, the follower of Paul of Samosata. Hägglund sees this as a connection between Arius and dynamic monarchianism, the belief that the divine element in Christ was a power bestowed on Jesus at his baptism.¹²

⁸ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 31.

⁹ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 142.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hägglund, Bengt, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1968), 70-75.

Influential both on Lucian and Arius was the great teacher Origen. Origen's thought held sway both in Antioch and in Alexandria. Antiochenes concentrated on Origen's teachings surrounding the "monarchy of the Father" and his emphasis on subordination of the Logos to God. In Alexandria they stressed the other side of Origen's Christology, namely the eternal quality of the Logos with the Father.¹³ Alexandrians enjoyed claiming Origen as one of their own. Origen began his teaching career in Alexandria but left teaching the latter portion of his life in Palestine. Hanson points out that Alexandria contained both proponents and opponents of Origen's ideas just before the Arian controversy broke out. It is evident to Hanson that Arius probably inherited some terms and even ideas from Origen, either by direct acquaintance with his works or indirectly by proximity to his proponents in Alexandria.¹⁴ He rejects though the notion that many of Arius' ideas are a wholesale acceptance of Origen's doctrine. Hansen finds that both Origen and Arius can be seen as subordinating the Son to the Father, he further makes the bold statement that there was no theologian in either the Eastern or the Western Church before the Arian controversy that in some sense did not subordinate the Son to the Father.¹⁵

J.N.D. Kelly concludes that Arius carried Origen's subordinationism to "radical lengths" by reducing the Son to creaturely status. At the same time, Kelly notes that Arius most certainly discarded Origen's doctrine of eternal generation.¹⁶ While many of

¹³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 143.

¹⁴ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 62, 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64

¹⁶ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 231.

Origen's ideas would later be rejected by orthodoxy, eternal generation would be used by Athanasius to refute Arian heterodoxy. Origen conceives eternal generation as the Son always being begotten, and the Spirit eternally emanating from the Father.¹⁷ Eternal generation is tantamount to eternal existence, which runs contrary to the Son being created by the Father.

As with Origen, Arius, and other early church theologians, Greek philosophy played a role in their understanding of the nature of divinity. According to Greek thought, the nature of God is ontologically perfect, in such a way that it cannot change. For God to change, either for better or worse, would by implication mean a move away from perfection. United with the concept of absolute static perfection is the notion of impassibility or passionlessness, God being incapable of change is also incapable of suffering.¹⁸ Arius coupled this Greek belief with the argument that if Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the Logos, and the Logos is divine in the same sense of God the Father, then God the Father would be changed by the human life of Jesus when he suffered.¹⁹

Philosophically, Arius was also shaped by Greek contemplations of eternity and created matter in relation to God. Questions regarding form and matter as well as the existence of God without a created universe were items of debate during Arius' era. The eternity of the Son, as Logos went with an eternal created universe of pure intelligence which would inform matter. Arius would have had difficulty excepting a created order as

¹⁷ Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought: the Fascinating Story of the Great Christian Thinkers and How They Helped Shape the World as We Know it Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 54.

¹⁸ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 143.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

sharing God's eternity.²⁰ This is exemplified by Arius as quoted in *Thaila* saying "Wisdom existed as Wisdom at the will of a wise God," demonstrating his belief that the universe and its time-spans exist only in the Son, who was brought into being absolutely as God wills.²¹

The personal philosophies of Origen, Lucian, as well as the shared ideologies of the Antiochenes and Greek philosophy were introduced to Arius during his educationally formative years. After Arius settled in Alexandria Egypt, his exposure to new personalities, thoughts, and events continued to shape his theological perspectives. Arius' determining experiences in Alexandria occurred within the context of his roles in the ecclesiastical structure of the city. As deacon, priest, and finally presbyter, Arius rose to good standing within the diocese of Alexandria prior to his fateful conflict with Alexander.²² The ecclesiastical structure of the diocese of Alexandria was considered unique for this era in the Church. Within Alexandria the church functioned in somewhat of a parochial system, the Bishop was surrounded by powerful and independent Presbyters, each overseeing their own congregations. The Bishop functioned similar to a president over a college of near-equals.²³ Local presbyters contributed greatly in electing the Bishop of Alexandria when there was a vacancy.²⁴ This distinctive structure, while

²⁰ Stuart George Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 124-125.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 5.

²³ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 42.

²⁴ Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 121.

quite progressive for that day, created an environment conducive to leadership challenges.

Although several are known of, one such challenge came from Melitius of Lycopolis during the administration of the earlier Bishop Peter. During the persecution under Diocletian, while Peter the Bishop of Alexandria was forced into exile, Melitius had taken it on himself to direct Peter's see. During this opportunistic time, Melitius declared himself Bishop of Alexandria and began ordaining clergy in Peter's jurisdiction. From his safe haven, Peter understanding this to be a coup, excommunicated Melitius but was martyred before he could regain his position. Melitius was also driven into exile by a wave of persecution; during his absence Achillas properly succeeded the martyred Peter for a very short period (312-313) before Alexander became Bishop in 313. Melitius later returned to Alexandria to lead a schismatic element in the Alexandrian church.²⁵

Much has been made about the possible historical connection between Melitius and Arius. Material from the *Collection of Theodosius the Deacon* contains confusing passages associating a Melitius with two people, one known as Arius.²⁶ It is very tempting, relying on this passage, to tie the behavior of arch-heretic Arius with the well known renegade Melitius. If this association were true it would lend credence to the notion that Arius had a predisposition to rebel against Alexander because of his relationship with Melitius. Hanson strongly refutes the association, noting that Arius was a common name back then. He further points out that if the document is to be taken as historically referring to Arius then there are inconsistencies regarding his ordination as

²⁵ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 32-40.

²⁶ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 4.

deacon, alluding to this occurring three times by three different Bishops. Lastly Hanson sees it as unlikely that Athanasius, who remains quiet on the issue, would have missed the opportunity to discredit Arius by associating him with Melitius.²⁷ Williams harmonizes with Hanson regarding Athanasius' silence, adding that Alexander also makes no mention of the association and would not fail to enjoy the political capital which could be gained by exposing it.²⁸

Although it is apparent that Melitius' "Arius" is not the same who became presbyter in Alexandria; the activities of Melitius and the ecclesiastical structure which advanced them, quite possibly influenced Arius the Presbyter. During these tumultuous times, filled with a plurality of leadership, Arius rose from deacon to presbyter, ordained to his final position by Bishop Achillas.²⁹ As Arius was advancing, Bishop Alexander assumed leadership of a particularly unharmonious body. The Presbyters of Alexandria were not docile clergyman, but a collegiate body, somewhat accustomed to disputes with their Bishop over the limits of their authority. Alexander may have attempted to consolidate his power as Bishop by requesting examples of exegesis from his subordinates, seemingly to reassure himself of their orthodoxy.³⁰ At this juncture, Arius and Alexander initiate public repudiation each other's theology and Arius begins to gather a following of believers.

²⁷ Ibid., 4-5

²⁸ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 40.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 44-45

It is not known for certain if Arius' bold theology provoked Bishop Alexander to move against him or whether Arius, interpreting Alexander's theology as polluted by Sabellian influence, rebelled. Hall supposes the latter is more probable, supported by Constantine's letter which first addresses Alexander with a scathing question.³¹ Olson proposes Arius heard a sermon preached by Alexander which he perceived as bordering on Sabellianism. Sabellianism was a modalistic heresy that reduced the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to mere names or aspects of the one divine person, which is God.³² Following the modalist a way of thinking of the Incarnation, God the Father was literally crucified and died on the cross because Jesus Christ was actually the Father incarnate.³³ Arius would have found this concept patently offensive, dutifully requiring a response from him.

Arius' response was to clearly subordinate the Son to the Father and remove the Father from potential passibility. However Arius carried this much further than the traditional perspective of subordination understood in both the East and the West. There were two quintessential elements in Arius' reflection about God and the Logos. Primarily, God is by nature removed from creatureliness, consequently if the Logos became human in Jesus Christ, then He must be a creature, although certainly the preeminent of creatures. Secondly, Arius advocated that salvation is a process of being joined with God by grace and free will. Jesus communicates salvation to us by what he accomplished with grace and free will in a manner that we can emulate. As Arius understood this, it follows

³¹ Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 121.

³² Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 142

if Jesus Christ was God, then salvation would not be something that he could accomplish.³⁴ These notions separated the relationship between the Father and Jesus Christ further than tolerable by Bishop Alexander, drawing a response from him.

If Arius smelled Sabellianism in Alexander's teachings, Alexander unmistakably detected a pungent adoptionist flavor in Arius' theology. Alexander responded by accusing Arius of repeating the heresy of Paul of Samosata, only in a more sophisticated manner. Alexander claimed Arius had removed God from humanity and therefore we could no longer be saved by a union with Him. Salvation is effected by the Son's essential identity with the Father. Arius had removed the linchpin that links God and Christ to creation, the divine nature's assumption of the flesh.³⁵ Hägglund expounds on this noting that opposition to Arius might have been based both on his doctrine of God and on his doctrine of Christ. In particular he notes Arius can be criticized for introducing polytheistic ideas and the worship of creation. Creation was placed side by side with the Creator and worshipped as divine. If Christ is different from God, but nevertheless is God, this implies the worship of two Gods.³⁶ As their conflict escalated, Bishop Alexander eventually relegates Presbyter Arius to the list of the excommunicated, labeling him heterodox.

It appears Alexander's branding Arius as a heretic has not only remained but has intensified over the years. Archbishop of Wales Rowan Williams reflects, "Arius himself became more and more to be regarded as a kind of Antichrist among heretics, a man

³⁴ Ibid., 147.

³⁵ Ibid., 145

³⁶ Hägglund, *History of Theology*, 77.

whose superficial austerity and spirituality cloaked a diabolical malice, a deliberate enmity to revealed faith.” He continues, “no other heretic has been thorough so thoroughgoing a process of ‘demonization’.”³⁷ This essay has examined the formulating experiences of Arius prior to his decision to confront Bishop Alexander. The demonization of Arius Williams denotes transpired well after this point in his life. In light of the early experiences of Arius as well as the prepubescent theological positions of the fourth century Church, a different interpretation of Arius may be in order.

There is little indication that the early thought of Arius was much less orthodox than the prevalent subordinationist positions of many early theologians. It is reasonable to question whether orthodox positions even existed at this Pre-Nicene point in time. Before the ecumenical councils which would follow, theology remained geographically diverse and in flux. It can be argued that Arius championed his own understanding of orthodoxy, perceiving his Bishop as straying into Sabellianism, he responded by wanting to conserve the faith. Granted he may have taken a step too far, but Arius was unwilling to stand still while others promoted what he regarded as heterodoxy. The ecclesiastical leadership structure of the Alexanderian Church advanced opportunity for theological diversity. The Presbyter College allowed for certain amount of intellectual freedom. Couple this with the history of schisms in the diocese and Arius’ confrontational behavior could be seen as inside the norm of his environment.

Given this analysis Arius appears to be a local presbyter involved in a conflict with his Bishop over sincere matters of faith. As the conflict escalates Arius finds himself excommunicated. Subsequent events which lead to Nicaea have not been investigated,

³⁷ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 1.

but based on Arius' early life one could conclude his journey to Nicaea involved the pursuit of both theological truth and vindication of his communal position. Despite the postmortem accounts, and demonization of Arius, for all intents and purposes he did not embark on a mission to change the orthodox position of church. On the contrary, Arius contended for his position of orthodoxy. Ecclesiastical and theological conditions were right for the firestorm that erupted at Nicaea, ignition has been blamed on Arius, yet seasoned theological wood was brought by all who attended the Ecumenical Council.

The historical response to Arius should give us pause. Arius is remembered as the heretic of this definitive conflict of the four century, arguably the most monumental theological crisis in the Church's history. Foundational understanding of the nature of Christ and the Trinitarian Godhead were forged in these four century councils. Where would we be without this arch-heretic? The innovative theological thought of Arius forced dialog that provided essential definition to our faith. Rowan Williams states, "Orthodoxy continues to be made."³⁸ If Archbishop Williams is correct, should we continue to saddle Arius as the extreme heretic, lest we bear the same yolk for current theological notions in the future?

³⁸ Ibid., 25

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