

## The Centrality of Soteriology in Early Arianism\*

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*A zeal for uncompromised monotheism has long been considered the driving force of Arius' heterodoxy. Scholars of the modern era have declared that it was his tenacious defense of God's transcendence which led Arius to place the Son in a subordinate position and to designate him "creature" and "work."*

*Close reexamination of the primary sources indicates that this analysis misconstrues the objectives of Arius, overlooks important aspects in the rebuttals of his adversaries, and thus fails to come to terms with the doctrinal crux which precipitated Nicaea and troubled Christendom in the years following 325.*

*The Arian controversy began not as a debate over God as first principle, nor as a collision of reductionist logic with biblical faith, but as a clash between two positive schemes of salvation.*

*Three key features reveal the structure of the Arian soteriology. (1) Language of Fatherhood and Sonship connotes an adoptive rather than a biological bond. Sonship is a category of conferred grace, stressing the dependent relationship of Son to Father. (2) The key property of God is will, not essence. Though he does not know the Father's essence, the morally changeable Christ attains Sonship by participation in the Father's will. (3) Because of his identity with creatures, the Sonship predicated of the redeemer can and must be predicated of the redeemed.*

*Once in view, the soteriological interests of early Arianism suggest new reasons both for the movement's apparently broad appeal and for the polemical strategies of Bishops Alexander and Athanasius. The Arian plan for salvation also makes plain the basic fallacy in the customary understanding of Nicaea as a "Trinitarian controversy," or indeed, as a dispute centering on the doctrine of God.*

\* In December, 1973 we welcomed Robert Evans as guest in our Arianism seminar in Evanston, Illinois, at which time we discussed and debated elements of the thesis developed in this article. The care with which he framed his critique and suggested areas for further research was typical of Robert Evans' life as a scholar. The charm, humor and seriousness he shared with all of us in that week were typical of his grace as the man we are proud to have known as friend and colleague.

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THE remarks of Peter Brown concerning Pelagius are capable of even sharper application to Arius. Brown writes that

it is only too easy to keep on the circumference of his thought, and to miss its centre... yet we would be wrong to ignore this centre just because it does not strike us so forcibly; for movements gather strength, not only through their explicit programmes and their more *outré* slogans but through claiming to give effect to what the average supporter had always taken for granted.<sup>1</sup>

Modern scholars, mistaking the outer edges of the debate for the core of Arius' thought, have described the early Arian teaching with depressing unanimity.

Several obstacles stand in the way of identification of the essentials of Arius' thinking. The first difficulty is that what we know of his programme has been transmitted or reported by his orthodox opponents. The chief of these, Alexander and Athanasius, were dominated by a single hermeneutical concern: the insistence that everything said of the Son had to be predicated of the Father as well. As a result of this hermeneutic, a primarily soteriological position was consistently restated by the orthodox in a linguistic framework which appears to moderns to be philosophical or theological in the strict sense — that is, concerned with the doctrine of God as first principle. Secondly, the transfer of soteriological propositions into strictly theological categories was aided by the Arian spokesmen themselves. As much under the influence of the format of the symbols of faith as the orthodox, they unwittingly allowed the theological to be accented. In Arian and orthodox correspondence, where major assertions and distinctions are developed within the context of the triadic confessional pattern, the doctrine of God enjoys undue (and, we think, misleading) prominence by virtue of its position in the formulas.<sup>2</sup> For example, Arius' letters to Eusebius of Nicomedia and to Alexander, as well as Alexander's encyclical letter and his epistle to his namesake in Constantinople, develop their claims, charges, and defenses within this credal patterning.

Thus handbook summaries single out the absolute uniqueness of the transcendent God as Arius' starting point. In the interest of preserving pure monotheism, Arius is supposed to have demoted the Son to an inferior order. Then realizing that Christ could not be simply one of the creatures, he advanced the problematic formula of a begetting in a time

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters," *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 193-194.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tertullian *De res. carn.* 2. In the context of the dispute in which the "rule of faith" became a standard for orthodox belief, Tertullian charged that by insisting that man's salvation demands enquiry *ante omnia*, his Gnostic opponents bypassed the prior question of the unity of the deity and thus abandoned the proper sequence (*ordinis sui*) in the discussion.

before time. Arius contends for a Christ who is an untenable *tertium quid*, neither true God nor true man. That this postulating of a time before time was a philosophical blunder disproved not that Arius was a logician, but only that he was a good one.<sup>3</sup> Having seen apparent inconsistencies in his thinking, scholarship devoted itself to tracking down his uncertain and rag-tag sources.<sup>4</sup>

A more careful reading of the polemic, both orthodox and Arian, changes not merely the stress but also the substance of early Arianism. We are willing to concur with the curiously ignored article of C. W. Mönnich in its assertion that the Arian controversy rests on a soteriological foundation.<sup>5</sup> We consider it misleading to portray the Nicene struggle as one that pivots on the person of God rather than the person of Christ, and shall contend that the conflict between Alexandrian orthodoxy and early Arianism is at base a clash between two soteriological programmes which are radically different at every important point. Salvation, for orthodoxy, is effected by the Son's essential identity with the Father — that which links God and Christ to creation is the divine nature's assumption of flesh. Salvation, for Arianism, is effected by the Son's identity with the creatures — that which links Christ and creatures to God is conformity of will. For the Arians it is critical that the person of Christ be as closely bound to creatures as possible, whereas for the orthodox party the closest possible identity of Son and Father is what must be protected.

Our immediate concern is the Arian soteriology, to which the following propositions are fundamental: (1) the key terms are Father and

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 95ff.; and "In Defense of Arius," *JTS* n.s. 13 (1962): 343ff. Wiles challenges the charges of Arius' illogicality levelled by H. M. Gwatkin and T. E. Pollard.

<sup>4</sup> Since the early nineteenth century, the origins of Arius' thought have been located in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Philo and the Christian "schools" of Alexandria and Antioch. In a recent survey of possible sources of Arian doctrine, Boularand attempts to straddle the latter two options. He suggests that Arius drew the "formules-clés" of his heresy from Alexandrian theology of the era of Bp. Dionysius while also inheriting from Antioch Lucian's exegetical method and Paul of Samosata's "monotheisme judaïsant." *Vide* Éphrem Boularand, *L'Hérésie D'Arius et La "Foi" De Nicée* (Paris: Letrouzey & Ané, 1972), pp. 101-74.

<sup>5</sup> C. W. Mönnich, "De achtergrond van de ariannse christologie," *Nederlandse Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 4 (1950), p. 409. Mönnich's basic contentions agree with ours, but cannot be accepted in their entirety due to his methodology of using later Christological categories to illuminate the Arian controversy (i.e., *ibid.*, 409; see note 14, p. 264, *infra*). While it is quite true that in the ancient church Christology had cosmological implications (Mönnich, p. 389, commenting on Harnack's analysis), it would be a mistake to make these *implications* the starting point of Arius' position.

Son, not "God"; (2) the key property of God (Father) is will, not *ousia*; (3) the key concept is that Sonship which obedience to the Father makes possible.

## I. FATHER and SON

One of Arius' major objections to Alexandrian theology was its uses of phrases such as, "Always a Father, always a Son."<sup>6</sup> We know this from Socrates' account of the outbreak of the controversy, from Arius' letter to Eusebius, and from Alexander's own statements.<sup>7</sup> The Arians objected to the sempiternity not of God, but of God as Father.<sup>8</sup> To use the language of philosophy, the term Father signifies a relationship which God has to the Son, not an attribute which he has in himself. This is attested by the care with which Arius distinguishes between the concepts of God and Father in his confessions. He writes, "Thus it follows that since the Son does not exist, the Father is God [i.e., *not* Father]," and elsewhere, "God precedes in existence the Son."<sup>9</sup> God only receives the name Father, according to Arius, upon the creation of the Son, or to put it more boldly, the concept of Father is determined by the Son. This observation, which in Athanasius' eyes amounted to an indictment, for Arius and his followers represented a fundamental and vigorously endorsed tenet.<sup>10</sup> When the Alexandrian bishop insisted that if the Son is not eternal, we should be called the Son's sons, the Arians retorted, not entirely tongue in cheek, that by the reckoning of the orthodox, Christ should be called God's brother, not his Son.<sup>11</sup> Fatherhood and Sonship are neither absolute nor essentialist words in the Arian vocabulary. They pertain to priority of importance, sequence of time, and quality of relationship. The Arian understanding of the terms Son and Father derive from empirical, rather than theoretical, notions of Sonship.

<sup>6</sup> Arius reserved the term "Father" for God until the creation of the Son. "Sonship" is then a determining factor in the concept of divine "Fatherhood" (Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 3.6). To the orthodox charge that the Arian believers should be called the "son's sons," the Arians retorted that the orthodox Christ should be called the "brother" of the Father (ibid., 1.14).

<sup>7</sup> Arius *Ep. ad Eus.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 1.2); Alexander *Ep. Encycl.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 4b.7, p. 7, line 19), *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.26, p. 23, lines 29-31); Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 6.1, p. 5, lines 23-26). Cf. Socrates *H.E.* 1.5.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander *Ep. Encycl.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 4b.7, p. 7, line 19).

<sup>9</sup> From the *Thalia*, in Athanasius *De Syn.* 15 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 243, line 2), and Arius *Ep. ad Eus.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 1.3, p. 2, line 6) respectively. Cf. Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 5, lines 25-26): ... και οὐκ ἀεὶ πατήρ ὁ θεὸς γέγονε τοῦ υἱοῦ, ἀλλ' ὅτε γέγονε καὶ ἐκτίσθη ὁ υἱός, τότε καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐκλήθη πατήρ αὐτοῦ. *Vide* also *De Decr.* 7.29-30.

<sup>11</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.14 (Bright, p. 15). *Vide* p. 6, note 1, *supra*.

The result is a literal reading of those passages of scripture which (to the Arians) spoke of the begetting of a second to God. Thus in the Arian exegesis, "Son" connotes an adoptive relationship to the Father, rather than a biological one. And Athanasius accordingly tells us that the Arians interpret Christ's Sonship by means of passages like Deut. 14:1 ("You are the sons of the Lord your God...") and John 1:12 ("But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..."). "Son" becomes a category of conferred grace which links Son to the Father in a way not radically unlike that which links all believers to God. Nothing serves to highlight the contrast between Arian and orthodox more sharply than the ways in which "begetting" language is construed. For the former (the Arians), those passages of scripture which speak of the birth of the Son are read along creationist lines to underscore the dependent relationship of the Son to the Father. The orthodox take these same passages in a physical sense, emphasizing the mutuality and coeternality of Father and Son.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the fear that essentialist or substantial or eternal linkage between Father and Son will blur or destroy the definition of relationship which stirs Arius' dread of any terms suggestive of communication of the divine substance, priority, or eternity. With a view to this, i.e., underlining the dependent character of Sonship, the Arians collected texts from the New Testament which emphasized the Son's humiliation and suffering. What Alexander and Athanasius unfailingly regard as irreligious efforts to dishonor the Son and demote him to the rank of creature represent an exact rendering of what the Arians consider to be the meaning of Sonship both for Christ and for Christians. Athanasius complains: "If . . . the Word is not from (ἐκ) God, as would be a natural and genuine son from a father, but is named as the creatures, because they are framed, he (as all things from God) is neither from the *ousia* of the Father nor is himself the Son according to *ousia*, but from virtue (ἐξ ἀρετῆς) as we are called sons according to grace (κατὰ χάριν)."<sup>13</sup> We shall return later to Athanasius' knowledge of the Arian soteriological goal, and his concerted effort to frustrate it through the use of the essentialist connection between Father and Son. At this point it is enough to stress the dependent character of Sonship in the Arian scheme. Whatever philosophical objections and defenses appear in Arius' confessional statements should be read in the context of such soteriological formulations rather than against the background of antique philosophical dogmatisms.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 6.3, p. 6, lines 3ff.).

<sup>13</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 5.22 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 19, lines 4-8).

<sup>14</sup> The emphasis of Mönnich ("ariannse christology," p. 390) on the rationalistic tendencies of Arius and the related designation of Aëtius as his direct successor seems at this stage of our research to be unwarranted. Mönnich wished to distinguish between the tendencies of Arian *thinkers* and their desire to prove

Conceived relationally rather than ontologically, and marked by dependency rather than coequality, Sonship for the early Arians is grounded in the conception of the will of God, and the faculty of willing, to which we now turn.

## II. WILL

Both orthodox and Arian would agree that the category "will," whether divine or human, can signify changeability. The question of the will becomes a pivotal issue in the controversy. Here also, Athanasius complains that the Arian phrase "the Son has received being from the Father at his will ( $\beta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\acute{\eta}\sigma\epsilon\iota$ ) and pleasure ( $\theta\epsilon\lambda\acute{\eta}\sigma\epsilon\iota$ )" is blasphemous in that it implicates the Son (thus the divine nature) in that instability which undermines the certainty of salvation.<sup>15</sup> Nature or *ousia* categories have to take precedence over and secure the will in unchangeability. Athanasius' contention is that the divine nature must control the Son's will. The Arians maintain:

Unless he has by will come to be, then God had a Son by necessity and against His good pleasure ( $\mu\grave{\eta}\ \theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\nu$ ).

Athanasius retorts:

And who is it then who imposes necessity on Him? . . . for what is contrary to will they see; but what is greater and transcends it has escaped their perception. For as what is beside purpose is contrary to will, so what is according to nature transcends and precedes counselling. . . . As far then as the Son transcends the creature, by so much does what is by nature transcend the will.<sup>16</sup>

To divinize the willing principle in the incarnate Son, then, becomes a matter of critical importance to Athanasius. When discussing the agony of Gethsemane, he will locate the willing faculty in the immutable Logos, but human weakness and fear (i.e., the marks of mutability) in the flesh.<sup>17</sup> Both the generation of the Son and his work as incarnate Christ are formulated in substantialist rather than voluntarist categories.

their contention of Christ's creaturehood, on the one hand, and the confessors, pneumatics and ascetics who formed Arius' more popular following, on the other (ibid., pp. 394-95). The distinction remains to be demonstrated. But he was surely right in his assertion that the controversy makes no sense on formal theological grounds (ibid., p. 409) and in his turning to ethics to unlock the problem of how, for Arius, Christ achieved unchangeability (ibid., p. 406). Thus Arian and orthodox positions represented two different renderings of the cardinal matters of Christianity (ibid., pp. 409-10).

<sup>15</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 3.59 (Bright, p. 212).

<sup>16</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 3.62 (Bright, p. 215). NPNF translation, altered.

<sup>17</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 3.57 (Bright, pp. 209-10).

Exactly the opposite holds true for the Arians, to whom the notion of will excluded any substantial commonality between the Father and the Son. The Son himself is a product of the Father's intentionality.

Everything we have from Arius professes the creation of the Son as an act of the Father's will.<sup>18</sup> It is by will rather than reason that God relates himself to all creation. Even Eusebius of Nicomedia, who has been seen as one of the more philosophical of the exponents of Arian thought, uses his metaphysical talents to destroy any ontological relationship between God and the world. For him there is no *analogia entis* — there is only the will of the creator upon which the creature is radically dependent for both being and knowledge. Such is the burden of his argumentation in the letter to Paulinus of Tyre: one cannot deduce anything about God's nature from rebellious sons (Isaiah 1:2), inconstant creatures (Deut. 32:18), or drops of dew (Job 38:28).<sup>19</sup> Eusebius argues:

There is nothing from His essence, but all things having come into being by His will, each one exists as it was begotten. For on the one hand there is God, but on the other are the things which will be like his Word with respect to similarity, and the things which came into being according to free will.<sup>20</sup>

The succeeding line reveals that for the Arian, ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ means "by His will," rather than "out of His substance."<sup>21</sup> The lack of knowledge of God as he is in himself, professed by Arius and other early Arians, is not inspired by and does not result in a negative theology, but points, instead, to a prior concern for a positive soteriology — one grounded in willing, not in knowing. Thus Arius maintains that the Son sees and knows neither his Father's essence nor his own.<sup>22</sup> As a creature, the Son's knowledge is proportionate rather than absolute. In Arius' own words:

I will say plainly how the invisible is seen by the Son: by the power with which God sees; in due measure the Son undertakes to see the Father, as is proper.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Arius *Ep. ad Eus.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 1.4, p. 2, line 9- p.3, line 3), *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 6, p. 12, lines 8-9); Athanasius *De Syn.* 15 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 243, lines 3,11).

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius of Nicomedia *Ep. ad Paulin.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 8.7, p. 17, lines 1-7).

<sup>20</sup> Eusebius *Ep. ad Paulin.* NPNF translation.

<sup>21</sup> Eusebius *Ep. ad Paulin.* 8.8.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander *Ep. Encycl.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 4b.8, p. 8, lines 4-5); Athanasius *De Syn.* 15 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 243, lines 16, 18-19).

<sup>23</sup> Athanasius *De Syn.* 15 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 242, lines 21-22). Cf. Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.6 (Bright, p. 6), 1.9 (Bright, p. 9).

Operating with the faculty of willing rather than knowing, the Son is a being truly distinct from the Father, and this means for the Arians that Christ is no hypostasis of the Father's will.<sup>24</sup> Like all other creatures, the Son makes choices—he is capable of vice as well as virtue.<sup>25</sup> In other words, he is *τρέπτός*. This changeability is at the heart of the Arian Christology. Alexander reports in one of his letters:

Someone asked them if the Logos of God is able to be changed, as the Devil was, and they were not afraid to say, 'Yes, he is able; for being begotten and created, he has a changeable nature.'<sup>26</sup>

In the single passage in which Arius applies the term *ἀτρέπτος* to the Son, he has in mind that ultimate perfection of willing which the creature achieves through obedience.<sup>27</sup> We can demonstrate this in two ways. First, by the Arian postulate that God foreknew the virtuous choices (i.e., deeds) of the one he would name His Son—we ascertain that here *ἀτρέπτος* is a proleptic term.<sup>28</sup> Second, for the same reasons the Arian spokesmen at Nicaea can assent to calling the Christ unchangeable by invoking the apostle's saying: "Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ." That is, unchangeability is a category of constancy of affection, rather than commonality of substance.<sup>29</sup> The Arians seem to have recognized affection as a species of willing, a Stoic position which Origen had also taken in the fourth book of *On First Principles*.<sup>30</sup> Athanasius is not unfamiliar with this use of the term *ἀτρέπτος*. He knows full well of an unchangeability which is attained by virtuous activity through the keeping of commandments, but, against the Arians,

<sup>24</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.5 (Bright, p. 6): "...but in his [Christ's] own free will, while he chooses, he remains good." *Vide* Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.13, p. 21, lines 19-23).

<sup>25</sup> Alexander *Ep. Encycl.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 4b.10, p. 8, lines 2-3), *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.11, p. 21, lines 11-12, etc.).

<sup>26</sup> Alexander *Ep. Encycl.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 4b.10).

<sup>27</sup> Arius *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 6, p. 12, line 9).

<sup>28</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 6.5, p. 6, lines 15-18), 3.9 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 9, 2-3, p. 8, lines 25-29). Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.12, p. 21, lines 16-19): "...they said that by foreknowledge and foresight God, having foreknown this concerning him [i.e., that unlike other creatures, Christ would obey], chose him out from among all because he would not rebel." *Vide* also Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.5.

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 5.20 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 20.2, p. 16, line 37).

<sup>30</sup> H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 226, points to Diogenes Laertius *Vita phil.* 1.116, Origen *De Prin.* 4.4.1 and Col. 1.13. Athanasius, perceiving the connection between "will" and "affection," accuses his opponents of attributing the Son's generation to "human" affection (*Or. c. Ar.* 1.10).

he reserves the achievement of this type of unchangeability to the believer, and does not attribute it to the divine Son.<sup>31</sup>

For Athanasius, the Son shares in the essential unchangeability of the Father; for the Arians the Son shares in the ethical changeability of all creatures. The Arian redeemer has his status by virtue of conferred grace, or adoption, or by participation in the Father's purpose for all creatures. This claim is expressed in one of Arius' "blasphemies" which asserts that the Father "advanced him as a Son to Himself by adoption."<sup>32</sup> Athanasius in his first oration quotes Arius on this point in greater detail:

And Christ is not true God, but by participation (μετοχή) even he was made God (ἐθεοποίηθη). The Son does not know the Father exactly, nor does the Logos see the Father perfectly, and neither does he perceive nor the Logos understand the Father exactly; for he is not the true and only Logos of the Father, but by name alone he is called Logos and Sophia, and by grace is called Son and Power. He is not unchangeable, as the Father is, but he is changeable in nature, as the creatures.<sup>33</sup>

What was odious to the piety of Athanasius was that the Person of the Word was plunged into the world of moral advancement:

Is Jesus Christ a man, as all other men, or is he God bearing flesh? If then, on the one hand, he is an ordinary man, like the rest, let him be advancing (προκόπτων) as a man... But if he is a God bearing flesh, since indeed he truly is this, and 'the Logos became flesh,' and being God descended to earth, what kind of advance has he who is equal to God?<sup>34</sup>

These remarks by Athanasius are in response to Arian exposition of Luke 2:52, which relates that the Son "advanced (προέκοπτεν) in wisdom and stature, etc." The question of the προκοπή of the Son was central to the controversy even before Nicaea, as we learn from Alexander's letter to Alexander. The patriarch of Alexandria devotes considerable space to combating the view that Christ has realized his Sonship by "diligence of conduct" (τρόπων ἐπιμελεία) and "practice of moral advancement" (προκοπῆς ἀσκήσει).<sup>35</sup> Both Alexander and Ath-

<sup>31</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 5.20 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 20,3, p. 17, lines 5-11).

<sup>32</sup> Athanasius *De Syn.* 15 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 242, line 15). Cf. Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.31) and the Arian application of Ps. 45:1 (LXX) to Christ in the same document (Urk. 14.14).

<sup>33</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.9 (Bright, p. 9).

<sup>34</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 3.51 (Bright, p. 204). For the Arian position on moral improvement, see also Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 6.4, p. 6, lines 12ff.).

<sup>35</sup> Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.34, p. 25, lines 1-2). The question is discussed throughout Urk. 14.30-34.

anasius fear that a Son who advances by choice and discipline can fall by whim, thus undoing the work of Incarnation.<sup>36</sup> What is the Alexandrians' fear is the Arians' soteriological *condicio sine qua non*.

When we approach Arian Christology from the standpoint of Stoic ethics, rather than from that of Logos speculation or metaphysics, the view of Christ as ὁ προκόπτων is accorded its full weight. J. M. Rist makes the point that the Stoic (not only Seneca, but by implication, Chrysippus) regards *willing*, not knowing, as the essential category for the one who is advancing.<sup>37</sup> Of the fool (that is, the one not yet σοφός) Seneca writes: "Let *scientia* be absent rather than *voluntas* . . .," and he declares elsewhere: "A great part of progress to virtue is wanting to progress."<sup>38</sup>

The Arian proposition that the Son knows neither his own nor his Father's nature must be understood in light of the Stoic portrait of ὁ προκόπτων. The Incarnate One of the Arians possesses the requisite *willing* of the aspirant, but not the perfected knowledge of the Sage. Thus when the Arians mention the Son's ignorance, their language is laced with the vocabulary of judging and apprehension (e.g., οὐκ οἶδε . . . ἀκριβῶς, . . . οὔτε ὁρᾷ τελείως, . . . οὔτε συνιᾷ . . . λείπει εἰς κατάληψιν).<sup>39</sup> The Arian Christ must advance, for as first-born of all creatures, he is the pioneer and perfecter of that Sonship which all creatures are destined to receive.<sup>40</sup> This is the center of the Arian soteriological program, and the explanation of Arianism's broad appeal.

### III. SONSHIP

At the beginning of this paper we made reference to the consistent Alexandrian episcopal hermeneutic which strove to tie the divine attributes of the Son to the Father's nature. That is its positive formu-

<sup>36</sup> Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* 14.34 (a persistent theme in Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 3).

<sup>37</sup> J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 226-28.

<sup>38</sup> Seneca *Ep.* 81.13 and *Ep.* 71.36 respectively. Quoted by Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, pp. 225-26.

<sup>39</sup> Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.9 (Bright, p. 9); *Vide* also his *De Syn.* 15 (end) and *Or. c. Ar.* 1.6 (Bright, p. 6, from the *Thalia*). Mönnich recognized that the Stoic wise man was influential for Arian Christology, but by focusing on the perfected state of the σοφός with respect to its importance for unchangeability in Arius' thought, he did not perceive the significance of the Stoic concept of "advance" (pp. 406-07).

<sup>40</sup> Mönnich, "arianse christology," p. 408, had this exactly right (*vide* note 14, *supra*). Cf. A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (New York: John Knox Press, 1965), p. 192, note 2. For μονογενής, *infra*, page 270, note 45, and Appendix.

lation, one capable of being misconstrued as theological; but when the soteriological character of the conflict between orthodoxy and Arianism comes into full view, we are able to see what that hermeneutic really meant in hand-to-hand combat. It meant that Christ's Sonship was of an essentially different order from ours. As one of Alexander's letters puts the point:

... it must be seen that the Sonship of our Savior has no community with the sonship of the rest [of men].<sup>41</sup>

The Arian hermeneutic cannot be misconstrued. It runs: what is predicated of the Redeemer must be predicated of the redeemed. The central point in the Arian system is that Christ gains and holds his Sonship in the same way as other creatures. Arius would be in full agreement with that tendency in early Christianity to identify the believers as θεοί, a motif fortified by themes in the Psalms and the Fourth Gospel,<sup>42</sup> and given succinct expression by Irenaeus:

... there is none other called God by the scriptures except the Father of all, and the Son, and those who possess the adoption.<sup>43</sup>

The scandal of the Arian watch-words ("there was when he was not," "creature," "work," "changeable," etc.) actually lay in their full implications for soteriology, as epitomized in phrases like "even as we," "like us," "as all others," etc.<sup>44</sup> Arius and his partisans are uncompromising in their contention that Christ is pioneer and perfecter of that Sonship into which men too shall be adopted. Thus all attributes of the Christ apply equally to believers. Even the term μονογενής, which Arius applies only to Christ, seems not to designate an *essential* attribute of the Logos, but that Sonship for which Christ has been *chosen* and which believers, following his lead, are to enter.<sup>45</sup>

Arius grants that God is not able to produce a Son more excellent than Christ, but he states in the *Thalia*: "One equal to the Son, the Superior is able to beget."<sup>46</sup> On this point, Arian and orthodox go their

<sup>41</sup> Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.28, p. 24, lines 6-8).

<sup>42</sup> *Vide* Ps. 82:6 and John 10:34ff., and Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 56 and note 199.

<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus *Ad. Haer.* 4 Preface; also 3.6.1-2; 4.1.1. Albert C. Sundberg, Jr. has been working productively on this motif.

<sup>44</sup> *Vide* particularly the excerpts from the *Thalia* in Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1.5-6, and the account of the deliberations at Nicaea in *De Decr.* 20.

<sup>45</sup> Arius *Ep. ad Eus.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 1.4, p. 2, line 9- p. 3, line 3). The phrase μονογενῆ πρό χρόνων (Urk. 6.2) would then connote "chosen before time." On μονογενής in the controversy, see Appendix.

<sup>46</sup> Athanasius *De Syn.* 15 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> p. 243, lines 9-10).

separate ways in the interpretation of scriptural texts. In a famous passage in the *De Decretis* Athanasius tips his own hand, and in the process reveals the Arian objective. Noting that "Son" can be taken in two senses in scripture — namely, the extended sense, in which it can signify believers (i.e., Deut. 14:1 and John 1:12), or the physical/natural sense (i.e., Isaac, son of Abraham) — Athanasius opts for natural Sonship. The Arians apply the term Son "to those who gain the name by grace from moral improvement."<sup>47</sup> Athanasius' apt observation that under the other definition of "Son" Christ would not differ from Adam or Enoch or Paul or even the penitent thief bears testimony to the vigor with which the Arians pressed their case.

It is only by understanding this central Arian affirmation that one can make sense of Athanasius' description of the discussion of some key terms at Nicaea. In *De Decretis* 20, Athanasius is building toward a defense of the use of the word ὁμοούσιος rather than a scriptural term. He claims that various terms and concepts were proposed, to each of which the Arians could assent on the grounds that it applied to believers as well as the Son. The Fathers suggested "like" (ὁμοιον) "eternal" (ἀεί), "the name of power" (τὸ τῆς δυνάμεως ὄνομα), and "in Him" (ἐν αὐτῷ). All these terms the Arians found acceptable because they were "common to us and to the Son."<sup>48</sup> For each of these concepts they provided a scriptural proof text demonstrating the application of the term in question to Christians and Christ alike.<sup>49</sup> When the word ἀτρεπτος was tested, as we have seen, the Arians agreed to that also because, they said, "Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ."<sup>50</sup> Frustrated by this hermeneutic, Athanasius and his allies had to resort to the word ὁμοούσιος, for only this notion was thought sufficient to differentiate the Son's likeness and unchangeability from that imitation (μίμησις) which the faithful appropriate through the virtue stemming from keeping commandments.<sup>51</sup> In this and succeeding sections, Athanasius labors to draw a sharp line of demarcation between Christ's Sonship and ours:

But if he [Christ] wishes us to call his very own Father 'our Father,' it is not necessary, on account of this, to equate ourselves (συνεκταίνειν) with the Son according to nature.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 3.6 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 6.4, p. 6, lines 12-14). *Vide* Wiles, "In Defense of Arius," pp. 345-47.

<sup>48</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 5.20 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 20.1, p. 16, lines 33-34).

<sup>49</sup> 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 4:11; Acts 17:28; Exod. 12:41/Ps. 45:8 respectively (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 20.2).

<sup>50</sup> Again, Athanasius *De Decr.* 5.20.

<sup>51</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 5.20 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 20.3).

<sup>52</sup> Athanasius *De Decr.* 8.31 (Opitz<sup>2</sup> 31.3).

This is indeed what the Arians are fighting for. Christ's limitations are exactly ours (willing, choosing, striving, suffering, advancing) and likewise Christ's benefits and glories are exactly ours. It cannot be said more emphatically: what the Arians are proclaiming is not a demotion of the Son, but a promotion of believers to full and equal status as Sons — that is, υἱοί, understood to mean θεοί. All the strange Arian exegesis concerning Powers and Words and Wisdoms is designed to underscore this central soteriological point.

#### IV

If our interpretation of early Arianism, especially of Arius' own thought, proves to be correct in its essentials, we are given a radically different picture of the nature of the controversy than has appeared in secondary literature, including even the most recent specialized studies. To mention only one example, a new book by Manlio Simonetti takes, as its starting point for early Arianism, Arius' devotion to "rigid monotheism" and posits a "radicalizing" of the "traditional subordinationism" of the Son to the Father.<sup>53</sup> The examples could be multiplied in the scholarship of several languages.

Such universality in secondary works produces an interesting phenomenon. The pastor faced with the business of catechizing the faithful, the systematic or historical theologian who must explain Nicene doctrine in the light of early Arianism, and the most specialized of patristic scholars are all in the same boat — they are dependent on a view of Arius perpetuated in the secondary literature which may be in large measure erroneous.

The great doctrinal work of the Council of Nicaea, viewed through traditional interpretations of Arius' concerns, is then seen in a *Trinitarian* rather than a *Christological* and *soteriological* light. On the contrary, we suspect the Arian effort at Nicaea and the orthodox counter-moves to be a Christological battle of two radically different soteriologies, each of which was founded on its own principles of scriptural interpretation.<sup>54</sup> In short, Arianism represented a soteriological system in which Christ himself was the model and pioneer of the creature's grace-filled progress to God. Arius' Christ was an adopted redeemer who progressed and grew in grace throughout his life and earthly ministry until his passion and resurrection. But the Christ who achieves the final state of glory represented for Arius no *essential* or *quantitative* difference in nature from any of the rest of the redeemed.

<sup>53</sup> *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo*, *Studia Ephemerida "Augustinianum"* 11 (Roma: Institutum Studium Patristicum Augustinianum, 1975): 46, 52, 55.

<sup>54</sup> *Vide*, pp. 270-1, *supra*.

It is in the context of such a full soteriological ascent of the redeemer, in the context of a conceptualization of a "saved savior," that the Nicene language of the Son's *essential unity with the Father* should be read. Against Arianism, orthodoxy here affirmed a fiercely held boundary—not just between the creature and God—but between the Savior and creatures. Thus Athanasius, commenting on Arian exegesis of the Philip-pians 2 hymn, will complain:

Can anything be plainer and more express than this? He [Christ] was not from a lower state promoted; but rather, existing as God, He took the form of a servant, and in taking it, was not promoted but humbled Himself. Where then is there any reward of virtue, or what advancement and promotion in humiliation? For if, being God, He became man, and descending from on high He is still said to be exalted, where is He exalted, being God?<sup>55</sup>

Those famous handbook distinctions which relegate Christological controversies to the middle to late fourth century, while treating Nicaea as the capstone of third century Trinitarian development may have to be abandoned.

Similarly, the reserving of sound biblical exegesis from a soteriological perspective to bishop Alexander and his successor, Athanasius, may be compromised as well, especially when we examine the texts on which the early Arians rested their case. Scholars have been so sure that Arius and his immediate circle were logicians and philosophers in the mold of the later Neo-Arians that they have either overlooked or misinterpreted their proof-texts. Proverbs 8:22, which has been highlighted as the key Arian text,<sup>56</sup> does play an important role in the controversy, but it is a secondary one.

It is precisely in trying to discover the exegetical starting point of the Arians that the average reader has been most at the mercy of the specialist. In fact, the best general sourcebook of early Christian texts does not even provide a translation of the passage that we consider to be most important for understanding Arian exegesis; instead, the editor of the volume has provided his own summary of the passage.<sup>57</sup> The net effect of this is to enhance the view that the Arians were primarily proponents of theological and philosophical terminology rather than exegetes of Scripture. The passage, found in Alexander's letter to Alexander of Constantinople (c. A.D. 324) claims that the Arians:

<sup>55</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* 1.40. *NPNF* translation.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Manlio Simonetti, "Sull' interpretazione patristica di prov. 8, 22," in *Studi sull' Arianesimo* (Roma: Editrice Studium, 1965), p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960), p. 349.

remember all the passages concerning the Savior's passion, both the humiliation and the emptying [Phil 2:5-11], and what is called his impoverishment [2 Cor 2:9], and what acquired things [i.e., as opposed to natural or essential] the savior took to himself for our sakes, as a demurer of his sublime and eternal divinity; but of those sayings [in the Bible] which are indicative of his nature and glory and nobility and union with the Father, they are forgetful.<sup>58</sup>

Arius and his followers are obviously working from texts referring to Jesus' earthly ministry — Phil. 2 and other important epistle and gospel references. Alexander has not given us a full list of their quotations in this early letter; but some decades later Athanasius does cite the texts for us, introducing them in words almost identical to those used by Alexander.<sup>59</sup> Athanasius' record of the texts shows that they were drawn from Matthew, Luke, and John and that they were passages which emphasized the Son's derived power and authority, human fear and ignorance, and need for God's comfort and assistance. Some chapters later Athanasius summarizes the Arian error from his vantage point:

For looking at the human characteristics (τὰ ἀνθρώπινα) of the Savior, they have considered him to be a creature (κτίσμα).<sup>60</sup>

Thus the sources affirm that the Arian watchwords *creature* (κτίσμα) or *work* (ποίημα) had their basis in an examination of the earthly Jesus.

It seems to us that even the Arian cosmology resulted from their preoccupation with the creaturely performance of the Savior. Athanasius quotes Arius as having said:

...God, foreknowing him [Christ] to be good, proleptically [προλαβόν] gave him this glory, which he had afterward as man from virtue; so that from his works, which God foreknew, He made such a one as him now to be begotten.<sup>61</sup>

Thus the very creation of the preexistent Son, for the Arians, depended on God's foreknowledge of the successful completion of his earthly ministry.

It is this achievement of Jesus, rewarded by God, that Arians emphasized in their exegesis of the Philippians 2 creed.<sup>62</sup> Both Arius and

<sup>58</sup> Alexander *Ep. and Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.37, p. 25).

<sup>59</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* 3.26.

<sup>60</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* 3.35 (Bright, p. 190).

<sup>61</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* 1.5.

<sup>62</sup> Phil. 2:5-11 is the first Arian text to which Athanasius responds systematically in the *Orations*, and its themes persist through the remainder of the work.

Eusebius of Nicomedia accented the phrase "wherefore God has highly exalted him," laying particular emphasis on the word *wherefore* (διό). Athanasius attacked them precisely for their italicizing of *wherefore* because he rejected the soteriological implications which they drew from this passage and Psalm 44 (45):7.<sup>63</sup>

If on account of this [i.e., διό], he was exalted, and he received grace, and on account of this he was anointed, he received a reward of his purpose. But having acted from purpose, he is entirely of a changeable nature.

Changeable, as we have suggested above, always implied for Athanasius "liable to be tempted and to fall." To the Arians, it also implied "to be victorious over temptation"; thus *changeable* to them meant *improvable*. For this reason the language of improvement (βελτίωσις) and advance (προκοπή) appears throughout the early Arian texts.

Our contention is that this soteriology of ultimately victorious improvement for both Savior and believer catches up the genuine appeal of Arianism to its partisans. C. W. Mönnich has suggested a large group of ascetic or ascetically-minded supporters for the Arian cause.<sup>64</sup> Whether Mönnich was right or not remains to be seen. What is clear is that it is difficult to understand the threat or the appeal to the thinker as well as the man in the street of Arian thought as presented in traditional interpretations. What is not so hard to imagine is a wide and disparate populace embracing a scheme of salvation that takes them out of the grandstands and ranges them alongside their Lord in the arena. Peter Brown has shown the importance of Pelagianism to both monk and missionary, to noble and senator, and has portrayed it as the last gasp of the classical ideal of human perfectibility. Was Arianism the first salvo of a battle that would rage under different names throughout the fourth century? Whether at base the Arian system is "proto-Pelagian" we are not yet prepared to say. The palimpsest of orthodox substantialist notions of grace makes a judgment on this exceedingly difficult, at least at this stage of our research. But one thing about Arianism is clear: whatever its doctrinal origins or its implications for the doctrine of God, the heart and life of early Arianism lay in its soteriological understandings.

<sup>63</sup> *Or. c. Ar.* 1.37 (Bright, p. 38). The Arians also construed διὰ τούτο in Ps 45:7 (LXX) in the same way, and Athanasius opposes their interpretation of both texts. Here he quotes Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia directly.

<sup>64</sup> *Vide*, p. 264, note 14, *supra*.

## APPENDIX

OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF THE TERM  
ΜΟΝΟΓΕΝΗΣ IN THE CONTROVERSY

We have contended throughout the body of the article that at all the critically important points the Arians and the Alexandrian orthodox parted company in their respective interpretations — each side following its own hermeneutic. So also the term *μονογενής* was understood in accordance with the presuppositions of the distinct parties.

Athanasius of Alexandria consistently applied the term when used of the Logos in the sense of “unique” or “only,” so that *μονογενής* (John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:9) was synonymous with “absolutely unique Son of the Father.” (For the fuller range of meanings of the term in Athanasius, see Guido Müller, *digessit et illustravit, Lexicon Athanasianum* [Berlin: 1952], pp. 922-23). Thus it is only from the standpoint of Christ’s human economy that he can be said to have had “brethren” (*Or. c. Ar.* 2.9, exegeting Hebrews 2:14-18; 3:2). In his divine economy, Christ is “Son by nature (*φύσει*) Only-Begotten” — i.e., “unique” (*ibid.*). Appeal to the term *ἀγαπητός* (Mt. 3:17) by the Arians to render Christ’s sonship preferential rather than essential seems to have prompted Athanasius’ insistence that “Only-Begotten” and “Beloved” have a single meaning and apply to him who is “alone in the Father’s bosom and alone . . . acknowledged by the Father to be from Him” (*De Decr.* 11.5. *Vide* also *Or. c. Ar.* 1.15, and cf. *Or. c. Ar.* 4.29).

As for the Arian interpretation, there are indications that connotations of “preference” were given to the term *μονογενής* in their usage. As a preface to his exegesis of Prov. 8:22, Athanasius enters into a polemic against the Arian methodology of reinterpretation and retrenchment on important terms connected with Christ’s sonship (*Or. c. Ar.* 2.19). Commenting on the use of *γέννημα* by Arius in his *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 6.2), Athanasius writes:

For, saying ‘offspring, but not as one of the offsprings,’ they line him up with many sons, and they pronounce the Lord to be one of these, so that he is no longer ‘only-begotten’ according to them, but is one of many brothers and an ‘offspring’ and bears the title ‘Son.’

It is the association of *μονογενής* with “many brothers” that interests us here. Paul Winter (*Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 5 [1953]: 335-65) has shown that *μονογενής* can be used to translate the Hebrew *yahid* (*ibid.*, 338), and it then indicates “no exclusiveness in

number, but a distinctive quality" (*ibid.*, 336) in certain classical and OT texts. Thus this term has the qualitative sense in the source behind John's prologue (where the term referred to Israel [*ibid.*, 361]) and in versions of Gen. 22:2, 12, 16 used by Irenaeus (*Haer.* 4.5.4: Winter, 337-38). In the Genesis versions Isaac is said to be *μονογενής* because he is the preferred or favorite or beloved son rather than the only son (Winter, 338, 342). The Arians seem to have employed this meaning of the term in reference to Christ, so that Christ's sonship would not differ from ours by nature (*φύσει*), but rather by divine favor or preference. In this sense the term seems in the Arian documents to designate Christ's mediatorial work rather than an essential attribute (cf. Alexander's complaint, Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 14.11-13 [Mönnich, "ariannse christology," 408-09]; cf. the usage in the late Western *Anon. in Iob*, MG 17, 400D-401A).

If we are correct in our contention that Arius used the term qualitatively, part of the orthodox rebuttal may survive in the exegesis of *μονογενής* (Gen. 22.2) in *Or. c. Ar.* 4.24, where it is argued that Isaac was the *only* son born of Sarah and that "*beloved*" son means *only* son. It is our suspicion that Alexandrian episcopal defense has purposely shifted the thrust of such texts away from the Arian exegetical positions on sonship based in will or preference toward the Alexandrian claim for the Son's *essential* uniqueness.

The early Arians used *μονογενής* in a second and slightly more cosmological way although, as we shall see, notions of the Son's qualitative rather than essential (unique) difference from believers undergirded this usage also.

Arius himself had indicated that the Son was the only creature brought into being directly by the Father alone (Opitz<sup>3</sup> Urk. 6.4, p. 13, 1. 10). Athanasius attributes this opinion to both Arius and Asterius in *De Decr.* 8 (= Bardy Frag. VIII) and to Eusebius, Arius, and Asterius in *Or. c. Ar.* 2.24 (= Bardy *ibid.*). It apparently is Asterius who developed the notion of Christ as the "firstborn" of the creatures and applied it to the term *μονογενής* (Ath. *De Syn.* 18 = Bardy Frag. IIa). But Asterius makes it clear that the only begotten Son, alike with all other creatures, shares in dependency on God the Father (*ibid.*; cf. also ch. 19). Thus the Son as *μονογενής* represents at most "... an identical image of the substance and will and glory and power" [of the Father] (Bardy Frag. XXIa — from the *C. Marcellum* 1.4.33; cf. the later Arian Philostorgius' complaints, *H.E.* 2.15. The position was probably developed after Nicaea: cf. Ath., *De Syn.* 20). Athanasius rightly understood his statement as undermining the ontological oneness of the Father and Son and, hence, perverting *μονογενής* understood to mean *unique* (cf. *Or. c. Ar.* 2.38-39). That Christ was the only one created directly by the Father — hence *μονογενής* not in the sense of *unique* but of *first-born* (i.e., the first in a series) — was a way the Arians conceded a

difference of preference or quality, but not one of nature, between Christ and creatures. *Monogenes* even in this line of thinking continued to mean “first Son” or “favored Son” rather than “unique Son.”

Thus when the Arians said that the Son had “more than the others” (*παρὰ τὰ ἄλλα*) and therefore was called *μονογενής* because God created him directly but all others were created through him (*Ath. De Decr.* 7.1, Opitz<sup>2</sup>, p. 6, 11, 23-26) and when Eusebius of Nicomedia similarly admitted that the Son had “more than the others” (*De Decr.* 9.4), we can assume the phrase meant “more favor” along the same lines as the favorite Arian text, Ps. 45:7 (LXX):

You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows (*παρὰ τοὺς μετόχους σου*).