



# Out of Africa, For the World

## The Creed of Nicaea 325

Sara PARVIS

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland  
*S.Parvis@ed.ac.uk*

### Abstract

The original Nicene Creed of 325 is of particular importance to those who are interested in African theology. The debates which led to the Council of Nicaea had been sparked by the great third-century African theologian Origen, and they were worked through by Arius, Alexander, and the Egyptian church well before the advent of Constantine. Athanasius of Alexandria was the Creed's main champion for most of the fourth century. His stalwart confession of it in the face of imperial violence became the inspiration for the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches to put Nicaea's theology at the centre of their own theological self-understanding.

### Résumé

Le Credo de Nicée original de 325 revêt une importance particulière pour ceux qui s'intéressent à la théologie africaine. Les débats qui ont conduit au concile de Nicée ont été déclenchés par le grand théologien africain du III<sup>e</sup> siècle Origène, et ils ont été approfondis par Arius, Alexandre et l'Église égyptienne bien avant l'avènement de Constantin. Athanase d'Alexandrie fut le principal défenseur du Credo pendant la majeure partie du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle. Sa confession inébranlable face à la violence impériale inspira les Églises copte et éthiopienne à placer la théologie de Nicée au centre de leur propre conception théologique.

### Resumo

O Credo Niceno original de 325 é de particular importância para aqueles que se interessam pela teologia africana. Os debates que levaram ao Concílio de Nicéia foram desencadeados pelo grande teólogo africano do século III, Orígenes, e foram trabalhados por Ário, Alexandre e a Igreja egípcia muito antes do advento de Constantino. Atanásio de Alexandria foi o principal defensor do Credo durante a maior parte do século IV. A sua firme confissão do Credo diante da violência imperial inspirou as

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Igrejas Copta e Etíope a colocar a teologia de Nicéia no centro da sua própria compreensão teológica.

**Keywords**

Nicene Creed, Council of Nicaea, African christianity, African christian history, African theology, Origen, Arius, Athanasius

**Mots-clés**

Credo de Nicée, Concile de Nicée, christianisme africain, histoire du christianisme africain, théologie africaine, Origène, Arius, Athanase

**Palavras-chave**

Credo Niceno, Concílio de Nicéia, cristianismo africano, história cristã africana, teologia africana, Orígenes, Ário, Atanásio

**Introduction**

The Christian world in 2025 is celebrating, or at least discussing, the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea of 325. But this has frequently been done, not by looking at the actual Creed drawn up at Nicaea in 325, but at the Creed of 381, the Creed now frequently referred to as the Nicene Creed.<sup>1</sup> The distinctive elements of this later Creed, which was drawn up at Constantinople, were mainly based on the work of Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia and Gregory of Nyssa, also in Cappadocia.<sup>2</sup> The original Creed of 325, however, parts of which were retained in the later Creed (including in particular the phrase “True God from True God” and the term ‘*homoousios*’), was a much more African document.<sup>3</sup> It was a document written as a result of theological discussion between Egyptian and Libyan clergy, and it had a significant influence on the development of the Coptic Egyptian Church, and

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<sup>1</sup> The Creed of 381 is often called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the influence of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa on the Creed of 381, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 211–221 and 253–260.

<sup>3</sup> The texts of all the original documents connected with the Creed of Nicaea of 325 can be found on the comprehensive Wisconsin Lutheran College/Asia Lutheran Seminary website, “Fourth-Century Christianity,” <https://www.fourthcentury.com/>, currently indexed as part of a “Resources for the celebration of the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325)” list. The text of the Creed is available at “The Creed of the Council of Nicaea” on that page; the Greek text on that site is taken from G. L. Dosssetti, *Il Simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli: Edizione critica*, 226–241; the English translation is by Aaron West.

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on early Ethiopian Christianity as well.<sup>4</sup> As Christianity strengthens in the Global South, and African Christianity re-considers its relationship to the theological formulations of the Early Church, it is important that the Africanness of the original Nicene Creed is not forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

This article will set out four ways in which the original Creed of Nicaea may be considered to issue from an African provenance and to continue to be of importance for early African Christianity specifically, as part of its world-wide ecumenical importance.

1. The source of the early fourth-century theological debate about God which eventually led to the Creed of 325 and its anathemas was the catechetical work *On First Principles* (*Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* / *Peri Archon* in Greek; *De Principiis* in Latin; the title could also be translated as ‘On the Origins’), written by the great third-century Egyptian Scripture exegete Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – c. 253).<sup>6</sup> In this work, Origen attempted to respond to the more philosophical questions of men and women living in the great Egyptian capital in his day who wanted to become Christians. This work continued to be read after Origen’s death, and continued to be used by Christians in Egypt, and elsewhere, as a basis for debates about the nature of God. These debates eventually led to the pre-Nicene disagreement about the eternity of the Son of God between Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328) and Arius of Alexandria (d. 336).
2. The Creed of 325 itself, including its anathemas, closely focused on judging as heretical and refuting the Trinitarian theology and Scripture exegesis of Arius specifically. The theological propositions which were used to do this stem from *Henos Somatos*, the encyclical letter of Alexander of Alexandria to all bishops, which may be partly the work

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<sup>4</sup> Each of the following Christians mentioned in this article has an entry (or several) in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (<https://dacb.org>): the Eunuch of Ethiopia, Mark the Evangelist, Titus Flavius Clemens (Clement of Alexandria), Origen, Athanasius, Frumentius, Aedesius, Ezana, Sayzana. (There is no entry yet for Arius, Alexander, or any of Arius’ Egyptian or Libyan supporters, or for the queen regent Ahyawa Sofya.) The “Ethiopian eunuch” of Acts 8 was, as Luke makes clear, a government official of the Nubian kingdom of Meroë, and not, as frequently assumed, a government official of Aksum (ancient Ethiopia). *Κανδάκη* (*kandákē*) is not the name of an individual queen (“Candace”) but is the Greek pronunciation of the Nubian title for regnal queens.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the African contribution to Early Christian doctrine is made more generally in Fessahaye Mebrahtu, “Black Catholic History: The Role of Africa in Christianity” and Kyama Mugambi, “Africa at Nicaea: Reclaiming our Place in the Foundations of Christian Doctrine.”

<sup>6</sup> For an accessible English translation, see John Behr, ed. and trans., *Origen: On First Principles: A Reader’s Edition*.

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of the great Alexandrian theologian Athanasius of Alexandria.<sup>7</sup> Arius, who was probably Libyan himself, was supported at Nicaea by two bishops from Upper Libya, Secundus of Ptolomais and Theonas of Marmarique; he was abandoned by his episcopal supporters from elsewhere.

3. Athanasius (c. 300 – 373), who succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria three years after the Council of Nicaea, became the main defender of the text of the Creed of 325, of its theological language and of its ecumenical importance, and hence the Confessor par excellence of the original Nicene Creed. In consequence, he stands at the fountainhead of the theology and self-understanding of the Coptic Orthodox Church. I have argued elsewhere that the original Nicene Creed (and hence therefore also the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381) would have sunk without trace if it had not been for the work of Athanasius.<sup>8</sup>
4. Athanasius's career was integral to the adoption of Christianity by Aksum (ancient Ethiopia) as a state from the fourth century on. It was Nicene Christianity which the state adopted, and the historical relationship of Christianity in Ethiopia to the Coptic Christianity of Egyptian Alexandria was, once again, a consequence of the work of Athanasius.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Ethiopic Nicene Christianity went wider than simple adulation of one bishop. Aksumite Christianity from the fourth century onwards emerged as a thinking, theologically educated church from its inception, like the Christianity of Alexandria itself.

In conclusion, I will argue that the Creed of 325, wherever one stands on its theology, should be recognized around the world as one of the most significant and lasting fruits of early African theological debate.

### **Origen of Alexandria and the origins of Egyptian debates concerning the Son's eternity**

Origen's importance to fourth-century trinitarian debates has long been recognised.<sup>10</sup> Since the late fourth century, his influence has often been regarded as largely negative, but in more recent years it has been recognised that the

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<sup>7</sup> "Letter of Alexander\* of Alexandria to all bishops (*Henos sōmatos*)," for the argument that Athanasius was its author, see G. C. Stead, "Athanasius's Earliest Written Work."

<sup>8</sup> Sara Parvis, "The Reception of Nicaea and Homoousios to 360."

<sup>9</sup> See P. L. Shinnie, "The Nilotic Sudan and Ethiopia, c. 669 BC to c. AD 600," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 2: *From c. 500 BC to AD 1050*, edited by J. D. Fage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 210–271.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, J. Rebecca Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius*.

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picture is rather more complicated than that. Origen, who had taught in the catechetical school in Alexandria in the early third century, influenced all subsequent Christian discussion of the Trinity, even among those who disagreed with him.<sup>11</sup>

Early Christianity in Egypt had a double tradition, to both parts of which Origen contributed. On the one hand there was the rich philosophical tradition which went back to the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria in the first century, and before him to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint, which was the version used by the early Church. This philosophical tradition gave us Logos theology, the distinctively Egyptian Jewish spin on a Greek idea which was taken over by early Christians to become Logos Christology, the view that Jesus was the true Word of God made flesh. (The long-standing Egyptian theological valuing of ensouled flesh was also crucial to the development of Alexandrian Christianity.) On the other hand, the culture of Egyptian Christianity was also earthy and bruising. Some of the worst and most violent persecutions of Christianity took place in Egypt in the third and fourth centuries (the Coptic calendar to this day numbers years not according to *anno Domini* but by *anno martyrum*, because the Great Persecution under Diocletian was so traumatic and devastating). Origen himself was both a philosopher and a man who suffered torture for his faith.<sup>12</sup> St Mark's Gospel depicts Jesus as a man of the people, a man constantly pushed and shoved and mistreated and roughed around. It is no accident that, although St John's Gospel was always at the heart of Egyptian theology, the church of Alexandria was understood to have been founded by St Mark.

Converts to early Christianity were prepared intellectually and morally to join the Church by spending a minimum of three years as catechumens, studying Scripture and theology in preparation for confessing the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at baptism. The school for catechumens in Alexandria, the great capital of Egypt, was particularly intellectually rich, because many of those who attended it were experts in the Jewish scriptures, in Greek philosophy, or (like Origen himself) in both. Origen was employed by the Church of Alexandria to teach at the school, following on from the great Christian philosopher Clement of Alexandria.

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<sup>11</sup> On Origen himself, see G. A. Oshitelu, "Origen (A)," John Anthony McGuckin, *Origen of Alexandria: Master Theologian of the Early Church*; and also Andrew F. Walls, "In Quest of the Father of Mission Studies;" the latter was later revised first as "Scholarship under the Cross: Thinking Greek and Thinking Christian" and then as "Origen, the Father of Missions Studies." Origen's role in the overall controversy is discussed in Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 20–30. Despite later accusations of heresy, Origen died a Confessor, in communion with the universal Church of his day.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Chadwick makes this point in *The Early Church*, 100–113.

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The catechumens came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Alexandria was a place of intersection between the Africa of the Upper Nile valley and the Africa of the Lower Nile and the Southern Mediterranean coast, and its Judaism came from the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea trade-routes and their trading links with the Nile as well as from Mediterranean trade-routes.<sup>13</sup> The Alexandrian catechetical school taught all comers, old and young, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, men and women together, as all Christian catechetical schools at that period did.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, it was the only form of real education available to the poor and to women, and people often remained in the catechetical schools even after they were baptised, learning as much as they could.<sup>15</sup>

Origen would later move to Caesarea in Palestine, where he would found the great library on the basis of which Eusebius of Caesarea wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* at the end of the third century. But the questions about the Trinity discussed in *On First Principles* come from his time teaching philosophically-minded converts to Christianity in Egypt. How did Christianity relate intellectually to Jewish and pagan Platonism and other philosophies? Was the created order eternal? When confessing Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as in St Matthew's Gospel, how did the Second Principle, the Son, relate to the Father, the First? What about the Third Principle, the Holy Spirit?

For Origen, all three were eternal, but so was creation itself.<sup>16</sup> Father, Son, and Spirit were three distinct and enduring *hypostases* (entities). vOther rational beings, such as stars and planets and angels and human souls, were also eternal, but subordinate to the Trinity. They were all called to contemplate and worship the Father.

*On First Principles* was self-consciously speculative, taking the Rule of Faith (belief in Father, Son, and Spirit, in the Incarnation and in salvation) as its foundation and drawing out further cosmological and other implications from them, while being open to correction from other parts of Scripture. Origen approached many of the same themes more directly in his later exegetical works, particularly his *Commentary on John*. He made great theological use of the titles of Jesus from John's Gospel, particularly the four great titles of Wisdom, Logos, Truth, and Life. He saw these as the principal ways in which the Son ordered all

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<sup>13</sup> See David W. Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the Northern Horn, 1000 BC–AD 1300*. We can gain some idea of what the local Egyptian population, or at least its more elite members, looked like from surviving Fayyum mummy portraits.

<sup>14</sup> See Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology*, 40. Other examples of African catechetical groups of mixed social status include the Scillitan Martyrs and Perpetua and Felicitas and their companions.

<sup>15</sup> See Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology*, 55.

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of creation, visible and invisible, rational and irrational, and gathered rational creation (stars and planets, angels and spirits, and human beings) and brought it from its fallen state back into full contemplation and joyful worship of the Father. The job of the Spirit, meanwhile, was to teach and help Christians specifically to do this within the Church, despite persecution and temptations to turn away from God. For Origen, it was important that the Spirit worked hand in hand with the Logos both in God and in creatures: the Spirit did not bypass the human intellect (as he believed the Montanist charismatics had taught), but worked with and through it.<sup>17</sup>

What had altered by the early fourth century in Alexandrian thought which drew on Origen was the abandonment by all sides of Origen's belief that creation was eternal. Both Arius and Alexander believed that the created order had come into being at a moment in time. They were also agreed that the Father was eternal. The question was whether the Son was also eternal or not. In consequence, was the Son a different sort of being from the Father, or not? Was it only the Father we should worship as true God, or also the Son and the Spirit? These were questions which were fiercely fought out in Egypt and Libya in particular.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Creed and anathemas of 325 and their close focus on the theology of Arius**

Let us begin with the text of the Creed of 325, together with its anathemas, because they should be read together. The anathemas are often neglected in discussion of the Creed of 325, but they are an important counterpoint to the Creed, offering theological specifics which sharply focus the more general terms of the Creed itself on the theology of Arius, as we shall see:<sup>19</sup>

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things seen and unseen.*

*And in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our*

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<sup>17</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.7.3.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the Alexandrian context of the pre-Nicene debates, see Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy."

<sup>19</sup> Commentators sometimes claim that the terminology of the Creed of 325 is vague and intended to include a variety of viewpoints, seeing this as evidence for the influence of Constantine on the text of the Creed, but the specificity of the anathemas belies this interpretation. E.g., see James Corke-Webster, "What Really Happened at Nicaea."

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*salvation came down and was made flesh, becoming human, who suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, who is coming to judge the living and the dead.*

*And in the Holy Spirit.*

The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence, or a creation, or changeable, or alterable.<sup>20</sup>

The ‘Arian controversy’ as a whole was about that quintessentially African Christian question of what does and does not count as theologically correct worship of God (‘orthodoxy’, from ‘right glory’).<sup>21</sup> In particular, the debate was about whether the Son and Spirit should be worshipped by us and by the angels and powers alongside the Father, or not. This question went much further than Egypt and Libya: by 325, it was being discussed across the whole of the Eastern half of the empire, and it was only really concluded after 381. But it was the debates in Egypt and Libya which identified and crystallised the problem, and offered the solution.

Much has been written on the Trinitarian theology of the period immediately before Nicaea.<sup>22</sup> But it is important to note that both the Nicene Creed and its anathemas were closely focused specifically on the terminology of two documents written by Arius: his Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, and his Letter to Alexander of Alexandria.<sup>23</sup> The dating of these and of the other key documents which circulated before the Council of Nicaea continues to be debated by scholars, and cannot be fixed on the basis of the current evidence, but they certainly both date before Constantine came East.<sup>24</sup> The emperor Constantine may have been responsible for calling the Council of Nicaea in the first place, or he may simply have moved an already planned council to the

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<sup>20</sup> Aaron West, trans., “Creed of the Council of Nicaea.”

<sup>21</sup> One of the defining strengths of Egyptian Christianity is often seen as the coherence between worship and theology. In the cases of Origen and Athanasius in particular, we see that liturgy and the lived practice of the Church often preceded formal theological articulation.

<sup>22</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 11–84, offers useful wider groupings of the different theological accounts of the relationship of Father and Son on display in the early fourth century.

<sup>23</sup> “Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia;” see also Corke-Webster, “What really happened at Nicaea.”

<sup>24</sup> On the chronology of the pre-Nicene documents, see the discussion in “Documents of the Early Arian Controversy,” which compares different scholarly reconstructions.



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imperial palace at Nicaea.<sup>25</sup> But it is beyond question that the initial debate had already been worked through theologically and ecclesially in the churches in Egypt and Libya well before Constantine defeated Licinius in September 324 and became sole ruler of the whole Roman empire. Nicaea was about the response of the rest of the bishops of Licinius's and then Constantine's regions to what the African churches had already decided. The other bishops decided (with the exception of two Libyans) that the African churches were right.

Arius, a priest of Alexandria and apparently at one point a candidate for the role of bishop there, was most likely Libyan by origin.<sup>26</sup> The content of his disagreement with Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria since 313, focused, at least in the early stages, on the question of eternity. Arius, in his letter to Eusebius, complains that Alexander had publicly said the following:

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."<sup>27</sup>

Arius continues,

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. Before he was begotten, or created, or defined, or established, he was not. 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 to be from nothing. 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>25</sup> See H. A. Drake, "The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council." For the argument that Constantine's influence on the Council of Nicaea has been greatly exaggerated, as has that of fourth-century emperors in general on the development of Christian doctrine, see my "Nicaea to Constantinople I: Lessons from Fourth-Century Ecclesiastical Politics."

<sup>26</sup> For Arius's Libyan identity, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381*, pp. 3–5. On Arius's philosophy and theology, as well as the traditions of intellectual thought on which Arius drew, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. On fourth-century theology in the tradition of Arius and his supporters, see most recently Brendan Wolfe, Mattias Gassman, and Oliver Langworthy, *Arianism Revisited: An Introduction to Non-Nicene Theologies*.

<sup>27</sup> "Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia."

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The anathemas of the Creed of Nicaea directly reference this exchange:

The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence, or a creation, or changeable, or alterable.<sup>28</sup>

In his letter Ἡ φιλαρχος (*Hē philarchos*, ‘Ambition’), addressed in the version that survives to Alexander of ‘Constantinople’ (then Byzantium), Alexander of Alexandria responds to the eternity question as follows:

Would it not be unholy to say that at one time the power of God did not exist, or his Word, or anything else that describes the Son and characterizes the Father at the same time? To say that the brightness of the Father’s glory [cf. Heb 1:3] “once did not exist” destroys the original light too, because the brightness comes from it. If the image of God did not always exist, then it is clear that God, in whose image the Son is, also did not always exist.<sup>29</sup>

Alexander is here using arguments that had been used by Origen. Their basis is exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:4, “Christ, power of God and wisdom of God.” If Christ is *power of God*, he must be eternal, and if he is eternal, he must be true God and to be worshipped as such.<sup>30</sup>

Arius’s Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia is a private document. For Arius’s official theology, we should turn to the creedal document he and the priests and deacons who agreed with him addressed to Alexander in his own defence. It is worth giving in full, because it shows the theological platform on which he wanted to be judged.<sup>31</sup>

Our faith from our forefathers, which also we learned from you, blessed father, is this: We acknowledge One God, alone unbegotten, alone eternal, alone without beginning, alone true, alone having immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign, judge of all, governor, and provider, unalterable and unchangeable, just and good, God of the Law and the Prophets and the New Testament; he begot an only-begotten Son before time and the ages, through whom he made both the ages [Heb 1:2] and all that was

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<sup>28</sup> West, trans., “Creed of the Council of Nicaea.”

<sup>29</sup> “Alexander’s Letter to Alexander of Byzantium\* (*Hē philarchos*).”

<sup>30</sup> On the third- and fourth-century history of Power of God arguments in Trinitarian theology, see Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology*.

<sup>31</sup> Glen L. Thompson, trans., “Letter of Arius and his followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria.”

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made; who begot him not in appearance, but in reality; and that he made him subsist at his own will, unalterable and unchangeable, the perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures; offspring, but not as one of the other things begotten; nor as Valentinus pronounced that the offspring of the Father was an emanation; nor as the Manicheans taught that the offspring was a one-in-essence-portion of the Father; nor as Sabellius, dividing the Monad, speaks of a Son-Father; nor as Hieracas speaks of one torch [lit] from another, or as a lamp divided into two; nor that he who existed before was later generated or created anew into a Son, as you yourself, O blessed father, have often condemned both in church services and in council meetings; but, as we say, he was created at the will of God, before time and before the ages, and came to life and being from the Father, and the glories which coexist in him are from the Father. For when giving to him [the Son] the inheritance of all things [Heb 1:2], the Father did not deprive himself of what he has without beginning in himself; for he is the source of all things. Thus there are three subsisting realities [hypostases]. And God, being the cause of all that happens, is absolutely alone without beginning; but the Son, begotten apart from time by the Father, and created and founded before the ages, was not in existence before his generation, but was begotten apart from time before all things, and he alone came into existence from the Father. For he is neither eternal nor co-eternal nor co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father, as some speak of relations, introducing two unbegotten beginnings. But God is before all things as monad and beginning of all. Therefore he is also before the Son, as we have learned also from your public preaching in the church. Therefore he thus has his being from God; and glories, and life, and all things have been given over to him; in this way God is his beginning. For he is over him, as his God and being before him. But if the expressions “from him” [Rom. 11:36] and “from the womb” [Ps. 109:3 (LXX), 110:3 English] and “I came from the Father,” and “I have come” [John 16:28], are understood by some to mean that he is part of him [the Father], one in essence and as an emanation, then the Father is, according to them, compounded and divisible and alterable and material, and, as far as their belief goes, the incorporeal God endures a body.

I pray that you fare well in the Lord, blessed father. Arius; the priests Aethales, Achilles, Carpones, Sarmatas and Arius; the deacons Euzoios, Lucius, Julius, Menas, Helladius, and Gaius; the

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bishops Secundas of the Pentapolis, Theonas of Libya, and Pistus whom the Arians [later] set up [as bishop] at Alexandria.

This statement of Arius was condemned first by the Church of Alexandria, and then by a council of the 100 bishops of Egypt and Libya.<sup>32</sup> The original Nicene Creed also ruled this theology out of court:

We believe . . . in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, becoming human, who suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, who is coming to judge the living and the dead.<sup>33</sup>

The body of the Creed, as we see here, targets Arius's assertions about the difference in substance between Father and Son. The questions of the eternity of the Son which he had raised were dealt with in the anathemas, as already noted. In the text of the Creed itself, the emphasis was on defining theologically acceptable ways of understanding the Scriptural term *begotten*, and on countering Arius's claim that the Father was 'alone true God'. 'Begotten' was not to be used as a way of distinguishing the Son's ontology from that of the 'unbegotten' Father, or as a way of saying the Son was later in time than the Father, but rather as a way of saying Father and Son, analogously to a human parent and child, are of the same essence. The authors of the Nicene Creed insisted that the Son was 'from the essence of the Father' and '*homoousios* ('of the same being') with the Father', because they wanted to counter Arius's arguments that the Son was something different in nature and essence from the Father. It would take another great Egyptian theologian to set out the thinking behind this more clearly: Athanasius of Alexandria.

### **Athanasius's defence of the theological language of the original Nicene Creed**

From the time of Nicaea on, Constantine and his successors attempted to rein in the see of Alexandria. Constantine decided unilaterally to pardon and reinstate Arius two years after Nicaea, and tried to force Alexander to agree; Alexander stalled for time, and sent Athanasius, his deacon-secretary, to the

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<sup>32</sup> "Letter from Alexander of Alexandria to his clergy" and "Letter of Alexander\* of Alexandria to all bishops (*Henos sōmatos*)."

<sup>33</sup> "Creed of the Council of Nicaea."

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imperial court to argue his case. Alexander died in 328, and Athanasius was elected and installed as his successor.<sup>34</sup>

Athanasius's career as Bishop of Alexandria lasted from his consecration on 8 June 328 to his death on 2 May 373.<sup>35</sup> Of these nearly 45 years, however, almost 18 were spent in exile or in hiding. He was sent away or strategically withdrew from Alexandria five times: from November 335 to November 337, from April 339 to October 346, from February 356 to February 362, from October 362 to February 364, and from October 365 to February 366. The first exile he spent in Trier, the second in Rome and various other parts of Europe, and the others in hiding in both male and female monastic communities up and down the Nile and beyond.

Athanasius was of low birth: he may not have known either his own age or who his father was.<sup>36</sup> He was adopted and educated by Alexander, and seems to have been at home in both Coptic and Hellenistic cultural milieux. It is likely that he could code-switch freely, and disappear into an Egyptian crowd at will: stories abound of his escaping from imperial guards and escorts. His many works rely heavily on Scripture citations and on natural rhetorical force. He had clearly learned much from the theology of Irenaeus, although he also well understood the norms of the Origenist tradition. He was a very effective theologian, able to find room for different traditional approaches to the Trinity, while being absolutely opposed to any Christology which alienated the essence of the Father from that of the Son.

He came late to the theological defence of the text of the Creed of Nicaea and of the term *homoousios*: up until his first exile in 335, he was simply trying to avoid being forced to accept Arius back into the clergy of Alexandria. In his second, from 339 to 346, he was left trying to defend himself from the theological innovations of his own allies at the Western Council of Serdica of 343, which he partly did by returning to a defence of the term *homoousios* in his three *Orations against the Arians* of the early 340s. In this, he was supported by Julius, a

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<sup>34</sup> On the political career of Athanasius and his wrangles with Constantine and his successors, see Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. On his theology, see Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: the Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*. On his relationship with Egyptian Christianity specifically, see Annick Martin, *Athanasie d'Alexandrie et l'église d'Égypte au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle (328–373)*.

<sup>35</sup> I have set out my own account of Athanasius's contribution to the survival of the original Creed of Nicaea during the years 328–360 at greater length in Parvis, "Reception of Nicaea."

<sup>36</sup> Athanasius was accused of being younger than his thirtieth year when he was elected bishop, but that charge was quickly dropped, presumably because there was no reliable evidence to be had by 328 on either his age or his paternity.

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particularly judicious Bishop of Rome. But from 353 onwards, once Constantius was sole ruler of the whole Roman Empire, Athanasius became the main theological defender in *On the Decrees of Nicaea* of the wording of the original Nicene Creed, including the non-Scriptural phrases ‘homouousios with the Father’ and ‘from the essence of the Father’.

The fifth-century histories which cover the Arian controversy make a great deal of Athanasius’s bravery and his persistence as a confessor of orthodoxy, but the Antiochene and Constantinopolitan historical traditions are more interested in the colourful stories surrounding him than in his theology, which was not always perfectly aligned with their own.

Egypt was the rock on which Roman imperial Christianity founded. Emperors sought to control it theologically and ecclesio-politically, but failed on both counts. Athanasius outlasted the attempts of four different emperors (Constantine, Constantius II, Julian, and Valens) to remove him and replace him with a more imperially amenable figure (Pistus, Gregory, George, and Lucius, respectively). The Bishop of Rome put paid to Pistus by refusing to recognise him. Gregory lasted six years, but on his death Constantius, at the behest of his brother Constans, allowed Athanasius to return and resume his former office. George was lynched immediately after Constantius’s death. Lucius, who was only installed after Athanasius’ death, fled to Constantinople when Valens left Antioch in 378.

Athanasius’s long and poignant *History of the Arians* sets out in detail the moves that Constantius made in 356 to bring the Egyptian churches under control, using a great deal of violence against clergy, monks and nuns and the recipients of the church poor fund, both in Alexandria and throughout Egypt. Clergy were banished to the Great Oasis, and nuns and widows publicly attacked. The same sort of moves were made by Valens in the case of Lucius. But this sort of violent attempt at imperial control was never successful for very long, and simply hardened the Egyptian church in its own identity.

We can see the development of Coptic literature as a unifying force in the Egyptian church begin during Athanasius’s career. A recent discovery of a fourth-century Coptic papyrus roll which includes Athanasius’ *Letter to Dracontius* offers evidence for his yearly Festal Letters giving the date of Easter being circulated in Sahidic Coptic as well as Greek from 354, in a dialect associated with Upper Egypt.<sup>37</sup> The amount of polemical literature that Athanasius was able to circulate during his 356–362 period in hiding implies

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<sup>37</sup> Sofia Torallas Tovar, “Athanasius’ Letter to Dracontius: A Fourth-century Coptic Translation in a Papyrus Roll (P.Monts.Roca inv.14).”

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access to extensive desert monastic copying facilities, probably including in women's communities (as Origen had employed women scribes).

Athanasius, before his death, had persuaded most of the Roman empire that being prepared to confess the (original) Nicene Creed and use the term 'homoousios' of the relationship between Father and Son was essential to orthodox worship of the Trinity. Persecution of the Egyptian church continued for another five years, but for the most part, his work was done. Nicaea 325 would become World Christianity's great unifying Council, to which all lasting Christian churches between the sixth and eighteenth centuries would subscribe.<sup>38</sup> 'Homoousios with the Father' would become the way that Christians would say that Christ is truly God.

### **The adoption of Nicene Christianity by the Kingdom of Aksum**

The development of Christianity as the religion of Ethiopia at state level is a product of the Aksumite civilisation of the fourth–eighth centuries.<sup>39</sup> King Ezana is now generally accepted on archaeological and numismatic grounds to have converted first from polytheism to monotheism, and then to Trinitarian Christianity.<sup>40</sup> During this period, he extended Axumite rule to Meroë in the Nile Valley, and into parts of Sudan and Somalia, connecting up the waterborne trade routes with the Roman Empire on both sides.

His conversion is connected both by the Ethiopian Synaxarion and by a number of Roman ecclesiastical historians of the fourth and fifth centuries with two Tyrian slave-boys, Frumentius and Aedesius.<sup>41</sup> Frumentius (*Fʾré Menatos* in Ge'ez) would become Abba Salama I, Ethiopia's first bishop. Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History* gives more details of the mission, including their capture and sale to the royal family, their career supporting Ezana's mother the queen-regent (otherwise identified as Ahyawa Sofya), and Frumentius's church-building campaign. When Ezana came of age, Aedesius returned to Tyre, but

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<sup>38</sup> The Primitive Christianity movement from the early nineteenth century onwards would dispense with church councils as standards of authority.

<sup>39</sup> S. C. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991). On the Christian archaeology of Adulis in particular, see Gabriele Castiglia, "Architecture, Liturgy, Chronology: Aksumite Christianity as a Cosmopolitan Paradigm (?) — the case study of Adulis (Eritrea)." Castiglia argues that the archaeological record suggests widespread Christian worship buildings in Adulis are a product of the fifth century rather than the fourth, implying that fourth-century Christianity was largely confined to the royal court.

<sup>40</sup> See Steven Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered;" also Sergew Hable-Selassie, "Ezana ('Ezana) (C)."

<sup>41</sup> The earliest account is to be found in Rufinus of Aquileia, *Ecclesiastical History*, 10.9. Rufinus claims to have heard the story from Aedesius.

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Frumentius went (or was sent) to Athanasius to ask for bishops for the kingdom. This seems to have taken place in the early 330s. In response, Athanasius consecrated Frumentius himself, as Frumentius had presumably intended. Whether Constantine was involved is not clear, but since Tyre was a pro-Arian see at that point, and his brother Aedesius had returned there, Frumentius must have been well aware of the theological choice he was making in traveling down the Nile to Alexandria in order to seek a consecrator for a bishop, rather than the Arabian gulf in the direction of Jerusalem or further afield to Antioch.

In 356, after Athanasius's flight, Constantius II wrote to "Ezana and Sayzana," the "barbarian" Aksumite rulers (in fact, they were literate in several languages, including Greek), evidently concerned that Athanasius might have fled to Ethiopia and be looking for support.<sup>42</sup> He demanded (though without military menaces) that Frumentius be sent back to Alexandria to be examined by Athanasius's Arian replacement George, and re-ordained by him if found theologically reliable. It is not a particularly diplomatic document, treating the Aksumite rulers peremptorily as ignorant fools. Athanasius gained access to the text of the letter, and included it in his *Apology to Constantius*, and in the *History of the Arians*, as evidence of Constantius's unreasonable ill-will.

Nothing is known of Frumentius's career after 356, but Ethiopia remained firmly allied to Alexandria, including in refusing to accept the results of the Council of Chalcedon of 451. The earliest known collection of Christian non-biblical documents translated into Ge'ez from Greek is the Aksumite Collection, a fifth-sixth-century compilation which includes the fourth-century 'Antioch collection' of canons, the late fourth-century *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria*, and a number of other documents pertaining to Alexandria's position in wider fourth- and fifth-century ecclesiastical politics.<sup>43</sup> The *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria* is particularly interesting, because it makes the case for the importance of the Church of Alexandria before Athanasius, in particular in the time of Alexander's predecessor Peter the Martyr, and argues that Peter himself expelled Arius from the Alexandrian church before Alexander did so.<sup>44</sup> Alexandria is presented as the oldest, most important, church in the East, in a detailed account of its own past extensively and plausibly bulwarked by data concerning bishops of the second and third centuries. Ethiopia never

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<sup>42</sup> On the letter, see Benjamin Hendrickx, "The 'Letter' of Constantius II to Ezana and Sezana: A note on its purpose, range and impact in an Afro-Byzantine context."

<sup>43</sup> Alessandro Bausi, Antonella Brita, Marco Di Bella, et al., "The *Aksumite Collection* or Codex Σ (*Sinodos of Qəfrəyā*, ms C<sub>3</sub>-IV-71/C<sub>3</sub>-IV-73, Ethio-SPaRe UM-039): Codicological and Palaeographical Observations: With a Note on Material Analysis of Inks."

<sup>44</sup> Alessandro Bausi and Alberto Camplani, "New Ethiopic Documents for the History of Christian Egypt."



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seems to have taken the Roman imperial line against the Church of Egypt at any period when the two were in conflict, but Ethiopians clearly studied the whole issue of Alexandrian authority extremely carefully, and made detailed information about it available in their own literary language. Ethiopia was Nicene, anti-Arian, and non-Chalcedonian — but not without thinking about it first.

### **Conclusion**

Many Christian theologians of the present day are used to equating Nicaea with the Creed of 381, without stopping to think too long about its relationship with the Creed of 325. But a proper account of the origins of African theology demands that we reconsider that reflex. In this paper, I have highlighted the specifically Egyptian context both of the background to the Nicene debates in the work of the Egyptian theologian Origen, and of the Nicene debates themselves. The Creed of 325 and its anathemas addressed the theological questions, debates, concerns and answers about the Trinity which had been thrown up by Egyptian and Libyan theologians in the third and early fourth centuries. Constantine, sometimes mistakenly seen as the author of the Creed of Nicaea 325, or of its key terminology, came on the scene after the terminological debates had come to a head, as I have demonstrated here. The terminology of the Nicene Creed and its anathemas comes directly from the Alexandrian debates between Arius and Alexander of Alexandria.

Egypt continued to be at the forefront of the Nicene debates throughout the fourth century. Nicaea's theological insistence that the Son was true God, eternal, and the same in essence as the Father was taken up by Athanasius, though shorn of the specific terminology, in *On the Incarnation*. The natural Son of God, eternal and stable by nature, from sheer love and generosity comes and takes human flesh to save contingent and unstable human beings by making us God's adopted children alongside him. Athanasius underwent five exiles and risked his life on numerous occasions for this theology; from the 345s on, he increasingly risked his life to defend Nicaea's actual terminology, and particularly the word *homoousios*.

It was this theology that the slave-boy Frumentius, one of two survivors of a massacre, chose for Aksum, his adopted country, and this theology that the royal family of Axum and eventually the whole kingdom chose for themselves. The Creed of Constantinople 381 eventually became the worldwide liturgical expression of that theology. But it was the determined theology of true God incarnate of the Creed of 325 that African theologians gave the world.

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<sup>45</sup> This article is part of the “Classic DACB Collection,” which includes all DACB articles published between 1995–2015.

<sup>46</sup> Editors’ note: This was reprinted as chapter 2 in *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopia*, edited by Alessandro Bausi, 27–34 (London: Routledge, 2012, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315250854>

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