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The Council of Nicaea 325: Reassessing the Role of Eusebius of Caesarea

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Samuel Fernández
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive interpretation of the Council of Nicaea, in light of Eusebius of Caesarea's role in the so-called Arian crisis. Given the historical-theological orientation of the study, it begins with hermeneutical caveats regarding the sources. It then examines the outbreak of the crisis, Eusebius's theology before the controversy, the Ossius embassy, the Council of Antioch, and the Council of Nicaea itself. The article argues, first, that the key theological issue at stake was the strict eternity of the Son, which Eusebius of Caesarea denied; second, that Eusebius—not Arius—was the principal adversary of Alexander of Alexandria; third, that the Nicene theological discussions primarily revolved around Eusebius's faith; and, fourth, that the *homoousios* implied the strict eternity of the Son.

Keywords

Alexander of Alexandria, Arius, Council of Nicaea, Eusebius of Caesarea, homoousios

We have very little information about the proceedings of the Council of Nicaea. Contemporary sources of Nicaea are awfully scarce,[1] ancient Christian historians are not always reliable because they depend on the

1. Some scholars believe that the written reports—that is, the Acts of Nicaea—never existed. Cf. Thomas Graumann, *The Acts of the Early Church Councils: Production and Character* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 18; Manlio Simonetti, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (Augustinianum, 1975), 77–78; and Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (T&T Clark, 1988), 158.

Corresponding author:
Samuel Fernández, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Santiago, 8970117, Chile.
Email: sfernane@uc.cl

retrospective narratives established in the second half of the fourth century, and it is difficult to assume that such an event was not recorded.[2] It is true that this was the first General Council, but the significance of this event must have been evident to the participants. Many bishops who had been persecuted stood side by side with the Roman emperor. Therefore, the scarcity of sources is not only frustrating but also surprising. In addition, the scarce extant sources are problematic: Eusebius's account in the *Vita Constantini* is intentionally vague regarding names and the doctrinal discussions at Nicaea, the polemical fragment by Eustathius of Antioch has no context and gives no names, and Athanasius's narrative is vague and retrospective, and it does not mention any names.[3] The most complete account of the Nicaea proceedings is Eusebius's letter to his church. However, it does not mention names, and it was handed down by Athanasius, not Eusebius.[4] Moreover, even though Ossius of Cordoba and Eustathius of Antioch played crucial roles in the drafting of the Nicene Creed, we have very little information about their trinitarian theology. The same can be said of Eusebius of Nicomedia. In summary, considering the participation of Eusebius and Athanasius, two bishops who wrote historical works, the scarcity of sources cannot be explained just by chance.

Two Hermeneutical Caveats

Given the complex state of the sources, it is necessary to make some caveats about their interpretation. The first one deals with the reconstruction of polemical discussions. In polemical settings, participants tend to emphasize the most controversial aspects of their adversaries' doctrines. Additionally, they often highlight what they think to be the most negative consequences of these doctrines. Some of these consequences are legitimate deductions, whereas others are polemical distortions. Such dynamics foster polarization. Furthermore, when a conflict develops within a group setting, participants tend to identify their adversaries with the most shocking ideas of the most radical members of the opposing group. These tendencies result in a polarized narrative of events. The social sciences, particularly social identity theory, have studied these group dynamics.[5] The theological controversies of the fourth century are not an exception. Furthermore, in the so-called Arian crisis, or controversy, this polarization process is intensified by the nature of the sources. Almost all the sources come from one side of the controversy and were written with a retrospective point of view.

2. John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longman, 1972), 212.
3. See David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the "Arian Controversy"* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 59–87; Ronald T. Ridley, "Anonymity in the *Vita Constantini*," *Byzantion* 50 (1980): 241–58; and Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 191–208.
4. See Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem*, text and trans. Samuel Fernández, *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337)* (Brill, 2024), 158–67 (hereafter cited as *FNS*). Eusebius's letter is handed down by Athanasius, *De decretis* 33.1–17.
5. See below, footnote 11.

Therefore, many factors contribute to establishing a one-sided, polarized, and retrospective narrative of the debates of the fourth century. Accordingly, it is crucial to distinguish the original doctrines asserted by the authors, their potential consequences, and their polemical distortions. The difference between these three levels is not always clear. However, in general terms, it is possible to distinguish:

a) *The original doctrines of the authors*. That is, the teaching that the authors are eager to support and defend explicitly. Of particular importance are the doctrinal departing points of the various teachings.
b) *The potential deductions of the original doctrines*. That is, the doctrines that are not supported by the authors but are logical deductions of the original teachings. I say "potential" deductions, because it is not always clear whether these deductions are legitimate according to their authors or merely assumed by opponents.
c) *The polemical distortion of the original teachings*. That is, the misrepresentation of the opponents' teaching for polemical purposes.

The second caveat is related to the nature of the sources. The absence of contemporary records has been fertile ground for anachronistic interpretations—that is, for projecting onto the Nicene assembly some parameters that only became clear in the second half of the fourth century. Hence, to address anachronistic reconstructions, the scarce contemporary documents must enjoy hermeneutical priority over retrospective accounts. For this aim, it is possible to classify ancient sources into three levels:[6]

a) The *narratives* of the historians of the late fourth and fifth centuries. The narratives are the primary level of historical works. They were written from the last decades of the fourth century to the first half of the fifth century by Christian authors who did not participate directly in the events they narrate. These authors include mainly Gelasius, Epiphanius, Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, Philostorgius, and Sulpicius. They wrote their histories based on oral testimonies and written sources; while some of these sources have survived, most have been lost.
b) The *testimonies* of the participants, such as Eusebius and Athanasius. The testimonies are accounts of controversies written by participants of the events several years later. The main authors are Eusebius and Athanasius. These authors are indeed privileged witnesses because they participated in the controversies. However, their narratives are partial and retrospective, as they wrote their accounts years or decades later.
c) The *documents* contemporary to the events they describe. The documents are letters, creeds, canons, theological statements, and imperial reports that meet three criteria: They were written contemporaneously with the events they

6. See *FNS*, xv–xxii.

> describe, their content is related to Nicaea, and they have been transmitted by ancient works as quotations (*traditio indirecta*). Most of the documents are controversial texts that have been transmitted in polemical works. It is necessary to free them from the ideological framework in which they are embedded to read *iuxta propria principia*.

Accordingly, almost all the ancient sources used in this article correspond to the third group—namely, the contemporary *documents*. They are not neutral, but they neither adopt a retrospective view of the events nor reproduce Athanasius's "master narrative." In conclusion, a particular aim of the scholar must be to identify the actual points of disagreement between the participants. For this end, all the sources are valuable. However, scholars must give hermeneutical priority to contemporary *documents* over *testimonies* and *narratives*.

The Outbreak of the So-Called Arian Crisis

The clash between the presbyter Arius and the bishop Alexander marked the outbreak of the so-called Arian controversy. For this first step of the controversy, we have the letters of both protagonists. However, some points of these sources seem to be inconsistent. For example, according to Alexander's letters, the "Arians" declared that the Son was mutable, whereas Arius's letters professed that the Son was immutable,[7] two claims that are incompatible.

Some ancient authors explained this mismatch by repeating that Arius was a hypocrite, whereas some modern scholars accuse Alexander of distorting Arius's doctrine.[8] However, on the one hand, Alexander's letters do not describe Arius's personal theology but "their" doctrine, which includes, in a polemical context, the more shocking doctrines asserted by the radical members of the group. On the other hand, some thinkers, who were labelled as Arians—like George of Laodicea—declared indeed that "the Son is also a creature and one of the things that were made (τῶν πεποιημένων εἷς)" and, therefore, mutable.[9] Therefore, observing the first caveat, it is necessary to distinguish the personal doctrine of Arius from the teaching of other so-called Arians. Alexander, who divided the scenario between "us" and "them," presented the doctrine of all his adversaries as one single teaching.[10] (Social identity theory provides helpful

7. See Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 11–13, text and trans. *FNS* 8.11–13, 46–49; and Arius, *Ad Alexandrum Alexandrinum* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 11.2, 70–71.
8. See Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* 1.10.3; *Epistula ad episcopos Aegypti et Libyae* 11.5, 19.6–7; and Hanson, *Search*, 139.
9. See George of Laodicea, *Ad Arium et socios*, text and trans. *FNS* 20, 94–95.
10. Athanasius followed the same pattern as Alexander.

academic tools to analyze this phenomenon.[11]) As a result, Arius was credited with doctrines that he never supported. Consequently, in order to study the outbreak of the controversy, it is necessary to free Arius from the doctrines he never held and to identify the real points of disagreement between him and Alexander.[12]

A close examination of contemporary sources indicates that the two substantial points of disagreement between them were as follows. First, Arius affirmed that before the Son was begotten, he was not, which means that there was once when the Son did not exist; therefore, the Son was posterior to the Father, although prior to creation and time.[13] In contrast, Alexander held the eternal begetting: The Son was coeternal with the Father.[14] Second, Arius affirmed that the Son came into existence "out of nothing."[15] In contrast, Alexander held that the Son came from the Father. Alexander states: "The Son of God, in fact, neither came to be 'out of nothing' nor 'was there once when he was not.'"[16]

Ancient Christian historians described the clash between Alexander and Arius as a spark that provoked a big fire when the world was in peace.[17] However, ancient sources indicate that the conflict had substantial theological antecedents.[18] No source transmitted the theology of Arius and Alexander before the conflict. However, the *Demonstatio*

11. Social identity theory explains how individuals categorize themselves and others into groups (*in-groups* vs. *out-groups*), which often leads to *in-group* favoritism and *out-group* discrimination as a way to reinforce their identity. According to social identity theory, group identity and categorization influence personal behavior, attitudes, and perceptions. See Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (Taylor & Francis, 1998); Raimo Hakola, "Social Identities and Group Phenomena in Second Temple Judaism," in *Explaining Christian Origins and Judaism. Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*, ed. Petri Luomanen (Brill, 2007), 259–76; and Philip F. Esler, "An Outline of Social Identity Theory," in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (T&T Clark, 2014), 13–39.
12. See Samuel Fernández, "Who Accused Whom of What? The Outbreak of the 'Arian' Controversy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 431–58, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2023.a915030.
13. "And before he was begotten, created, constituted, or established (πρὶν γεννηθῇ ἤτοι κτισθῇ ἤτοι ὁρισθῇ ἢ θεμελιωθῇ), he was not (οὐκ ἦν), as he was not unbegotten (ἀγέννητος γὰρ οὐκ ἦν)." Arius, *Ad Eusebium Nicomediensem* 5, text and trans. *FNS* 6.5, 38–39.
14. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 18, text and trans. *FNS* 8.15, 50–51.
15. See Arius, *Ad Eusebium Nicomediensem* 5, text and trans. *FNS* 6.5, 38–39.
16. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 15, text and trans. *FNS* 8.15, 48–49.
17. Gelasius, *Historia ecclesiastica* F11 (*GCS* NF 25, 50–53); Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.6.1.
18. See Manlio Simonetti, "Teologia alessandrina e teologia asiatica al concilio di Nicea," *Augustinianum* 13, no. 3 (December 1973): 369–98, https://doi.org/10.5840/agstm197313329.

evangelica informs us about the theology that Eusebius of Caesarea held before the beginning of the controversy.[19] As the conflict between Alexander and Arius focused on two specific topics—namely, those related to the pre-cosmic origin of the Son—I will not describe Eusebius's trinitarian theology in general but rather focus on his specific thinking about the two mentioned key doctrinal topics before the beginning of the crisis. This section does not focus on Eusebius's theology in the years following the Council of Nicaea.

Eusebius of Caesarea and the Origin of the Son of God

As a Christian thinker, Eusebius's departing point was the unity of God, that is, monotheism. As Alexandrian theologian, following Origen, Eusebius supported the subsistence of the Son of God against the Sabellian tendency:[20]

> The ray (αὐγή), being connatural to the nature of light, and substantially coexistent (συνυπάρχω) to light, could not exist outside that in which it is. Instead (δέ), the Logos of God exists and subsists in himself (καθ' ἑαυτὸν οὐσίωταί τε καὶ ὑφέστηκεν).[21]

Unlike light, the Logos of God is subsistent in himself (καθ' ἑαυτὸν). Thus, Eusebius had to explain how the Son's divinity—clearly supported by him—does not undermine monotheism. In this context and for this purpose, the bishop emphasized another difference between the ray and the Son of God:

> The ray does not shine by the free choice of light (οὐ κατὰ προαίρεσιν τοῦ φωτὸς ἐκλάμπει), but because of something which is an inseparable attribute of its *ousia* (οὐσίας συμβεβηκὸς ἀχώριστον). But (δὲ), the Son is the image of the Father by decision and free choice (κατὰ γνώμην καὶ προαίρεσιν). By his will, in fact, God became the Father of the Son (βουληθεὶς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς γέγονεν υἱοῦ πατήρ) and constituted him a second light, in all things similar to himself.[22]

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19. It is safe to say that *Demonstratio evangelica* was written after 313 and before the beginning of the Arian controversy, because it has no traces of this polemic. Only before the outbreak of the crisis was Eusebius able to articulate theological positions—unacceptable to Alexander—on central issues of the controversy, such as the Son's posteriority and his coming into being "from nothing," without adopting a polemical tone. See Sébastien Morlet, *La démonstration évangélique d'Eusèbe de Césarée: Étude sur l'apologétique chrétienne à l'époque de Constantin* (Études Augustiniennes, 2009), 80–94.
20. Dragoș A. Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea, and the Synthesis of Constantinople: Revisiting Trajectories in the Fourth-Century Christological Debates* (Brill, 2018), 205–10.
21. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.19, in *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*, vol. 23, 213 (hereafter cited as *GCS*). See Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.4.
22. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.7 (*GCS* 23, 153). See Simonetti, *La crisi*, 62; Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Eerdmans, 2001), 172; and Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011), 59–65.

In fact, God decided (ἐδόκει) that it was necessary (δεῖν) for the only begotten to preexist the creatures as an instrument (ὄργανον) of creation.[23] The bishop, then, maintains the traditional link between the origin of the Son and the divine plan of creation.[24]

When did the Son come from the Father? On the one hand, if the existence of the Son depends on a divine decision, the Son could not be coeternal with the Father. On the other hand, Eusebius clearly professed that the Son was begotten before creation:

> The begotten (γεννητός) Son did not lack existence at certain times (χρόνοι) and, afterward, was born at a certain instant, but before eternal times (πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων) exists and preexists, and exists continually with the Father as Son (καὶ τῷ πατρὶ ὡς υἱὸν διὰ παντὸς συνόν-τα).[25]

If everything was made through the Logos (Jn 1:3), the Logos must have existed before creation of time (χρόνος). In fact, according to Plato's *Timaeus*, time is the created image of eternity.[26] However, the mainstream of Greek philosophy and Christian theology assumed that even "before" time, it is possible to discern a succession of events that give meaning to notions such as "before," "after," and "simultaneity."[27] Some scholars have seen the expression "διὰ παντὸς συνόντα" as a declaration of the Son's strict eternity. However, the passage aims to state that the Son never existed except as a Son (ὡς υἱὸν).[28] In other words, the Son did not exist first as internal Logos and then as Son.[29] Therefore, God is strictly eternal, whereas the Son is prior to creation and time, but not strictly coeternal with God. That means that God exists *ab aeterno*, whereas the Son exists *ante tempora*.[30] In fact, since the Son is not unbegotten, the Father must be *previous* to the Son. In this point, the analogy of human birth works well:

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23. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.4.1; 4.2.2. "L'existence du Verbe se déduit donc entièrement de la providence du Père: elle découle d'un acte providentiel par lequel le Père exprime sa bonté à l'égard de sa création." Morlet, *La démonstration*, 285.
24. Simonetti, *La crisi*, 60–66.
25. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.13 (*GCS* 23, 154).
26. Plato, *Timaeus* 37c–d.
27. See Daniel Vázquez, "Before the Creation of Time in Plato's Timaeus," in *Time and Cosmology in Plato and the Platonic Tradition*, ed. Daniel Vázquez and Alberto Ross (Brill, 2022), 111–33. In fact, pre-Nicene Christian authors apply propositions such as πρό, ὁπότε, ὅτε, εἶτα, and ἅμα to "events" that precede the creation of time.
28. See Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.1.3, 4.2.1, 4.5.13, 5 praef. 1, 5.1.6, 5.1.17–18, 5.1.28, and 5.2.1.
29. See Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 71–74, 104–5.
30. From the second century, Christian thought made a distinction between *ab aeterno*, which indicates strict coeternity with God, and *ante tempora*, which indicates anteriority to creation and time. Hilary complains that this distinction is not taken into account. Hilary, *Contra Auxentium* 6 (PL 10, 613a–b): "Audiunt ante tempora, putant idipsum ante tempora esse quod semper est."

> Since one is unbegotten and the other begotten (ὁ μὲν ἀγέννητος ὁ δὲ γεννητός), one is the Father and the other is the Son, all should confess that the Father pre-exists (προϋπάρχω) and exists before (προϋφίσταμαι) the Son.[31]

For Eusebius, then, a sort of posteriority is a necessary consequence of begetting.[32] The Son cannot be coeternal with his Father. Thus, at least prior to the outbreak of the Arian crisis, Eusebius affirms that the Son came into existence *ante tempora*, but did not exist *ab aeterno* as the Father did. For showing this posteriority, Eusebius used the metaphor of light:

> The ray coexists with light (συνυπάρχει τῷ φωτί) because it is something constitutive of it (συμπληρωτική τις οὖσα αὐτοῦ)—for without the ray, light could not exist—and that arises at once (ὁμοῦ) out of itself. Instead (δὲ), the Father pre-exists with respect to the Son (ὁ πατὴρ προϋπάρχει τοῦ υἱοῦ) and exists before his birth (καὶ τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ προϋφέστηκεν), since [the Father] is the only unbegotten.[33]

While the ray co-exists with the light, the Father pre-exists in relation to the Son.[34] The opposition between the two verbs is evident: συνυπάρχω / προϋπάρχω.

How did the Son come from the Father? Eusebius answered: Not in the manner of animal births among us—*ousia* from *ousia* (οὐσίαν ἐξ οὐσίας)—which involves passion, division, cutting, and separation. Thus, the bishop both rejects and accepts aspects of creatural begetting. He accepts the posteriority of the Son, as in the begetting of creatures, while rejecting any material connotation of the begetting:

> The [Savior] did not come into existence from the *ousia* of the Unbegotten by a certain passion or division (κατά τι πάθος ἢ διαίρεσιν), nor did he coexist without beginning (ἀνάρχως) with the Father.[35]

Eusebius rejected two theological solutions: The Son is neither part of the Father nor coeternal with him. The bishop attributed these solutions to the two-stage theology of

31. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.20 (*GCS* 23, 213).
32. See Raffaele Farina, *L'impero e l'imperatore Cristiano in Eusebio di Cesarea: La prima teologia politica del Cristianesimo* (Pas Verlag, 1966), 39; Adam Renberg, *The Son Is Truly Son: The Trinitarian and Christological Theology of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Brepols, 2021), 53; and Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 135.
33. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.5 (*GCS* 23, 153). See Williams, *Arius*, 172.
34. Eusebius's view contrasts with Origen's theology, which supported the strict coeternity of the Son in relation to the Father. Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.2; Hanson, *Search*, 52; and Anatolios *Retrieving*, 61–63. It should be noted, however, that the Origenian tradition was not only a body of doctrine, but also a method. Eusebius could consider himself to be a faithful follower of Origen because he followed his method, although he did not always agree with Origen's teaching.

the Logos.[36] To characterize the authentic begetting of God's Son, the bishop stated the following principle:

> All that is in anything (τὸ ἔν τινι) or is found as accident (ὡς συμβεβηκός)—as whiteness in the body—or as one in another (ὡς ἕτερον ἐν ἑτέρῳ)—as that which is conceived in the womb of the pregnant woman—or as a part in the whole (ὡς μέρος ἐν τῷ ὅλῳ)—as a hand, foot or finger, which are a part (μέρη).[37]

Then, he concludes:

> The Son was not unbegotten in the Father (ἐν τῷ πατρί) from eternity and beginningless ages (ἐξ ἀπείρων καὶ ἀνάρχων αἰώνων), as one in another (ὡς ἕτερον ἐν ἑτέρῳ), as if [the Son] were a part (μέρος) of [the Father], who was born after he had changed and gone outside. This is already proper to the change (τροπή) and thus there would also be two unbegotten (ἀ-γένητα).[38]

Eusebius denies that the Son was in the Father "as one in another." The Son did not coexist with the Father in an unbegotten way (οὐκ ἀγενήτως συνυπάρχει τῷ πατρί).[39] So, he rejected the traditional theology of the two stages of the Logos: the unbegotten, impersonal *logos, ab aeterno* in God, and the begotten *Logos, ante tempora*, with God.[40] According to the bishop, this doctrine would imply two unbegotten beings and mutability in God.

In short, according to Eusebius, the Son was not a second unbegotten being, coeternal with the Father; the Son was not a part of the Father; and the *logos* was not *in God* eternally and then was begotten as Son. Finally, Eusebius mentioned a last explanation:

> But to assert simply that the Son came into being "out of nothing" (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων) just as (ὁμοίως) the other beings that have come into being is not without danger (οὐκ ἀκίνδυνον). For, one thing is the birth (γένεσις) of the Son and another the creation (δημιουργία) through the Son.[41]

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35. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.20 (*GCS* 23, 213). Cf. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.13.
36. The two-stage Christology distinguishes two steps: From all eternity—that is, *ab aeterno*—God had his impersonal *logos* within Him; when He decided to create, that is, *ante tempora*, God begot His inner *logos* which became the Logos and Son. See footnote 40.
37. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.11 (*GCS* 23, 212).
38. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.13 (*GCS* 23, 212).
39. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.19 (*GCS* 23, 213). See Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.4.
40. Two classical representatives of the two-stage Christology are Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolicum* 2.22.3–4 and Hippolytus, *Contra Noëtum* 10.1–3.
41. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.15 (*GCS* 23, 212). The Antiochian formula of 341 repeats the same idea: "For it is not safe (οὐκ ἀσφαλής) to say that the Son comes from nothing" (Athanasius, *De synosis* 26.3.1).

For Eusebius, the origin of the Son was different from that of the creatures. He emphasized the distinction between the Son and the creatures. However, a careful reading of the text shows that it is less specific than is usually understood, for two reasons: Eusebius did not declare this doctrine blasphemous, but "not free from danger"; moreover, he specifically denied that the Son came into being "out of nothing," adding a crucial specification: "*just as* the other creatures."[42] Was Eusebius open to accept that the Son came into being out of nothing *but not* as the other creatures? The *Demonstratio evangelica* is not explicit. However, in his letter to Alexander, Eusebius defended that "the One who is" begot the one who did not exist,[43] which implies that before his begetting, the Son did not exist.

After analyzing the metaphors themselves, it is worthwhile to examine certain passages in which Eusebius articulates his understanding of metaphorical language in theology.

> It is not licit to assimilate (ἀφομοιόω) the birth of a creature with the ineffable and unspeakable birth and constitution [of the Son]. Nor [is it licit] to compare (παραβάλλω) with him some passing and mortal image (εἰκών).[44]

The first text emphasizes the limitations of human language and the huge difference between the birth of a created being and the origin of the Son. Notably, the bishop of Caesarea repeatedly cites Isaiah 53:8: "Who will describe his birth?" However, another passage presents a different perspective:

> The core of the theology expounded to us, as it is beyond all analogy (παράδειγμα), derives nothing from corporeal things. But [these corporeal things] enable the acute mind to glimpse that the begotten (γεννητός) Son did not lack existence at certain times (χρόνοι) and, afterwards, was born at a certain instant, but before eternal times exists, pre-exists (πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων ὄντα καὶ προόντα), and exists unceasingly with the Father as Son (καὶ τῷ πατρὶ ὡς υἱὸν διὰ παντὸς συνόντα). But, without being unbegotten, he is begotten by the Unbegotten, being Only-begotten, Logos, and God from God (θεὸν ἐκ θεοῦ).[45]

This second text acknowledges both the insufficiency of human language in speaking about God and its necessity in offering a glimpse of divine realities. Both passages

42. In his letter to Alexander, Eusebius denies that "the Son came into being out of nothing, *as one among all* (ὡς εἷς τῶν πάντων)." Eusebius, *Ad Alexandrum* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 12.2, 76–77. Years later, Eusebius maintains the same view and rejected those who asserted that the Son "ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ὁμοίως τοῖς λοιποῖς κτίσμασιν γενόμενον." Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* 1.9.1 (*GCS* 14, 67). See Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* 1.9.6, 1.10.4.
43. Eusebius, *Ad Alexandrum* 4, text and trans. *FNS* 12.4, 76–77.
44. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.9 (*GCS* 23, 211).
45. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.13 (*GCS* 23, 154).

resonate with a significant excerpt from Origen's *On First Principles*.[46] These texts underscore God's transcendence, which surpasses all comparisons, yet they also assert that something must enable rational creatures to grasp the origin of the Son. Consequently, in every metaphor, certain aspects must be discarded, while others should be retained.

In summary, before the beginning of the controversy, Eusebius asserted, first, that the Son is *posterior* to God the Father, even if he is *prior* to creation and time. Since the Son was begotten as the instrument of creation, he is *posterior* to the Father yet *prior* to creation. Second, the Son is neither unbegotten, nor part of the unbegotten, nor was an impersonal *logos* in God (first stage) that at some point was begotten as Son (second stage). However, it is not without danger to say that the Son came out of nothing *just like* the creatures.

Ancient and modern scholars tend to excuse Eusebius from his more problematic statements,[47] and present him as a *via media* between Alexander and Arius. However, if we free Arius from the doctrines that he never held and consider only those teachings that he did hold personally; and if we take seriously the doctrinal statements of Eusebius's *Demonstratio evangelica*, without trying to discharge him from the most problematic ones, it becomes clear that the doctrines of Arius that caused the conflict are visible in the theology developed by Eusebius before the controversy. I highlight these problematic doctrines because they explain why the crisis occurred. These observations change the conventional view of the relationship between Eusebius and Arius. The traditional question is whether Eusebius was Arian, but the analysis of the sources indicates that Arius was a (imprudent) representative of the theology held by Eusebius, not the other way around.

Eusebius, Arius, and Alexander

For the aim of this article, it is crucial to compare the theologies of Eusebius and Alexander. Eusebius affirms a sort of atemporal posteriority of the Son with respect to the Father, while Alexander declares their strict coeternity. Eusebius states that the Son

46. "It is abominable and unlawful to equate (*infandum autem est et inlicitum… exaequere*) the God and Father, in the begetting of his only-begotten Son and in his giving [him] subsistence, with any generation of humans or other animals; but it must be something exceptional and worthy of God, for which can be found no comparison at all, not merely in things, but even in thought or imagination, such that a human mind could apprehend how the unbegotten God becomes Father of the only-begotten Son (*ut humana cogitatio possit adpraehendere quomodo ingenitus deus pater efficitur unigeniti filii*)." Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.4, text and trans. Behr, *Origen*, 44–47.

47. Hanson goes too far when he states that Eusebius "specifically disowns the doctrine that the Son is derived from non-existence." Hanson, *Search*, 52. Pollard excuses Eusebius in another way: He "may have been a good historian but was certainly a bad theologian." Thomas E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 251. See Christopher A. Beeley, "Eusebius' Contra Marcellum: Anti-Modalist Doctrine and Orthodox Christology," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 12, no. 3 (December 2008): 433, https://doi.org/10.1515/zac.2008.027.

does not coexist without beginning (ἀνάρχως) with the Father;[48] Alexander ascribes to the Son a birth without beginning (ἄναρχον) from the Father.[49] Alexander says that some men suppose that "always" means "unbegotten," whereas Eusebius identified these two concepts.[50] In addition, the bishop of Caesarea affirms that the Son was begotten by the will of God to be the instrument of creation,[51] while the bishop of Alexandria denounces this doctrine as heresy.[52] It should be noted that the topic of the Son as an instrument is found in Eusebius but not in Arius. Moreover, at least before Nicaea, Eusebius says that to affirm that the Son is "from nothing" as the other creatures is not free from danger,[53] whereas Alexander declares that this doctrine is a blasphemy.[54] These sharp discrepancies should not be undervalued; in fact, they are serious enough to justify the controversy.

The contrast between the two bishops becomes even clearer in Arius's account of Alexander's teaching. Eusebius affirms that the Son "does not coexist with the Father in an unbegotten way (οὐκ ἀγενήτως συνυπάρχει τῷ πατρί);"[55] in contrast, according to Arius, Alexander affirms that "the Son coexists with God, in an unbegotten way (συνυπάρχει ὁ υἱὸς ἀγεννήτως τῷ θεῷ)."[56] Eusebius states, "The Father pre-exists with respect to the Son and exists before his birth;"[57] in contrast, in Arius's view, Alexander declares that "neither in thought nor for a certain instant is God prior to the Son."[58] These two theologies are opposed using the same terms (οὐκ ἀγενήτως / ἀγεννήτως; προϋπάρχει / συνυπάρχει). In this light, it is possible to reread a well-known passage of Arius's letter to the bishop of Nicomedia:

48. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.20 (*GCS* 23, 213). Cf. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.13, 5.1.13.
49. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 52, text and trans. *FNS* 8.52, 64–65.
50. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 48, text and trans. *FNS* 8.48, 62–63; Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* 2.3.3: "ἀίδιον, τοῦτ᾽ ἔστιν ἀγένητον." See Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* 2.12.2; *Ad Euphrationem* 1, text and trans. *FNS* 13.1, 76–79; Athanasius, *De decretis* 28.6; and Anatolios, *Retrieving*, 61. See also Asterius, *Fragment* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 17.2, 86: "Ἀγένητον εἶναι τὸ μὴ ποιηθέν, ἀλλ᾽ ἀεὶ ὄν."
51. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.4.1, 4.2.2.
52. Alexander, *Epistula encyclica* 9, text and trans. *FNS* 26.9, 112–13.
53. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.1.15. Later, he censures those who claim that the Son came into existence out of nothing like the other creatures (ὁμοίως τοῖς λοιποῖς κτίσμασιν). If the latter expression functions not as an explanation but as a specification, then Eusebius modified his language more than his doctrine. See Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* 1.9.1, 1.9.6, 1.10.4.
54. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 19, 26, 44, text and trans. *FNS* 8.19, 8.26, 8.44.
55. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.4 (*GCS* 23, 153). See Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.13, 5.1.20.
56. Arius, *Ad Eusebium Nicomediensem* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 6.2, 38–39.
57. Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.5 (*GCS* 23, 153).
58. Arius, *Ad Eusebium Nicomediensem* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 6.2, 38–41.

> And given that Eusebius, your brother who is in Caesarea, Theodotus, Paulinus, Athanasius, Gregory, Aetius, and all the Eastern [bishops] say: "God exists without beginning before the Son (προϋπάρχει ὁ θεὸς τοῦ υἱοῦ ἀνάρχως)," they became anathema.[59]

Arius summarizes their common theological tradition as follows: "God exists without beginning before the Son." Consequently, the pre-cosmic priority of the Father was the genuine doctrine that expresses the theological identity of the group. Arius did not present himself as an original thinker persecuted by his bishop because of his innovative theology, but as a representative of the theological tradition whose principal figure was Eusebius of Caesarea. Arius's message to the bishop of Nicomedia is clear and could be expressed as follows: "Since Alexander condemns my teaching, he condemns Eusebius's theology and, therefore, he condemns all of you!" If this interpretation is correct, the more serious threat for Alexander was Eusebius, not Arius. This interpretation receives further support from the synodical letter of Alexandria (338):

> When the impious Arius—from whom the heresy of the Ariomaniacs has its name—was expelled from the Church by the blessed bishop Alexander, those around Eusebius, who were [his] disciples and shared his impiety, considering that they themselves were expelled (ἑαυτοὺς ἐκβεβλῆσθαι νομίζοντες), they wrote many times to bishop Alexander, asking him not to leave the heretic Arius outside the Church.[60]

Both letters represent opposing perspectives, that of Arius and that of the Alexandrian bishops faithful to Athanasius. Both letters describe the same facts and support the same interpretation of the facts: The condemnation of Arius hit the bishops around Eusebius. Therefore, the principal antagonists of Alexander were the bishops associated with Eusebius.[61] This reconstruction explains why the entire East immediately became involved in the controversy. Behind a seemingly local quarrel there was a broader conflict between the two influential bishops who could each claim to be the leader of the Origenian legacy, namely the bishop of Caesarea and that of Alexandria.

Ossius in Alexandria and Antioch

After his victory over Licinius, in September 324, Constantine went to Nicomedia. When he was planning to visit Egypt, he got acquainted with the clash between Alexander and Arius. With the advice of Eusebius of Nicomedia, the emperor wrote his letter to Alexander and Arius and dispatched Ossius, his emissary, to Alexandria, the place that required the most urgent attention.[62] The emperor's letter blamed both

59. Arius, *Ad Eusebium Nicomediensem* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 6.3, 40–41.
60. Synod of Alexandria (338), *Epistula synodalis*, in Athanasius, *Apologia secunda* 6.2, *Athanasius Werke* vol. 2, 91–92 (hereafter cited as *AW*).
61. The letter—written in 338—does not make clear whether it refers to the bishop of Caesarea or to that of Nicomedia. In any case, Alexander's opponents were a group of bishops from outside Egypt. See below, footnote 111.
62. On Ossius's mission in Alexandria, see Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 160–66.

bishop Alexander and presbyter Arius, something more uncomfortable for the bishop. Considering the distances, it seems reasonable to suppose that the mission of the bishop of Cordoba did not begin before mid October of 324—that is, shortly before the end of the sailing season.[63]

Some letters attest to Ossius's presence at an Alexandrian synod.[64] It is likely that this assembly that dealt with Colluthus was the same synod of 100 bishops that condemned Arius.[65] In both issues, that of Colluthus and that of Arius, Ossius supported Alexander. Therefore, Ossius's stay in Alexandria sealed the alliance between the bishop of Cordoba and that of Alexandria. Alexander must have alerted Ossius about the danger represented by Eusebius of Caesarea.

After his stay at Egypt, Ossius went to Antioch to support the fragile situation of the newly appointed bishop, Eustathius. The synod of Antioch of early 325 remained unknown till 1905, when Schwartz published a Syriac manuscript containing its letter (Urk. 18 = *FNS* 28). This document was written by Ossius, who is at the head of the list of signatories.[66] Let us examine the reference to Eusebius in the synodal letter of Antioch:

> Therefore, when this faith was first presented and the whole priestly synod agreed and confessed that this was the apostolic and saving doctrine, and all the fellow ministers were of one mind about these things, only Theodotus of Laodicea, Narcissus of Neronias, and Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine, as people who had forgotten the holy Scriptures and the apostolic teachings, were shown to be introducing doctrines opposed to these—though they attempted many machinations to dissimulate and cover up their follies through persuasion of words, and not through truth.[67]

This letter is the only document that testifies to the condemnation of Eusebius of Caesarea and the other two bishops. The synodal letter, however, does not elucidate the reasons for their condemnation. It only says, "For, based on the very facts and on the things that they were asked and that they asked, they were reproved as agreeing with those who were with Arius, and that they were of an opinion contrary to those that

63. Agnes M. Ramsay, "The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 15, no. 1 (1925): 60–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/295601; and Scott L. Arcenas, "Mare ORBIS: A Network Model for Maritime Transportation in the Roman World," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 36, no. 2 (2021): 169–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2021.1964015. On stations suitable for navigation, see James Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season* (Brill, 2012), 9–52.
64. See The Clergy of Mareotis, *Ad synodum Tyriam* 4, text and trans. *FNS* 70.4; and The Clergy of Mareotis, *Ad Philagrium praefectum* 2–3, text and trans. *FNS* 71.2–3.
65. Alexander, *Epistula encyclica* 11, text and trans. *FNS* 26.11, 112–13.
66. Recently, Simperl credited the letter to Eustathius. However, in my view, the conventional reconstruction is better supported by the sources. See Matthias Simperl, *Das Schreiben der Synode von Antiochia 324/325 (Urk. 18): Überlieferungs-geschichtliche Einordnung, Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar* (forthcoming).
67. Synod of Antioch (325), *Epistula synodica* 14, text and trans. *FNS* 28.14.

had been previously established."[68] Fortunately, Marcellus of Ancyra—one of the staunchest opponents of the bishop of Caesarea—preserves a fragment of a letter that describes Ossius's activity and provides some elements of the theological debate. According to this fragment, "Ossius the bishop asked [Narcissus] if he would also say in this way, as Eusebius of Palestine does, that there are two *ousiai*, I learned from his writings [says Marcellus] that he answered that he believed that there were three *ousiai*."[69] The fragment, then, transmits the things that Eusebius of Palestine, that is, Caesarea, was asked in the synod. The wording of the fragment does not suggest a scholastic debate but a judicial interrogation. The critical question was: How many *ousiai* are in God, one or two? Eusebius used *ousia* to denote individual entity.[70] The question posed by Ossius indicates a crucial shift, because it adds new parameters to the controversy. The disagreement between Alexander, Arius, and Eusebius was not about the number of divine *ousiai* or *hypostaseis*, but about the origin of the Son of God. Ossius, according to the little we know about his theology, was a representative of the one *hypostasis / ousia* tradition, common in Asia Minor.[71] Consequently, it is likely that at the synod of Antioch (325) two different controversies overlapped. The first opposed two branches of the Alexandrian tradition (Alexander / Eusebius), and the second opposed the Alexandrian and Asian traditions (three / one *hypostasis*). The synodal letter finally adds, "But know this also: that because of the synod's abundant love of humanity we have given these a place for repentance and acknowledgment of the truth at the great and priestly synod of Ancyra."[72] It is not easy to explain the sense and aim of this condemnation. There is little evidence to envisage Eusebius's exact juridical status. It is possible to visualize two scenarios. Commonly, scholars speak about a "provisional condemnation," but there are no ecclesiastical antecedents of this kind of sentence.[73] Another possibility is suggested by the development of the ecclesial appeal process at that time,[74] which was "emblematic of the innovations of

68. Synod of Antioch (325), *Epistula synodica* 14, text and trans. *FNS* 28.14.
69. Narcissus of Neronias, *Epistula*, text and trans. *FNS* 29, 128–29. See Marcellus of Ancyra, *Fragment* 116, 124.
70. "Eusebius did not envision οὐσία as an essence or common substance but as an individual, actual entity." Giulea, *Antioch*, 209. See Renberg, *The Son Is Truly Son*, 35n7.
71. Synod of Sardica (343), *Epistula synodica* 1, in Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.8, 39; Eustathius, *Fragment* 88 (CChr.SG 51, 156–57); Robert V. Sellers, *Eustathius of Antioch: And His Place in the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1928), 72; and Joseph T. Lienhard, *Contra Marcelum: Marcellus of Ancyra and Fourth-Century Theology* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 35–43.
72. Synod of Antioch (325), *Epistula synodica* 15, text and trans. *FNS* 28.15, 126–27.
73. Graumann, *Acts*, 224.
74. Klaus M. Girardet, *Kaisertum, Religionspolitik und das Recht von Staat und Kirche in der Spätantike* (R. Habelt GMBH, 2009), 217–49; Federico Pergami, *L'appello nella legislazione del tardo impero* (Accademia romanistica costantiniana, 2000), 45–119; Hamilton Hess, *The Early Development of Canon Law and the Council of Serdica* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 179–200; and Caroline Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Constantine in law, administration, and imperial control."[75] This condemnation must have been shocking, unexpected, and unacceptable for Eusebius himself, one of the most prestigious Eastern bishops. He then must have used every means to reject it: He likely would have had appealed to a larger synod. Both, Ossius and Eusebius, knew this practice, which was implemented in the Donatist crisis.[76] The bishop of Cordova, then, could not but accept Eusebius's request. The great and priestly synod of Ancyra could act for Eusebius of Caesarea as a court of appeal. It is not my contention, however, that this was the only or the principal aim of the synod.[77]

Eusebius at Nicaea

Eusebius arrived at Nicaea as an excommunicated bishop, who was considered the leader of those who supported the "Arian" doctrine. The evidence provided by Eduard Schwartz in 1905—the synodal letter of Antioch—should have changed scholars' views of Eusebius's role at Nicaea.[78] However, mainstream studies still depict him as one of the leading figures, the head of the moderate party, the one who mediated between the two radical stances.[79] Modern studies describe him as the bishop who took the initiative of proposing his own creed as the common base of an agreement.[80] However, it is problematic to present Eusebius of Caesarea, a condemned bishop, as one of the leading figures involved in the drafting of the Nicene Creed, the hallmark of orthodoxy.

"The actual course of events which led to the formulation of the [Nicene] creed is bafflingly obscure."[81] The most significant contemporary documents are the well-known letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his church (hereafter the *Letter*),[82] written immediately after the synod, and fragment 79 of Eustathius's works (hereafter the *Fragment*), produced a few months after the synod.[83] In addition, there are valuable

75. John N. Dillon, *The Justice of Constantine: Law, Communication, and Control* (The University of Michigan Press, 2012), 11, see 214–50.
76. See Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10.6.2; and Vittorino Grossi, "Para una relectura de la documentación sobre Osio de Córdoba y la cuestión donatista (311–357)," in *El siglo de Osio de Córdoba*, ed. A. Reyes Guerrero (BAC, 2015), 271–316, 271–316.
77. See Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 176–81.
78. Eduard Schwartz, "Eusebios von Caesarea," in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. G. Wissowa, 6/1 (Metzler, 1907), 1414.
79. See Timothy D. Barnes, "Emperors and Bishops, A.D. 324–344: Some Problems," *American Journal of Ancient History* 3 (1978): 53–75, https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463237394-004; and Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 89.
80. Pier F. Beatrice, "Eusebe de Césarée," in *Histoire de la littérature grecque chrétienne des origines à 451*, ed. Bernard Pouderon, vol. 3 (Les Belles Lettres, 2017), 652; and David M. Gwynn, "Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicea*, ed. Young R. Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 99.
81. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 212.
82. Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem*, text and trans. *FNS* 37, 158–67.
83. Eustathius, *Fragment* 79, text and trans. *FNS* 39, 166–69.

testimonies written by Athanasius;[84] he witnessed Nicaea, but he wrote several years after the synod and, therefore, describes the events from a retrospective viewpoint.

The *Fragment* blamed a certain Eusebius. The conventional interpretation assumes that it refers to Eusebius of Nicomedia. Consequently, the *Letter* and the *Fragment* would describe different episodes, and there would be three stances at Nicaea: the group of Eustathius, that of the bishop of Nicomedia, and, in the middle, Eusebius of Caesarea. However, my contention is that, in light of Eusebius's antecedents and excommunication, the comparison between the *Fragment* and the *Letter* indicates that both documents describe the same event.[85] Consequently, although the assembly included a variety of positions, it was effectively divided between the alliance of Eustathius, Ossius, and Alexander and that of Eusebius of Caesarea, the condemned bishops, and their supporters. For the sake of clarity, I quote here the relevant section of Eustathius's *Fragment* and then compare its content with the *Letter* by Eusebius of Caesarea:

> As the form of the faith was sought, the writing (τὸ γράμμα) was brought forward, a manifest proof of Eusebius's blasphemy. And, when the [writing] had been read aloud to everyone, immediately it produced uncertainty in the hearers because of its deviation, and it inflicted irredeemable shame on the writer. As the maneuver of those who were for Eusebius (οἱ ἀμφὶ τὸν Εὐσέβιον) was clearly convicted, the unlawful writing having been torn to pieces before everyone's eyes, some men, thanks to a plot, putting forward the name of peace, silenced all those who used to speak the best things. But the Ariomaniacs, fearing that they should be exiled by such a great synod which agreed on this, once they leapt forward, they anathematized the forbidden doctrine, subscribing with their own hands the agreed written statement.[86]

The *Fragment* indicates that the synodal discussion developed when the issue of faith was tackled; similarly, the *Letter* asserts that the discussion revolved "around the faith of the church."[87] The *Fragment* refers to "the writing (τὸ γράμμα)" that was brought forward,[88] which was a proof of Eusebius's blasphemy. The *Letter* contains Eusebius's formula of faith. So, the *Fragment* and the *Letter* speak about a document coming from Eusebius. However, the *Fragment* does not make clear whether the document "was brought forward" by Eusebius or his persecutors. It is possible that during the discussion Eusebius presented his faith and his opponents read some other letters of him—as "a manifest proof of Eusebius's blasphemy"—such as the letters to Alexander

84. See Athanasius, *De decretis* 3.1–4, 19.1–20.3; and Athanasius, *Ad Afros* 5.4–6.3.
85. See Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 196–204.
86. Eustathius, *Fragment* 79, text and trans. *FNS* 39, 166–69.
87. Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem* 1, text and trans. *FNS* 37.1, 158–59.
88. Eustathius, *Fragment* 79.1, text and trans. *FNS* 39.1, 166–67. The text preceding the extant *Fragment* should have reported the events that caused the assembly of Nicaea. Theodoret, who read the context of the *Fragment*, must have known what bishop was mentioned there. Why did he write ambiguously? Possibly, the historian wanted to protect the reputation of the bishop of Caesarea, whom he intended to follow as a historian; see Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1.4. In fact, "six later historians paid him the compliment of writing a continuation of his Church History." Hanson, *Search*, 46.

and Euphration, which contained shocking expressions that scandalized some members of the assembly. In fact, the Acts of Nicaea II testify that some "blasphemous" letters of Eusebius of Caesarea were preserved precisely in Nicaea.[89] Eustathius's account may have conflated these writings.

The *Fragment* and the *Letter* have the same structure: Both affirm that a document by Eusebius was read before the assembly and describe the reaction of the synod—albeit opposing reactions. The *Fragment* asserts that the assembly rejected the document, whereas the *Letter* states that Constantine affirmed that his creed was "good and worthy." However, a close examination of the sources indicates that the *Letter* does not affirm that the document was applauded by the assembly.[90] It should be remembered that Eusebius of Caesarea had been condemned at Antioch; he had to prove that he was not of "the same opinion as those with Arius."[91] However, the creed that he presented was not specific enough as to prove his rejection of the Arian ideas:

> We believe in one God Father, the ruler of all, the maker of all visible and invisible things, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, God from God, light from light, life from life, Only-begotten Son, "firstborn of all creation," begotten from the Father before all ages, through whom all things came into existence; who was made flesh for the sake of our salvation, lived among humans, suffered, rose again on the third day, ascended to the Father, and will come again in glory to judge living and dead. And we also believe in one Holy Spirit.[92]

Although Eusebius's creed was traditional and orthodox, it was insufficient to absolve him of the charge of Arianism. As an excommunicated bishop, he was required to demonstrate that he did not support the "Arian" doctrine. However, the formula he read contained no specific rejection of the Son's pre-cosmic posteriority in relation to the Father, nor of the doctrine that the Son came into being from nothing. Eusebius affirmed that Constantine witnessed that the faith (πίστις) was orthodox and ordered all to subscribe to it only once the term *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) had been added.[93] In other words, the emperor did *not* accept Eusebius's formula. The requirement for the insertion of the term *homoousios* clearly indicates that Eusebius's profession of faith was not accepted as it stood.

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89. One of these letters is introduced with the following words: "Openly blaspheming, he [scil. Eusebius of Caesarea] speaks thus about Arius and those who are with him," Eusebius, *Ad Alexandrum* 1, text and trans. *FNS* 12.1, 74–75.
90. See Holger Strutwolf, *Die Trinitätstheologie und Christologie des Euseb von Caesarea: Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung seiner Platonismusrezeption und Wirkungsgeschichte* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 46. In addition, Eustathius does not say that Eusebius's document was heretical, as modern translations suggest; he affirms that the γράμμα was "deviating" so that it provoked "uncertainty" for the bishops. The term ἐκτροπή should be understood in the light of the uncertainty that it provoked. Thus, it seems possible to understand "deviation" in the sense of "zigzagging."
91. Synod of Antioch (325), *Epistula synodica* 14, text and trans. *FNS* 28.14, 126–27.
92. Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem* 4, text and trans. *FNS* 37.4, 158–59.
93. "ἑνὸς μόνου προσεγγραφέντος ῥήματος τοῦ ὁμοουσίου." Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem* 7, text and trans. *FNS* 37.7, 160–61.

Therefore, Eustathius's and Eusebius's narratives are not incompatible. From opposing perspectives, they describe the negative reaction against the profession of faith of Eusebius of Caesarea. In addition, the *Fragment* records "the shame" (αἰσχύνη) of the unidentified Eusebius, and Athanasius states that Eusebius of Caesarea "was ashamed (αἰσχύνω) to sign these expressions."[94] Besides, the *Fragment* does not use the idiom "those around Eusebius" (οἱ περὶ Εὐσέβιον), which later came to refer to Eusebius of Nicomedia. These details support the claim that the *Fragment* refers to Eusebius of Caesarea—not that of Nicomedia, as Hanson claims.[95] Besides, according to the *Fragment*, the document was torn asunder before all; yet, considering Eustathius's polemical language,[96] it is not clear whether this sentence should be read literally or figuratively.[97] What was the "maneuver" of those of Eusebius? Sources are not explicit. However, in the light of Athanasius's narrative, professing an unspecific creed containing no anti-Arian statements could be interpreted as a maneuver.[98] Then, at this point, the *Fragment* says that some of the Eusebians called upon "the name of peace"; similarly, in the *Letter*, the bishop of Caesarea invoked "the sake of peace" as a reason for accepting the *homoousios*.[99] Again, the accounts coincide in their structure, although they differ regarding the interpretation of the facts.

Both the *Fragment* and the *Letter* mention a second formula; Eusebius actually quotes it. Eustathius accused the Ariomaniacs of subscribing to this formula for fear of exile, and the bishop of Caesarea made it clear that he did not subscribe to the creed

94. Athanasius, *De decretis* 3.4, text AW 2, 1; see *De decretis* 20.1.
95. See Hanson, *Search*, 161.
96. Hanson highlights Eustathius's "inflated and ornate language" and his "usual style of pompous wordiness." Richard P. C. Hanson, "The fate of Eustathius of Antioch," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 95 (1984), 171; and Hanson, *Search*, 160. Sellers affirms that Eustathius "is a man of passion, full of fire against his adversaries… he was a man who did not fear to use scathing words against his adversaries." Sellers, *Eustathius of Antioch*, 27–28. Athanasius described Eustathius as someone who "hated the Arian heresy" (ἀρειαν ὴν αἵρεσιν ἐμίσει). Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 4.1, AW 2, 185.
97. Barnes affirms that the document "was symbolically torn up." Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 216. Tetz doubts that the tearing (*zerreißen*) was actually performed; see Martin Tetz, "Zur strittigen Frage arianischer Glaubenserklärung," in *Logos: Festschrift für Luise Abramowski zum 8. Juli 1993*, ed. Hans C. Brennecke, Ernst L. Grasmück, and Christoph Markschies (De Gruyter, 1993), 225.
98. Modern reconstructions attribute to the bishop of Caesarea strategic dishonest intentions, as Eustathius did. According to Hanson, Eusebius's profession of faith "avoids all the controversial points raised by the Arian Controversy." Hanson, *Search*, 160. Ortiz de Urbina says that Eusebius was "opportuniste et courtisan." José Ortiz de Urbina, *Nicée et Constantinople* (Éditions de L'Orante, 1963), 55.
99. "τοῦ τῆς εἰρήνης σκοποῦ πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν ἡμῖν κειμένου." Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem* 10, text and trans. *FNS* 37.10, 162–63. Besides, the authors of *FNS* 66 state that once they examined the sense of the ὁμοούσιος, they made peace and signed the formula of faith (*FNS* 66). According to Duchesne and Martin, the authors of this letter are Theonas of Marmarike and Secundus of Ptolemais; see Annicke Martin, "Le fil d'Arius: 325–335," *Revue d'histoire ecclesiastique* 84 (1989): 316–20.

eagerly.[100] Thus, both sources describe the unenthusiastic signature of the Nicene Creed by Eusebius. Both imply that Eusebius modified his first stance for the sake of peace, which was invoked strategically (*Fragment*) or sincerely (*Letter*). Again, same facts, different interpretations. As the signature of the Nicene formula cannot be but a one-time event at the synod, both documents, the *Fragment* and the *Letter*, should describe the same episode.

In conclusion, the parallels between both testimonies indicate that the *Fragment* and the *Letter* refer to the same episode. If it is accepted that both sources account for the same discussion, the development of events becomes clearer, simpler, and consistent with Eusebius's condemnation at the Synod of Antioch (325). Thus, it is not necessary to figure out several stages in Nicaea: an earlier unrecorded session that rehabilitated Eusebius of Caesarea, a second one that rejected the "Arian" formula of Eusebius of Nicomedia, and a third one that drafted the Nicene Creed, prompted by Eusebius of Caesarea. Accordingly, the bishop of Caesarea did not lead the moderate position at the synod but was in the dock, and there were not three but two stances at Nicaea. Besides, this reconstruction is not compelled to suppose that the bishop of Caesarea, who had been condemned for heresy by Ossius and Eustathius a few months earlier, became a leading figure at Nicaea and proposed the first draft of the creed, which is highly problematic. In addition, this interpretation solves another issue: It is unlikely that the great assembly of Nicaea concentrated on evaluating the orthodoxy of a presbyter who had already been condemned by the bishop of Alexandria. Rather, it is more plausible that the Council focused on determining whether a group of bishops—whose central figure was Eusebius of Caesarea—endorsed the so-called "Arian" teaching.

Finally, it is worth noting the intriguing scarcity of sources. The outcomes of Nicaea likely left most bishops disappointed. On one hand, leading figures such as Ossius and Eustathius, who had previously condemned Eusebius at Antioch (325), sought to have their judgment confirmed by Nicaea. However, Constantine's intervention prevented this. On the other hand, Eusebius of Caesarea aimed to demonstrate the legitimacy of his theology before both the assembly and the emperor. Yet, this did not come to pass, and he was compelled, *obtorto collo*, to sign a creed containing expressions that were at least in tension with his own theological views. It is often said that history is written by the victors. In this case, however, since there were no clear victors, no one was particularly eager to record the events in detail.[101]

The Theological Meaning of the *Homoousios*

Before examining the meaning of the *homoousios* at Nicaea, it is necessary to analyze its appearance before the Council. The term is mentioned in the theological discussions leading to Nicaea only four times, three of them in Arius's writings and the other

100. Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem* 9–16, text and trans. *FNS* 37.9–16, 162–65. Athanasius noticed that Eusebius signed unwillingly; see Athanasius, *De decretis* 3.3–4.

101. As stated previously, the accounts of Eusebius in the *Vita Constantini* (ca. 338) and of Athanasius in *De Decretis* (ca. 357) are intentionally vague.

one in a problematic fragment that Ambrose credits to Eusebius of Nicomedia. In addition, Eusebius of Caesarea discards some untenable interpretations of the term in his letter to his church, which was written shortly after Nicaea. The more instructive text on this matter is a fragment of Arius's letter to his bishop Alexander:

> Some understand (ὑπό τινων νοεῖται) the expressions "from Him" (Ps 109:3), "from the womb" (Ps 109:3), and "I came forth from the Father and I am come" (Jn 8:42) as if [the Son was] a part *homoousios* of the [Father] or an emission (ὡς μέρος αὐτοῦ ὁμοουσίου καὶ ὡς προβολὴ). Then, according to them, the Father would be compound, divisible, mutable, and body; and, according to them, the incorporeal God would suffer in the way that corresponds to a body.[102]

Arius describes the doctrine asserted by specific individuals (ὑπό τινων). They understand some biblical expressions as if the Son were a *homoousios* part of the Father. Arius draws the consequences of this: The Father would be compound, divisible, mutable, and body. He rejects this understanding of the *homoousios* in his conciliatory letter to his bishop; of course, both, Arius and Alexander, did not accept this idea of divine substance. The three biblical expressions above could be used to support the two-stage Christology. All of them suppose that the Son progressed from the first to a second stage. Therefore, in Arius's view, the two-stage Christology implies that a part of God—a *homoousios* part that existed in God *ab aeterno*—went forth and became the Son before the beginning of time (*ante tempora*). Considering the first caveat, the corporeal character of God was not part of the doctrine of Arius's adversaries; it was rather Arius's deduction from their teaching. Is it a legitimate deduction or a polemical distortion? According to Eusebius's testimony, at least none of the relevant bishops at Nicaea accepted a material view of the divine *ousia*.[103] Consequently, it is likely that no one at the Nicene assembly supported a corporeal connotation of the term *homoousios*.

Socrates says that immediately after Nicaea some bishops accused the supporters of the *homoousios* of Sabellianism.[104] Is it reasonable to assume that those who introduced *homoousios* at Nicaea were inclined toward Sabellianism? There are three

102. Arius, *Ad Alexandrum* 5, text and trans. *FNS* 11.5, 74–75, slightly modified.

103. Eusebius, *Ad ecclesiam Caesariensem* 7, text and trans. *FNS* 37.7, 160–61.

104. "But as we have found in various letters, which the bishops wrote to one another after the synod, the term homoousios (ἡ τοῦ ὁμοουσίου λέξις) confused some [of them]. Those who spent time and inquired closely about the [term] provoked a battle against each other. What happened was not far from a night battle, for neither of them seemed to understand the reason why they thought the other [group] was blaspheming. On the one hand, those who avoid the word ὁμοούσιος believed that those who welcome it introduced the doctrine of Sabellius and Montanus, for that reason they called them blasphemers, as to those who deny the [individual] existence of the Son of God. On the other hand, those who were devoted to the ὁμοούσιος, presuming that the others introduced polytheism (πολυθεΐαν εἰσάγειν), avoided them as they were promoters of paganism." Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.23.6–7 (*GCS* NF 1, 69).

reasons for answering in the negative. First, none of the three mentions of the term in Arius's writings suggests the risk of a Sabellian interpretation of the term. Second, Eusebius's letter to his church does not argue against a Sabellian connotation of the term under discussion. Third, Alexander, who affirmed that the Father and the Son are "two things" (πράγματα δύο)[105]—a phrase that is in the antipodes of Sabellius—supported the *homoousios*. Once the material and Sabellian tones of the term *homoousios* have been ruled out, it is worth exploring its original meaning.

Two historical-theological results of this article shed light on the controversial meaning of the *homoousios*. First, a comparison of the theologies of Eusebius, Arius, and Alexander shows that the crucial point of disagreement was the opposition between the pre-cosmic priority of the Father over the Son, openly defended by Eusebius, and the strict coeternity of the Father and Son, openly supported by Alexander. In fact, Arius characterized the theological tradition represented by Eusebius of Caesarea with the statement, "God exists without beginning before the Son (προϋπάρχει ὁ θεὸς τοῦ υἱοῦ ἀνάρχως)."[106] This assertion was not a polemical deduction from Eusebius's teaching, but rather a central doctrine explicitly defended by him. On the other hand, the article has shown that, according to contemporary sources, the expression ὁμοούσιος was the dividing line between the two alliances at Nicaea.

If a somewhat deductive line of reasoning is permitted, it is possible to connect these two results, because both represent the theological dividing line between the group led by Eusebius of Caesarea and that of Alexander, which was headed also by Ossius and Eustathius. We are poorly informed about the trinitarian theology of these last two bishops. They belonged to the theological tradition that opposed that of Alexander, because it is likely that they claimed that there is only one divine *hypostasis*.[107] In any case, Ossius and Eustathius supported the strict eternity of the Logos, as Alexander did. Therefore, the alliance of Alexander with Ossius and Eustathius was not merely political, but it had a solid theological ground: the defense of the strict eternity of the Logos-Son.

The textual evidence and the deductive rationale allow one to connect the meaning of the term *homoousios* with the strict coeternity of the Son and the Father. Eusebius denied the strict eternity of the Son claiming that unlike the ray regarding the light, the Son is not connatural (σύμφυτος) with and constituent (συμπληρωτική) of the Father.[108] Instead, to affirm that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father means, according to Nicaea, that the Son is connatural with and constituent of the Father. The key term of Nicaea opposes the key idea of Eusebius—namely, that "God exists before the Son." In other words, the *homoousios* implies that the Christian God is not conceivable without the Son. The Son's existence derives from the divine nature itself, not from the economy of creation. God is eternally trinitarian; he did not become trinitarian in view of the plan of creation.

Furthermore, it must be said that the *homoousios* should not be examined in isolation from its grammatical context. In other words, analysis should focus on the entire phrase rather than the term alone. From this perspective, one can reconsider the

105. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 15, text and trans. *FNS* 8.15, 48–49.
106. Arius, *Ad Eusebium Nicomediensem* 2, text and trans. *FNS* 6.3, 40–41.
107. See above, footnote 71.
108. See Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.3.5.

enigmatic statement in which Arius rejects those who speak of relationship (τὰ πρός τι).[109] Notably, the phrase the Son is *homoousios* with the Father (ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί) is constructed with a dative—specifically, the *dativus sociativus* (associative dative)—which inherently implies a relationship between two distinct entities. The very structure of ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί, therefore, conveys the relational character of the Father and the Son. This understanding stands in contrast to a Sabellian interpretation of the formula, as it affirms their eternal correlativity. This understanding of the key Nicene expression aligns with Alexander's description of the Father and the Son as "two mutually inseparable entities" (ἀλλήλων ἀχώριστα πράγματα δύο). However, the full development of these ideas was not the work of Nicaea itself but was further articulated by later theologians, particularly the Cappadocians.[110]

Conclusion

This reconstruction of Eusebius's role during the so-called Arian crisis simplifies the reconstruction of events and can explain some obscurities of the conventional narrative. If Arius regarded himself as a representative of Eusebius's theology, it becomes clearer why he dared to confront his own bishop. If Alexander regarded Eusebius as the adversary behind Arius, it more readily explains why he reacted so strongly against his presbyter and why Eusebius was condemned at Antioch (325) by Ossius following his stay in Alexandria. This reconstruction explains why the entire East immediately became involved in the controversy: Behind an apparently local dispute there was a broader conflict between two influential bishops, namely those of Caesarea and Alexandria. In addition, it is unlikely that the great synod of Nicaea was summoned to judge the orthodoxy of a presbyter already condemned by his own bishop, Alexander of Alexandria. Instead, it seems more plausible that the great Nicene assembly was convened to examine whether a group of eminent bishops lead by Eusebius of Caesarea supported the "Arian" teaching or not. Consequently, the theological inquiry of Nicaea was about the faith of a group of influential bishops, not about a presbyter's teaching.

If Eusebius of Caesarea played such a significant role, why was this not reflected in the accounts of later historians? A detailed study of the sources reveals the extent to which later accounts of the early stages of the controversy rely on Eusebius—who, of course, had compelling reasons to omit many elements of the unfolding events.[111] His

109. Arius, *Ad Alexandrum* 4, text and trans. *FNS* 11.4, 72–73.

110. Giulio Maspero, *The Cappadocian Reshaping of Metaphysics: Relational Being* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

111. In fact, his silence regarding the Council of Antioch (325)—an assembly attended by more than fifty bishops—meant that his condemnation remained unknown to historians until 1905. Besides, after Nicaea, the bishop of Nicomedia played a much more active role in opposing Athanasius, particularly during the synod of Tyre in 335. As a result, in the decades following Nicaea, the bishop of Nicomedia emerged as Athanasius's principal adversary, the head of the "Arian party." However, if the bishop of Nicomedia was the head of the so-called Arian party, why did Athanasius—who cited approximately eighty documents in his works—preserve only a meaningless and vague fragment of one of his letters?

vagueness in the *Vita Constantini* and his silence in the *Historia ecclesiastica* are telling. In addition, early Christian historians regarded themselves as continuators of the *Historia ecclesiastica* written by the bishop of Caesarea; their gratitude toward the father of church history likely contributed to the preservation of Eusebius's reputation.[112] Modern historians are thankful to him as well.[113]

If the *Letter* and the *Fragment* describe the same discussion, it explains why both narratives finish with the signing of the Nicene Creed, which cannot be but a one-time event. This reconstruction implies only one discussion that put to the test the orthodoxy of the bishop of Caesarea and those who were with him and concluded with the signature of the Nicene formula. Furthermore, this reconstruction does not require the assumption that the bishop of Caesarea—who had been condemned for heresy by Ossius and Eustathius—played a leading role at Nicaea or authored the first draft of the creed, an interpretation that remains highly problematic. Finally, the interpretation proposed in this article is consistent with subsequent events. That is, with the prominence of the bishop of Caesarea after the great council. Socrates recounts the conflicts surrounding the *homoousios* in the aftermath of Nicaea.[114] This passage reveals some insights. First, Socrates reports that Eustathius attacked Eusebius, indicating an anti-Arian atmosphere in which the bishop of Antioch felt empowered to attack Eusebius of Caesarea. Second, Eustathius's target was the bishop of Caesarea, not that of Nicomedia. Third, the passage highlights the crucial importance of the term *homoousios* in the aftermath of Nicaea. Socrates, in fact, claims to have derived this information from letters written by some bishops shortly after the Council.

In addition, Eusebius presided over the synod that deposed Eustatius of Antioch (329), the bishop of Caesarea was to preside over the failed synod that was to judge Athanasius in Caesarea (334), and he led the condemnation of Marcellus of Ancyra in Constantinople (336).[115] In short, ancient sources highlight the central role of Eusebius of Caesarea as the primary theological opponent of the "Nicene alliance." The trajectory of posterior events supports the hypothesis claimed by the present article, namely that Eusebius of Caesarea—not Arius—was the more significant opponent of Alexander of Alexandria since the "Arian" conflict broke out.

These historical considerations illuminate the trinitarian theology at stake in Nicaea. The effective prioritization of contemporary sources (caveat two) and the careful avoidance of attributing controversial deductions to the actors (caveat one) have

112. "I will make the end of [Eusebius's] writing the beginning of [my] history." Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1.4, text *GCS* NF 5, 4. See Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1.1; Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1.12; and Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10 pr.

113. See John H. Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (Longman, 1981), 261; and Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 303–4.

114. "And Eustathius, the bishop of Antioch, vilifies Eusebius of Pamphilus, as one who falsifies the Nicene faith (ὡς τὴν ἐν Νικαίᾳ πίστιν παραχαράττοντα), but Eusebius says that he does not transgress the Nicene faith, and he calumniates Eustathius as one who introduces the doctrine of Sabellius (ὡς τὴν Σαβελλίου δόξαν εἰσάγοντα)." Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.23.6–8, text *GCS* NF 1, 69–70.

115. See Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 239.

enabled a fresh understanding of the actual theological tenets addressed by the council. If this reconstruction is correct, it clarifies various aspects of trinitarian theology: The synodal discussion did not primarily revolve around affirming or denying Christ's divinity, nor was it a struggle between subordinationism and Sabellianism. The fundamental point of disagreement—the only issue on which both alliances explicitly defended incompatible positions—was the pre-cosmic priority of the Father (Eusebius) versus the strict co-eternity of the Father and the Logos-Son (Alexander, Eustathius). Accordingly, Eusebius's theology implies that the Christian God is conceivable prior to the Son, as the Son arises from the free decision to create the world. Hence, the profession that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father—used to counter Eusebian theology—indicates that the God of the Bible is inconceivable without His Son. The *homoousios* did not have a Sabellian tendency, as was later claimed. In fact, the expression "*homoousios* with the Father" denotes two distinct yet inseparable entities; in Alexander's words, "two mutually inseparable realities" (ἀλλήλων ἀχώριστα πράγματα δύο).[116] God is Trinity not only for the sake of the economy but from all eternity.

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ORCID iD

Samuel Fernández https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4330-0671

Author biography

Samuel Fernández (PhD, Patristic Institute "Augustinianum," Rome) is Professor of Theology at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

116. Alexander, *Ad Alexandrum Byzantium* 15, text and trans. *FNS* 8.15, 48–49.