

# The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed

*A 1700 Year History*



*Athanasius*

## ***Session 3: Arius' Life & Writings***

### **Introduction**

Watch the YouTube [video](#), “The Council of Nicaea in Five Minutes,” which gives a short introduction to who Arius was and what he taught.

### **The Teaching of Arius**

#### *Historical Explanation*

The controversy surrounding the teaching of Arius was the single most important reason for calling together the Council of Nicaea. Arius was a Christian priest in a suburban church of Alexandria in Egypt. He had been educated to be a clear and rational thinker in the tradition of Greek philosophy. When Bishop Alexander explicitly stated that God the Father and Jesus the Son were equally divine and eternal, Arius' logic took him in a different direction. Since Jesus was the Son and begotten of the Father, Arius believed Jesus could not be eternal in the same sense the Father was and thus could not be equally divine. Arius' logic found favor with a number of other church leaders and teachers, especially in the Eastern Empire.

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One of Arius' famous statements was, “There was a time when he [Jesus] was not.” Read Proverbs 8:22–25 and Hebrews 1:1–5. How could Arius have arrived at that position? How would you assess his interpretation of those biblical passages?

## Writings: Arius' "Thalia" & Letter to Eusebius of Nicodemia

### *Historical Explanation*

The *Thalia* or "Banquet" was Arius's most extensive theological work. It was cast in poetic style, and was traditionally thought to have been composed to make his teachings accessible to a wider audience. It has more recently been argued by Mark DelCogliano<sup>1</sup> that, having been expelled from Alexandria and having fled to Caesarea, Arius composed it at the urging of Eusebius of Caesarea in order to clarify his theological positions.

Except for the several surviving letters of Arius (*Dok.* 1, 15, and 24) and a few scattered citations, the very incomplete excerpts from the *Thalia* are our only first-hand evidence from Arius's own pen. The surviving citations come from several works of Athanasius, and from Epiphanius and Hilary. It is impossible to ascertain that each of the citations listed below did indeed come from the *Thalia*, that they were preserved verbatim, or that the writers have always provided us with direct rather than indirect quotations. The consistency in thought and approach, however, is evident, and citations preserved in different ancient sources overlap closely in wording and content.<sup>2</sup>

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*1. And so God Himself, as he really is, is inexpressible to all. He alone has no equal, no one similar, and no one of the same glory. We call him unbegotten, in contrast to him who by nature is begotten. We praise him as without beginning in contrast to him who has a beginning. We worship him as timeless, in contrast to him who in time has come to exist.*

*6. He who is without beginning made the Son a beginning of created things. He produced him as a son for himself by begetting him. He [the son] has none of the distinct characteristics of God's own being For he is not equal to, nor is he of the same being as him.*

*10. God is wise, for he himself is the teacher of Wisdom – A sufficient proof is that God is invisible to all: He is invisible both to things which were made through the Son, and even to the Son himself.*

*13. I will say specifically how the invisible is seen by the Son: by that power by which God is able to see, each according to his own measure, the Son can bear to see the Father, as is determined.*

*16. So there is a Triad, not in equal glories. Their beings are not mixed together among themselves. As far as their glories, one infinitely more glorious than the other. The Father in his essence is foreign to the Son, because he exists without beginning.*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark DelCogliano, "How Did Arius Learn from Asterius? On the Relationship between the *Thalia* and the Syntagmaton," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 69 (2018), 491.

<sup>2</sup> Glen Thompson and Aaron West, "Arius–Thalia," [fourthcentury.com](http://fourthcentury.com).

20. Understand that the Monad [eternally] was; but the Dyad was not before it came into existence. It immediately follows that, although the Son did not exist, the Father was still God. Hence the Son, not being [eternal] came into existence by the Father's will, He is the Only-begotten God, and this one is alien from [all] others.

24. Wisdom came to be Wisdom by the will of the Wise God. Hence he is conceived of in innumerable aspects: he is Spirit, Power, Wisdom, God's glory, Truth, Image, and Word. Understand that he is also conceived of as Radiance and Light.

27. The one who is superior is able to beget one equal to the Son, But not someone more important, or superior, or greater. At God's will the Son has the greatness and qualities that he has. His existence from when and from whom and from then — are all from God. He, though powerful God, praises in part his superior.

32. In brief, God is inexpressible to the Son. For he is in himself what he is, that is, indescribable, So that the son does not comprehend any of these things or have the understanding to explain them. For it is impossible for him to fathom the Father, who is by himself. For the Son himself does not even know his own essence, For being Son, his existence is most certainly at the will of the Father.

38. What reasoning allows, that he who is from the Father should comprehend and know his own parent? For clearly that which has a beginning is not able to conceive of or grasp the existence of that which has no beginning.

41. According to the faith of God's elect, having discernment of God, his holy children, dividing rightly, receivers of God's Holy Spirit, I have learned these things from those who share in wisdom, accomplished, divinely taught, and wise in all things. I have been walking in their steps, with the same opinions. I, a man of renown, suffering many things for God's glory; and taught by God, I have acquired wisdom and knowledge.

47. The Logos<sup>3</sup> is not true God. For although he is called God, he is not true [God], But through the participation of grace, just as all others, he is called God only in name.

51. And whereas all beings are foreign and different from God in essence, so too is the Logos alien and unlike in all things to the Father's essence and propriety but belongs to things originated and created, as is one of these.

55. The Father is even inexpressible/invisible to the Son, and the Logos cannot perfectly and exactly either see or know His own Father;

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<sup>3</sup> The Logos is a name for Jesus based on John 1:1–18, translated in English as “the Word.”

57. *But even what he knows and sees He knows and sees in proportion to His own measure, just as we also know according to our own power. For it is not only the Father that the Son does not know exactly, For he is failing to comprehend him, but the Son does not even know his own essence.*

63. *The essences of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, are separate in nature, and estranged, and disconnected, and alien, and without participation of each other and [they are] utterly unlike from each other in essence and glory, unto infinity.*

67. *In likeness of glory and essence [the Word] is entirely different [from both the Father and the Holy Ghost].*

68. *The Son is distinct by himself and in no respect a partaker of the Father*

69. *God was not always a Father, but became so afterwards;*

70. *The Son was not always, for He was not before His generation; He is not from the Father, but He, as others, has come into subsistence out of nothing; He is not proper to the Father's essence, for He is a creature and work?' Christ is not very God, but He, as others, was made God by participation. The Son has not exact knowledge of the Father, nor does the Word see the Father perfectly.*

75. *He neither exactly understands nor knows the Father. He is not the very and only Word of the Father, but is in name only called Word and Wisdom, and is called by grace Son and Power. He is not unalterable, as the Father is, but alterable in nature, as the creatures, and He falls short of apprehending the perfect knowledge of the Father*

80. *There was when the Son was not. The Son was not before he was begotten*

82. *If there was not once when he was not, but the Son is eternal and co-exists with the Father, then he is no longer a son, but you would say that he is a brother.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Accessed from Glen Thompson and Aaron West, "Arius-Thalia," [fourthcentury.com](http://fourthcentury.com).

### *Historical Explanation*

This letter from Arius to his supporter Eusebius of Nicomedia was dated by Opitz to the very beginning of the controversy in Alexandria c. 318, since it was about then that Eusebius left the bishopric of Berytus (Beirut) to become the bishop of Nicomedia. However, the more recent study of this material by Stead and others has pointed out that the letter clearly shows that not only Arius but several Syro-Palestinian bishops had already been condemned, and further claims that nearly “all those of the East” agree that the Father pre-exists the Son (§2). This all points to a period when the controversy was already in full swing throughout the eastern Mediterranean, but a more precise dating is impossible.<sup>5</sup>

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*1. To that most beloved man of God, the faithful and orthodox Eusebius, from Arius, unjustly persecuted by father Alexander because of the all-conquering truth which you, Eusebius, also are defending! Since my father Ammonius is going to Nicomedia, it seemed reasonable and proper to greet you through him, remembering at the same time the innate love and affection which you have for the brothers on account of God and his Christ, because the bishop [Alexander] is severely ravaging and persecuting us and moving against us with every evil. Thus he drives us out of every city like godless men, since we will not agree with his public statements: that there was “always a God, always a Son;” “as soon as the Father, so soon the Son [existed];” “with the Father co-exists the Son unbegotten, ever-begotten, begotten without begetting;” “God neither precedes the Son in aspect or in a moment of time;” “always a God, always a Son, the Son being from God himself.”*

*2. Since Eusebius, your brother in Caesarea, and Theodotus, and Paulinus, and Athanasius, and Gregory, and Aetius and all those in the East say that God pre-exists the Son without a beginning, they have been condemned, except for Philogonius and Hellenicus and Macarius, unlearned heretics some of whom say that the Son was “spewed out,” others that he was an “emanation,” still others that he was “jointly unbegotten.”*

*3. We are not able to listen to these kinds of impieties, even if the heretics threaten us with ten thousand deaths. But what do we say and think and what have we previously taught and do we presently teach? — that the Son is not unbegotten, nor a part of an unbegotten entity in any way, nor from anything in existence, but that he is subsisting in will and intention before time and before the ages, full <of grace and truth>, God, the only-begotten, unchangeable.*

*4. Before he was begotten, or created, or defined, or established, he did not exist. For he was not unbegotten. But we are persecuted because we have said the Son has a beginning but God has no beginning. We are persecuted because of that and for saying he came from non-being. But we said this since he is not a portion of God nor of anything in existence. That is why we are persecuted; you know the rest.*

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<sup>5</sup> Glen Thompson, “Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia,” [fourthcentury.com](http://fourthcentury.com).

*I pray that you fare well in the Lord, remembering our tribulations, fellow-Lucianist, truly-called Eusebius [i.e. the pious one].*<sup>6</sup>

Evaluate Arius' basic logic: "The Bible says Jesus is the Son of God and begotten of the Father. Sons who are begotten of their fathers are younger than their fathers. That means Jesus is younger than the Father and existed at a point later than the Father."

Key Terms	
"Eternal Generation"	According to his divine nature, Jesus is "begotten" from the Father from all eternity, in the sense that he shares in the same essence as his Father—just as a son shares in the same human essence as his father (not in the sense that he was begotten in a moment in time)

In small groups, select one of the following doctrinal arguments and show how, much like Arius' line of reasoning, they may appear to be logical but are not scriptural:

1. Jesus has a real human body that is in heaven, and a human body cannot be in multiple places at once. Therefore, Jesus' body cannot be present in the Lord's Supper; the bread and wine must be symbolic.
2. The Bible clearly teaches that God has elected (chosen) some people to be saved. It logically follows that God also therefore elects some people to be damned to hell.
3. The Bible clearly teaches that human beings are responsible for their sin. It logically follows that humans are also responsible, at least in part, for their own salvation or for choosing to believe.

## Conclusion

It seems many of the bishops at the Council of Nicaea didn't really understand the precise details of the theological debate (and could be easily persuaded)—just like many people today. Respond by establishing why this matters: "Who cares about Arius? We're just fussing about semantics. It's not worth our time to hash this out."

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<sup>6</sup> Accessed from Glen Thompson, "Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia," [fourthcentury.com](http://fourthcentury.com).