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The Role of Scripture at and Around the Council of Nicaea

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Peter M. Folan, SJ
Georgetown University, USA

Abstract

This article argues that the Council of Nicaea, which has borne responsibility for moving the church away from a primarily scriptural mode of speaking, is, in fact, thoroughly grounded in what we might call "the symbolic universe of Scripture." The events and documents that preceded, were contemporaneous with, and followed Nicaea all chart their own ways through that universe, even when they appear to have departed it. Today, the council beckons and helps guide the church, in particular its theologians, to live again in the world that Scripture produces.

Keywords

Arius, Bible, Council of Nicaea, creed, imagination, Scripture

Any inquiry into the role of Scripture at the Council of Nicaea, which marks its 1700th anniversary this year, risks looking misguided, if not altogether mistaken, for two reasons.[1] First, one can locate only scant traces of scriptural

1. My preference for the terms "scriptural" and "Scripture" throughout this essay—over and against "biblical," "Bible," "canonical," and "canon"—is a recognition that a universally accepted biblical canon was not in place, either in practice or by authoritative ecclesial teaching, by 325. If one dates the Muratorian Fragment to the late second or early third century—numerous scholars today believe 350–375 to be more plausible—then the majority

Corresponding author:
Peter M. Folan, SJ, Georgetown University, 3700 O Street NW, 120 New North, Washington, DC 20057, USA.
Email: pf479@georgetown.edu

language in the three extant textual outputs of the council. The creed of the 318 Council Fathers (henceforth, "the creed of the 318"), although it includes several parts of Jesus's biography surely drawn from the Gospels, contains not a single scriptural quotation;[2] and the creed's celebrated term *homoousios* is never attested in either the Septuagint or the New Testament.[3] Neither the Latin nor the slightly-longer Greek version of the letter the council sent to the church in Egypt makes as much as a single allusion to the text of any biblical book. And while Nicaea's collection of twenty canons does feature three scriptural citations, two of them provide the foundation for already-determined aspects of clerical life, and the third cloaks in scriptural language something akin to a playground insult. With so few scriptural texts peppered throughout the council's documents, why bother with a closer examination of them?

When we widen our gaze to look beyond the words of these three texts and consider instead the collection of them and their import in church history as a whole, we come to the second reason the inquiry seems peculiar: As Luke Timothy Johnson puts it, "[The Nicene Creed] used philosophical language within a profession of faith that was supposed to articulate the Christian story in the language of Scripture."[4] One can extrapolate from Johnson's observation about the creed of Nicaea and apply it to the council as a whole. That would bring us to the position of John Courtney Murray, SJ, who held that Nicaea sealed the victory of a Hellenized form of Christianity over and above one grounded primarily in scriptural categories. In the pages of this journal, Murray described the creed of the 318 and, by extension, the whole of Nicaea, as the council's "sanction[ing] for the first time the transcendence of the dominant scriptural mode of understanding and statement (which is interpersonal, historical-existential) in favor of the dogmatic mode of understanding and statement (which is absolute, essential-existential)."[5] He put it even more plainly in the second of his three "Problem of God" lectures, delivered at Yale University in 1962: "All that Nicaea did was to reduce the multiplicity of the scriptural affirmations [about the Son] to the unity of a

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of the twenty-seven books that are eventually canonized as the New Testament are in place. For sure, Athanasius's thirty-ninth Festal Letter, written around 367, includes the familiar books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Thus, we can be confident that Nicaea had access to virtually all of the texts that Christians now deem canonical.

2. Here, "318" refers to the number of purported attendees, not to a date. As numerous scholars note, that number almost certainly alludes to Genesis 14:14 and ought not to be understood as a reliable tally of those present at Nicaea. Still, the most authoritative critical edition of both the Greek and Latin versions of the creed references the 318 in the creed's heading. See Giuseppe Alberigo et al., *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, 3rd ed. (Instituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1973). For more on the number of those who likely were present, see Hubert Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: An Historical Outline*, trans. Ernest Graf (Herder and Herder, 1960), 16–17.
3. Indeed, the root substantive *ousia* appears only twice in the New Testament. See the use of "property" in Luke 15:12-13 (NRSV used throughout unless citing the Bible in another quotation).
4. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (Doubleday, 2003), 33–34.
5. John Courtney Murray, "On the Structure of the Problem of God," *Theological Studies* 23, no. 1 (March 1962): 1–26 at 10, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056396202300101.

single affirmation [the *homoousion*]," an affirmation that, as we have seen, is clothed in decidedly non-scriptural language.[6] Admittedly, Murray's conclusion is, at best, a minority opinion among scholars today, but it has not vanished entirely. In the last two years alone, a small number of academic articles have felt the need to refute this "Hellenization thesis," thereby keeping it on a form of intellectual life support.[7] Even if we dilute the thesis a bit and align it more with contemporary mainstream scholarship, our second peculiarity remains: Though Nicaea did not represent a wholesale abandonment of scriptural language, the questions it addressed, first and foremost those that issued from the controversies surrounding Arius of Alexandria, were "no longer to be answered simply by repeating formulas of Scripture, which did not directly meet the new issue because their affirmations were made in a different mode of understanding."[8] If what is distinct about Nicaea is its muffling of biblical language, then does asking about the role of Scripture at the council not amount to straining to listen to a whisper?

Both of these observations are true—yes, the documents of Nicaea do have a paucity of scriptural citations; and, yes, those same documents opt at points for non-scriptural language and categories—yet neither can be the final word on Nicaea because, when isolated from a broader historical context, each embraces an anachronistic understanding of the council's significance. What the Council of Ephesus in 431 named "the holy and great synod," what scholars today universally regard as the first ecumenical council, and what Christians each week recall when they recite in liturgical celebrations the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, was not, either when it was in session or when it adjourned, the epochal event that history would ultimately judge it to be.[9] Indeed, as Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ notes, "For 30 or more years after 325, the

6. John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (Yale University Press, 1964), 45.
7. See Giulio Maspero, "Nicea como crisis filosófica de la teología: La transferencia de la fe bíblica de la Iglesia al mundo filosófico helenístico," *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 32 (2023): 69–96, https://doi.org/10.15581/007.32.011; and Tomás J. Marín Mena, "El solipsismo arriano y la lógica de la ortodoxia trinitaria: del mito de la helenización del cristianismo al giro metafísico de Nicea," *Carthaginensia* 41 (January–June 2025): 315–44, https://doi.org/10.62217/carth.634. In my use of the "Hellenization thesis," I am merely playing on the well-known term coined by Adolf von Harnack, not endorsing it or applying it fully.
8. Murray, *The Problem of God*, 49. No small number of scholarly titles outline the Arian controversy, but for a compact and insightful take on it, see Uta Heil, "'. . . bloß nicht wie die Manichäer!': Ein Vorschlag zu den Hintergründen des arianischen Streits," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 6, no. 2 (2002): 299–319, https://doi.org/10.1515/zach.2002.018.
9. Council of Ephesus, "Second Letter of Cyril to Nestorius," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Georgetown University Press, 1990), 41. The Tanner volumes translate into English the text of *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*.

Council of Nicaea is hardly mentioned and the word *homoousion* rarely used."[10] Thus, when we consider the council in its temporal milieu, and not as the church would eventually come to esteem it, we must see it as one in a long chain of relevant ecclesial events, some prior to it, some after it, none meaningless when compared to it. The same is true for the documents of Nicaea: Reading them as a final pronouncement on the matters they address, and consequently declaring them right and texts that run afoul of them wrong, is to accord the creed, the letter, and the canons a significance they simply did not enjoy either upon their promulgation or in the decades immediately following it. If, however, Nicaea and its extant documents get situated properly, if they are evaluated alongside and as being in conversation with the events and texts surrounding them, then the council, far from heralding a deemphasis of Scripture, announces itself to be firmly grounded in what Lewis Ayres calls "the symbolic universe of Scripture."[11] Therein lies Nicaea's potential for the church of the twenty-first century—the whole Christian church, but especially its theologians: The council beckons us back to that universe, one which, in the judgment of many, was long ago deserted.

Ayres's idea of a "symbolic universe" builds on his understanding of story-telling, in particular, the sort of fantasy writing characteristic of J.R.R. Tolkien. "The writer of fantasy," says Ayres, "intends the creation of a world with sufficient density, sufficient 'inner consistency,' to convince the reader that the events of the story take place in a world one might inhabit. Without such a sense of reality, the reader will not experience the catching of breath or the lifting of the heart that occurs when ill or good befalls the central characters."[12] The one who writes theology is not so different, he claims: "Theologians seek to tell the *same* story [as one another], or at least to tell their stories in such a way that we are drawn back toward the one story [i.e., the Gospel]."[13] The Fathers of Nicaea—Ayres concentrates on Athanasius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea, but we need not limit ourselves to them—"are attempting to set out what Scripture teaches; both create particular paths, or modify traditional paths through the scriptural universe."[14]

But what makes this universe a symbolic one? To be sure, "symbolic" does not clash with the idea of a "physical" or even "geographical" universe. The Nazareth and Jerusalem described in the biblical text, for example, are revealed to be populated with people, but also with angels and unclean spirits; the healings that Jesus worked there genuinely restored health to those who needed it, but those mighty deeds also manifested something about the reign of God; children were born there, but they could

10. Joseph T. Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy: Some Categories Reconsidered," *Theological Studies* 48, no. 3 (September 1987): 415–37, at 416, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398704800301.
11. Lewis Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'In' the Scriptures?," *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 1285–1300, at 1299, https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2020.0069.
12. Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'In' the Scriptures?," 1297.
13. Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'In' the Scriptures?," 1299 (emphasis in original).
14. Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'In' the Scriptures?," 1299.

somehow be born anew without returning to their mothers' wombs, pace Nicodemus. That symbolic universe extends beyond these cities. In it, there is a God, that God has a people, that God deploys that people to be leaven for the nations, and so on. Ayres, in holding that theologians weave paths through, or tell stories that draw their readers into, the symbolic universe of Scripture, means to say that these theologians are grounding themselves in that revealed universe and using what they find there to answer the pressing questions of their day.

This concept of the symbolic universe of Scripture increases in thickness if we bring it into conversation—now, in brief; in the article's final section, at greater length—with the work of Johnson. His preferred term that approximates what Ayres discusses is "the world that Scripture produces" or "the world that Scripture imagines."[15] Johnson charts out that world in this way:

> Scripture as a whole and in all of its parts imagines a world, and by imagining a world, it reveals it to readers. . . . The scriptural world is . . . rooted in the physical realm where humans live. By no means, however, is the world conjured by Scripture simply to be identified with the physical realm where humans live and act. . . . Scripture imagines a world more richly furnished with living and intelligent beings than our own. It has room for angels and demons and assorted spirits. . . . Most of all, Scripture's world contains—or better, is contained by—God, which makes it the largest of all possible worlds.[16]

As we will see below, Johnson laments that theologians spend far more time in "the world that produced the Scripture" than in "the world that Scripture produces," but what concerns us here is how Johnson and Ayres are making a similar point: Scripture depicts a symbolic universe; it produces or imagines a world, that, far from being utterly different from the world we inhabit, can be accessed only through that world. And both believe that theologians write with integrity only when they acknowledge that that world is also their world.

What does all of this have to do with the Council of Nicaea? Despite the peculiarities of the documents of Nicaea citing Scripture only a handful of times, and of the council being celebrated by some, and cursed by others, for permitting philosophical language to figure prominently during it, if we look not just *at* Nicaea but at the period *around* it, we find that the whole council resides comfortably in the universe Scripture imagines. This point is one that, surprisingly, has been underattended in scholarly writing, which, when it does consider the role of Scripture at Nicaea, almost always narrows its focus to the role it plays in the creed, not the council as a whole.[17] There are

15. Luke Johnson, "Imagining the World That Scripture Imagines," in Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Eerdmans, 2002), 119.
16. Johnson, "Imagining," 119–20.
17. Offering even a representative sample of texts that probe the relationship between Scripture and the Nicene Creed would be a cumbersome task, yielding diminishing returns. The time since Nicaea is too long, the scholarship about the creed—pre-critical, critical, and post-critical—too abundant, and the space allotted to me too small to warrant compiling such a list.

some happy exceptions to this general trend, but each of them falls short of the treatment of Scripture at and around Nicaea: James N. S. Alexander's somewhat dated analysis of the interpretation of Scripture in the ante-Nicene period extends to the fifth century, but as he acknowledges, "The main concern [of his article] is with the ante-Nicene period";[18] Ralph E. Person's (published) dissertation spends a chapter on the function of Scripture and tradition at Nicaea, but it concentrates mostly on whether the council considered Scripture an authoritative source;[19] and Fred Sanders devotes just three paragraphs to Nicaea in an article focusing on the biblical foundations of the Christology present in early ecumenical councils.[20] However, no work I have encountered has studied the role of Scripture at the council as a whole.

Now is the occasion to rectify this lacuna in the scholarship, both because the anniversary places Nicaea in the fore of theologians' consciousness, and because the church and its theologians can find inspiration in Nicaea to re-plant themselves in the symbolic universe of Scripture. My hope is that the discussion that unfolds below in two parts will help both those theologians who do not take the council or the fourth-century christological debates as their primary scholarly locus, and those who do.

The first and longer section, which is descriptive in tone, breaks down the time "around" the council into three temporal periods to press the claim that Nicaea inherited, stewarded, and bequeathed a style of governance and theological reflection grounded consciously and unapologetically in the symbolic universe of Scripture. The second section speaks prescriptively. If, as several thinkers have argued, theologians and the church as a whole must "learn to live again in the world that Scripture produces," then a return to Nicaea shows us not only that such a journey can be undertaken, but how it can be completed.

Scripture at and Around Nicaea

Though his purpose for dividing the time around the Council of Nicaea into distinct parts is different from ours, Lienhard's three periods are nevertheless a helpful structure for us to adopt.[21] His first period begins in 318 and ends with the convocation of Nicaea in 325; the second runs from the start of the council until the eve of the Dedication Council of Antioch in 341; and the third spans from 341 to the death of Emperor Constantius in 361. I will refer to these three periods as the Prelude, the Event and its Immediate Aftermath, and the Postlude. Considering how ecclesial events unfolded and relevant documents were understood in each period will

18. See James N. S. Alexander, "Interpretation of Scripture in the Ante-Nicene Period: A Brief Conspectus," *Interpretation* 12, no. 3 (July 1958): 272–80, at 272n1, https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643580120030.
19. See Ralph E. Person, *The Mode of Theological Decision Making at the Early Ecumenical Councils: An Inquiry into the Function of Scripture and Tradition at the Councils of Nicaea and Ephesus* (Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1978), 166–86.
20. See Fred Sanders, "Biblical Grounding for the Christology of the Councils," *Criswell Theological Review* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 93–104.
21. See Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy," 430–37.

demonstrate that the Council of Nicaea found itself embedded in the symbolic universe of Scripture, as both Ayres and Johnson understand the term. Despite the peculiarities that hint at the contrary, it was not an outlier in this universe.

The Prelude: From 314 to the Start of Nicaea

Lienhard selects 318 as the start of this first period because the earliest attempts to formulate theological views either in support of or hostile to Arius played out mostly in epistolary form, the first entry of which was written by Eusebius of Caesarea to Euphration of Balaneae in either that year or the next. His choice of 318 also finds warrant because it was then that Alexander of Alexandria convoked a synod that condemned Arius's teaching.[22] For our purposes, however, the year 314 should be preferred as the start of the Prelude because it allows us to examine the regional councils of Arles (314), Ancyra (314), and Neocaesarea (314/325), each of which influenced Nicaea, most especially its canons. We begin with these three councils—as well as the pre-Nicene Council of Antioch (325)—and then turn to the three most important letters written during this first period.

The Council of Arles was the first church council summoned by Constantine, who convened it in 314 in what is today southern France. What survives from the council are a letter from the gathered bishops to Pope Silvester and twenty-two canons, at least one of which influenced a canon of Nicaea.[23] The only direct scriptural citation comes in the letter, and its use of 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 concerns setting one date for a worldwide Easter observance, an application of the verses that, even in the fourth century, was uncommon. "Since one 'died and rose again for many,'" the letter argues, "[Easter] should be observed with a religious mind by all at the same time."[24] It is primarily the subjects treated by the canons, though, that establish Arles as occurring in the symbolic universe of Scripture. Indeed, one of the reasons why those canons spoke to certain topics is that Scripture addresses them explicitly, most notably (a) the behavior of clergy, (b) the possibility of marrying non-Christians or persons who committed adultery, (c) the exclusion of certain people from the celebration of the Eucharist, (d)

22. While I agree that 318 is an important date for these two reasons, both related to Arius, I also acknowledge, without attempting to adjudicate the variety of scholarly opinions, how important Arius himself was in the christological debates that often get described using his name. See Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy," 431; Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils*, 16; and Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325: Reassessing the Contemporary Sources* (Brill Schöningh, 2025), 244. What cannot be disputed is that Arius has always been one of the central *dramatis personae* of these debates, and as such, his few extant writings simply cannot be ignored.
23. Compare Council of Arles, canon 21 (in *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum Quae Saeculo Quarto Habita Sunt*, ed. E. J. Jonkers [E.J. Brill, 1954], 28), to Council of Nicaea, canon 16 (in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:13).
24. O. R. Vassall-Phillips, *The Work of St. Optatus, Bishop of Milevis, Against the Donatists* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1917), 391.

the need for those who are ill to have hands laid upon them, and (e) the conditions in which a dubitably baptized person should be conditionally baptized. Arles addresses these matters because Scripture addresses these matters.[25] The canons are but a series of practical norms that are intended to serve the lived realities of the local churches represented at the council. They are justified by the fact that a variety of scriptural texts comment on these same realities, albeit in the way those realities manifested themselves in the apostolic church. These dimensions of Arles exemplify what Ayres has in mind when he speaks of "the symbolic universe of Scripture," or Johnson when he speaks of "the world that Scripture produces."

The Council of Ancyra (modern-day Ankara), like these other regional councils, was far smaller than Nicaea. It gathered a mere twelve to eighteen bishops.[26] The twenty-five canons it issued are noteworthy, Henry R. Percival reports, for being "the first enacted after the ceasing of the persecution of the Christians and as providing for the proper treatment of the lapsed."[27] "Lapsed" ought to be understood in a broad sense, for the canons of Ancyra decreed disciplinary action for a wide variety of betrayals, including sacrificing to foreign gods, eating meat offered to idols, professing virginity and then living with a cleric as a sister, and ordaining a man to the presbyterate or the diaconate without the permission or presence of a bishop.[28] No canon of Ancyra cites or alludes clearly to any scriptural text, but, as was true of Arles, all of them amount to detailed and contextualized applications of themes from Scripture. To take just five themes of the canons—idolatry, eating meat sacrificed to idols, virginity, qualifications for deacons, and qualifications for presbyters—we find that each of them carries a tremendous amount of import in the world Scripture produces—respectively, Exodus 20:1–6; 1 Corinthians 8; 1 Corinthians 7:25–35; Acts 6:1–7, and Titus 1:5–9.

The precise date of the Council of Neocaesarea, which took place in Cappadocia, is unknown, but scholars concur that it began no earlier than 314 and no later than 325. It comprised seventeen bishops.[29] Like Ancyra, it left a series of canons, in this instance, fifteen, many of which undergird the canons of Nicaea.[30] And like Ancyra, as

25. For instance, among other places, these subjects arise, respectively, in (a) Titus 1:5–9, (b) 1 Corinthians 7, (c) 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, (d) James 5:14–15, and (e) Galatians 3:27–28.
26. Henry R. Percival places the number at "only about a dozen bishops," while *Les Canons des Synodes Particuliers*, using available lists of names from the council, gives a range of twelve to eighteen. See Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church* (Edwin S. Gorham, 1901), 62; and *Les Canons des Synodes Particuliers*, ed. Périclès-Pierre Joannou (Pontificia commissione per la redazione del codice di diritto canonico orientale, 1962), hereafter abbreviated as CSP, 1/II: 54.
27. Percival, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 62.
28. Compare Council of Ancyra, canons 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 19 (in Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum*, 28–32, 34) to Council of Nicaea, canons 3, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 (in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:7, 9, 11–12).
29. See Percival, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 77; Joannou, CSP, 74; Karl Josef von Hefele, *Histoire des conciles d'après les documents originaux* (Letouzey, 1907), 1/I: 326–27.
30. Compare Council of Neocaesarea, canons 1, 5, 9, 10, 14 (in Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum*, 35–38) to Council of Nicaea, canons 8, 9, 14 (in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:9, 10, 13).

well as Arles, Neocaesarea handles numerous disciplinary matters, mostly concerning sexual relations, marriage, and the conduct of presbyters, themes for which we have already identified scriptural foundations. Two of its canons are of special note to us because of their explicit use of Scripture. The eleventh sets the minimum age for presbyteral ordination at thirty because "our Lord Jesus Christ was baptized and began to teach in his thirtieth year," a reference to Luke 3:21–23a. The fifteenth, which, as we saw with Ancyra, says that cities ought to have seven deacons in them, sets that number because of "the Book of the Acts [6:1–7]."[31] Both of these citations further buttress the argument that at Neocaesarea, like at Arles and Ancyra, the church's legislating on practical matters should be received as the church creating its own paths as it proceeds through the symbolic universe of Scripture. It meets the questions of its day in the revealed world of Scripture.

The last of the local pre-Nicene councils to examine is the Council of Antioch, which Henry Chadwick called "the curtain-raiser for the council of Nicaea."[32] The council was lost to history until the early twentieth century, when Eduard Schwartz discovered a letter written in Syriac and sent to Alexander, bishop of Byzantium, by the fifty-nine bishops present at this council, forty-nine of whom were also attendees at Nicaea.[33] Only the letter, which speaks of canons issued by the council and features a profession of faith that one commentator calls a "tortuous compilation," survives, and three aspects of it hold relevance for us.[34] For one thing, the letter states that the main topic of the council was an investigation of "what concerns the Saviour of us all, *the Son of the Living God*," in light of the fact that "Arius and his friends" blasphemed against Christ and led others astray.[35] The way that Antioch began to remedy the situation was by discussing the matter "in the presence of some brethren learned in the Church's faith which we were taught by the scriptures and the apostles and which we have received from the fathers."[36] Scripture, unsurprisingly, provides the first foundation for the teaching of the faith. What is surprising is that the profession of faith, tortuous as it is, contains three scriptural quotations and three explicit reminders that it is from Scripture that Christians have come to know what they believe: Matthew 11:27/Luke 10:22 (Matthew: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and

31. Percival, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 84, 86.
32. Henry Chadwick, "Ossius of Cordova and the Presidency of the Council of Antioch, 325," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 9, no. 2 (October 1958), 292–304, at 292, https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/IX.2.292.
33. For more on this discovery, see Chadwick, "Ossius of Cordova," 292–95.
34. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (Longman, 1972), 210.
35. Council of Antioch, "The Letter of the Council," trans. J. Stevenson, in *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to AD 337*, ed. J. Stevenson (SPCK, 1965), 355 (emphasis in original). For the Syriac and Greek versions of this letter, see *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Arianischen Streites*, ed. Hans-Georg Opitz (De Gruyter, 1934), no. 18. The part of the letter italicized here cites Matthew 16:16.
36. Council of Antioch, "Letter," 355.

anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him"); 2 Corinthians 4:4/Colossians 1:15 (Colossians: "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"); and Hebrews 1:3a ("[The Son] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word"). Each of these is a major *locus classicus* for what would develop as the anti-Arian position, especially for Alexander of Alexandria's articulation of that position. Also noteworthy is that when the council turned its attention toward persons who did not concur with the profession of faith, it described them as being "forgetful of the Holy Scriptures and the apostolic teaching."[37] Antioch, then, sees itself as still learning from, its articulation of faith arising from, and its opponents as being guilty of straying from, Scripture. Its symbolic universe is thoroughly scriptural.

In addition to the writings left behind by these local councils, three other documents—two letters of Arius, and a letter of Alexander of Alexandria to Alexander, bishop of Byzantium—are relevant for our discussion.[38]

The first of Arius's two extant letters (sometimes called his credal letter) was written in his name and in those of several other presbyters and deacons of Alexandria to their bishop, Alexander (likely in 321, if we accept Rowan Williams's dating).[39] After a brief greeting, the letter has three basic parts: a statement of faith that concentrates mostly on the Father, though it also addresses the Father's relation to the Son, at one point calling the Son "the perfect creation of God (*ktisma tou theou teleion*)"; an enumeration of several erroneous teachings about that relation, which the letter attributes to individual persons, such as Valentinus, Manichaeus, and Sabellius; and then a longer affirmation of how the "three subsisting realities (*hypostaseis*)" of the Godhead, in fact, do relate to one another, especially the Father to the Son.[40]

Two aspects of this letter are noteworthy for us. First, one of the ways Arius names the Father is "God of the Law and the prophets and the New Covenant," which amounts to calling the Father "the God of Scripture."[41] Indeed, this is the final way that Arius names the Father before turning to talk about how the Father relates to the Son, a placement that scans like a crescendo leading up to the heart of Arian Christology. Second, the letter includes several scriptural passages that figured prominently in the fourth-century christological debates. For instance, Arius, like the Council of Antioch,

37. Council of Antioch, "Letter," 356.
38. Given space constraints, this list is necessarily brief. A fuller treatment would include several other letters and potentially the surviving fragments of Arius's *Thalia*. The decision to omit the *Thalia* was not an easy one, but three factors fueled it: We have no complete copy of the text; the fragments that we do have come down to us from Athanasius, hardly an unbiased reporter; and those fragments also occur in Athanasius's *Orationes contra Arianos* and *De Synodis*, both of which are well outside the Prelude's temporal boundaries.
39. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 2002), 58. Opitz believes the letter to be from 320, and Fernández estimates that it dates from 323; see *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337)*, ed. Samuel Fernández (Brill Schöningh, 2024), 71.
40. Arius of Alexandria, "The Statement of Faith of Arius and His Alexandrian Supporters," in Williams, *Arius*, 270–71. For the Greek text of this letter, see Opitz, *Urkunden*, no. 6.
41. Arius, "The Statement of Faith," 270.

cites Matthew 11:27, but he points only to the first part of it ("All things have been handed over to me by my Father"), to argue that the Father "did not deprive himself of what he has self-sufficiently in his own life; for he is the source of everything."[42] The Fathers of Antioch, as well as others of Arius's opponents, instead relied on the final part of the verse ("no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him") to suggest that anyone who claims to know that the Son was created speaks from a position of ignorance. Arius offers no comment on that second portion of the verse. Arius also considers Romans 11:36 ("For from [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen"); Psalm 110:3 ("Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you"); and Jn 8:42 ("Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me'"). He quarrels with circulating interpretations of, respectively, "from God," "from the womb," and "I came from God and now I am here" that amount to understanding the Son as "a portion of something consubstantial or in terms of an emanation."[43] This would mean that the Father is "compound and divisible and changeable and material," a clearly unacceptable conclusion.[44] It is a conclusion that holds interest for us, though, because Arius anchors it in the symbolic universe of Scripture. In other words, and to return to the image that Ayres established, Arius grounded himself in the universe Scripture revealed and from that position responded to the controversies of his day, even if the church ultimately judged his response to be heterodox.

Williams estimates that Arius penned the second letter to his ally Eusebius of Nicomedia in approximately 321/2.[45] The text is brief, and the core of it enumerates statements that Arius attributes to Alexander's arguments in favor of the co-eternity of the Father and the Son, contrasting those arguments with what he himself has openly taught. Two parts of the letter have some bearing on how Arius moved through the world imagined by Scripture. First, he cites John 1:14 when he says of the Son, "That by the will and counsel of the Father he subsisted before times and ages, full of grace and truth, God, only-begotten, unchangeable."[46] Admittedly, one can hardly call Arius's inclusion of Scripture extensive here, but even one citation in a letter whose English translation runs only 400 words indicates that he was grounding himself in the text. Second, when Arius names others who, like him, have been condemned as heterodox, he names as well those who have not met that fate, calling them "heretical and ignorant men (*anthrōpōn hairetikōn akatēchētōn*)."[47] G. W. H. Lampe notes that,

42. Arius, "The Statement of Faith," 271.
43. Arius, "The Statement of Faith," 271.
44. Arius, "The Statement of Faith," 271.
45. Williams, *Arius*, 58. Opitz estimates that this letter was written in 318, while Fernández puts it at 322/3 (see Fernández, *Fontes*, 39).
46. Arius of Alexandria, "Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia," in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. William G. Rusch (Fortress, 1980), 23. For the Greek text of this letter, see Opitz, *Urkunden*, no. 1.
47. Arius, "Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia," 23

among Christian writers, *akatēchētos* carries the meaning, "uninstructed, ignorant of the faith."[48] Thus, it is entirely reasonable to conclude that, in calling his opponents *akatēchētōn*, Arius is, at least in part, calling them ignorant of Scripture.

The final entry in the Prelude to Nicaea is Alexander of Alexandria's 321/2 letter to Alexander, Bishop of Byzantium, an "immensely long letter" that is often known by its incipit, *Hē philarchos*.[49] Khaled Anatolios calls the letter Alexander's "undisputed and most substantive epistle," a deserving description because it engages at some depth the most prominent Arian christological arguments.[50] Three contributions of the letter to the topic we are considering are especially important. First, the letter contains more than forty biblical citations, far more than any other text we examined in the Prelude. Some of them, like Matthew 21:13, which Alexander cites to say that Arius and his confreres are building "caves, like robbers" for themselves to hold meetings to try to destroy the church, contribute little of substance to the argument of *Hē philarchos*, but the vast majority of the citations underscore pivotal points.[51] All of the citations, taken together, establish that Alexander positions himself squarely in the symbolic universe of Scripture as he rebuts Arius.

Second, the letter grants at multiple points that Arius is, in effect, located in that same universe, even if the trail he blazes is one that, in Alexander's mind, is not viable. For instance, the letter charges, "[Arius and his allies] fight against Christ, denying His divinity, and declaring Him to be on a level with other men. They pick out every passage which refers to the dispensation of salvation, and to His humiliation for our sake [cf. Philippians 2:8]; they endeavour to collect from them their own impious assertion."[52] Elsewhere, we read, "To establish [the Son's creaturehood] they insult the Scriptures, and bring forward what is said in the Psalms (45:7) about Christ."[53] Of course, one person's "insult" is another's clever interpretation; but for all, Scripture is the universe in which they dwell. This second contribution—that Alexander and his opponents are both making paths, albeit different ones, in the field of Scripture—recalls one of the ways Ayres spoke of the symbolic universe of Scripture: basing oneself there "often produces a plurality of readings and paths through the scriptural universe, even when an identical teaching is being articulated and explored."[54]

Third, Alexander maintains that the conclusion Arius draws as he charts his path through Scripture is invalid because saying Christ was created out of nothing, or that

48. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Clarendon Press, 1961), 60.
49. See Williams, *Arius*, 48, 58. Opitz puts the letter at 324, and Fernández at 322/3 (see Fernández, *Fontes*, 43).
50. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011), 80n161.
51. Alexander of Alexandria, "Letter to Alexander, Bishop of Byzantium," trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 35. For the Greek text of this letter, see Opitz, *Urkunden*, no. 14.
52. Alexander, "Letter to Alexander," 35.
53. Alexander, "Letter to Alexander," 36.
54. Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'In' the Scriptures?," 1299.

there was a time when he was not, neither appears in precisely that form, nor has any roots, in the text.[55] Indeed, Alexander argues that John 1:18 ("No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known") devastates the Arian position. What is intriguing for us is the distinction between a non-scriptural term being acceptable if it has roots in Scripture, yet unacceptable if it does not. It is because of the first half of that distinction that the *homoousios* from the creed of the 318 is ultimately judged acceptable.

The major conclusion to draw from the Prelude is that regional councils and their texts, as well as the most significant documents of the time that were unattached to councils, manifested clear signs of existing in and being the products of theological reflection that occurred in the symbolic universe of Scripture. The authors of these texts saw themselves grounded in a world revealed to them by God, and it was from their conscious recognition of this location that they negotiated the theological questions of their times. Even when the texts they produced did not cite a single verse of Scripture, as was true of most of the conciliar canons, they legislated as they did because scriptural texts, at least at some level, spoke to issues that were confronting those local churches. This is the world that Nicaea inherits: a world charged by the text of Scripture.

The Event and Its Immediate Aftermath: From Nicaea to 341

It is worth recalling why this essay does not devote a section solely to the Council of Nicaea: The council "did not enjoy any unique authority until several decades after it was held";[56] and the creed, in particular the *homoousios*, is "rarely mentioned and practically never quoted in the literature of the period [i.e., for a generation after the council]. Only in the 'fifties [sic] of the fourth century did they begin to emerge from their obscurity."[57] To be sure, Nicaea was significantly larger than any of the local councils we considered in the Prelude, but, like Arles, it was summoned by Constantine; like Antioch, it contained a profession of faith; like Ancyra, Neocaesarea, Arles, and, purportedly, Antioch, it issued canons; and like Arles and Antioch, its documentation included a letter. So, situated in its original historical context, Nicaea is both like and unlike these preceding local councils. What they all held in common, though, was their operation in the symbolic universe of Scripture, a point that emerges again and again when one plumbs Nicaea's creed, canons, and letter, even if the scriptural text is cited explicitly only three times across all those documents. The judgment of Percival is correct when he explains, in effect, why it could have been no other way: "In this, as in every other of the [first] Seven Ecumenical Councils, the question the Fathers considered was not what they supposed Holy Scripture might mean, nor what they, from *à priori* [sic] arguments, thought would be consistent with the mind of God, but something entirely different, to wit, what they had received. They understood their position

55. See Alexander, "Letter to Alexander," 39.
56. Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy," 418.
57. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 255.

to be that of witnesses, not that of exegetes."[58] It should be no surprise, then, that the documents of Nicaea could not be mistaken for the letters of Arius or Alexander, given those earlier texts' routine reliance upon particular scriptural passages. But it should be equally unsurprising that the witness that all of them bear is decidedly scriptural in its foundation. This is the key point about Nicaea that needs continued emphasis: It is a thoroughly scriptural council. How does each text—creed, canons, and letter—reflect that reality?

We look first at the creed of the 318, to which *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* links the one formal anathema issued by the council. Concerning the creed's origins, J. N. D. Kelly argues convincingly against once-held positions that it was either a local creed of Caesarea (a thesis grounded largely in dubitable testimony from a letter of Eusebius of Caesarea) or a *novum* of the Council Fathers themselves—a hypothesis that "has not much to be said for it."[59] His ultimate conclusion is that the creed has Syro-Palestinian provenance, with two "awkwardly interpolated" Nicene contributions.[60] Even though it would be impossible to say much more about the origins of the creed itself, minus the Nicene contributions, this much is clear: Without Scripture, it would be unintelligible to understand the witness that the creed is bearing when it names God as Father, Son, and Spirit; calls the Son the Lord Jesus Christ; speaks of the Son's incarnation; and declares Jesus Christ as having suffered, been raised up on the third day, and ascended into the heavens. Even at first glance, then, the creed cannot accurately be thought *un*-scriptural, if by that one means that it is completely divorced from Scripture. Johnson puts it this way: "The story told by the creed is itself drawn from the great story line of Scripture."[61]

The two Nicene interpolations into the creed are the phrases "that is from the substance (*ek tēs ousias*) of the Father" and "true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father." It is the question of these phrases' connection to Scripture that has, from the beginning, courted so much controversy. Kelly argues, "[The bishops] were . . . forced to trespass outside the vocabulary of the Bible to make their point clear beyond any risk of misunderstanding."[62] In other words, Nicaea desired first and foremost to speak with clarity on the christological controversies of the day, even if that clarity could be bought only with non-scriptural currency. Athanasius made this same point in his *De Decretis*, which he likely wrote in the 350s: "The council wished to banish the impious phrases of the Arians and to inscribe the words confessed by the Scriptures," but because the Arians so contorted the scriptural

58. Percival, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 2.
59. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 228.
60. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 229. For more on the background of the creed of Nicaea, see Giuseppe Luigi Dossetti, *Il Simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli* (Herder, 1967), 29–167; and *Faith in Formulae: A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-Related Texts*, 4 vols., ed. Wolfram Kinzig (Oxford University Press, 2017).
61. Johnson, *The Creed*, 59.
62. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 236.

texts to buttress their own conclusions, "the fathers of the council, seeing [the Arians'] deceit and the machinations of their impiety, finally found it necessary to proclaim the 'from God' more clearly and to write 'the Son is from the essence of the Father' (*ek tēs ousias tou theou*)."[63] As true and as justifiable as the non-scriptural nature of the insertions—especially the *homoousios*—is, equally true is Athanasius's contention, "Even if the words are not as such in the Scriptures, yet . . . they contain the sense (*dianoian*) of the Scriptures and they express this sense and communicate it to those who have ears that are whole and hearken unto piety."[64] David S. Yeago locates an articulation of that *dianoian* for the *homoousios* in Philippians 2:9 ("Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name"), especially when read alongside the remainder of the christological hymn of Philippians 2:5–11 and Isaiah 45:21–24. He contends, "The Nicene *homoousion* is neither imposed *on* the New Testament texts, nor distantly deduced *from* the texts, but rather describes a pattern of judgments present *in* the texts," which is to say that the *homoousios*, even if not from Scripture, is scriptural, insofar as it issues from the symbolic universe of Scripture.[65] Ayres, though he quarrels with Yeago's identification of the chosen verses of Philippians as the biblical texts that underpin the *homoousios*, lauds the basic tack of seeing dogmatic language as emerging from and remaining connected to Scripture. He writes, "We can say *both* that the Nicene dogma offers judgments that are compatible with scriptural discussion of relevant topics, that are certainly warranted and driven by the scriptural text, *and* that other construals of those texts are possible that do not simply do obvious violence to their phrasing."[66] In effect, Kelly, Yeago, and Ayres offer in a gentler tone what Athanasius puts more bluntly, and in so doing, the four point toward a conclusion that we have already seen: Because readers of Scripture can move through that symbolic universe in a variety of ways, establishing or clarifying a disputed point of the faith that has been handed down can necessitate moving beyond scriptural language without leaving behind scriptural roots.

The creed ends with an appended anathema, which condemns certain Arian positions, namely, those that say "there once was when he was not" or "before he was begotten he was not," and those who embrace the other christological stances associated with Arianism.[67] The Council Fathers expound upon these pronouncements in their letter to the church in Egypt. In effect, the letter summarizes for the Egyptians—their home being ground zero for the birth of Arianism—the decisions of the council,

63. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Council of Nicaea (De Decretis)*, in *Athanasius Werke*, ed. Hans-Georg Opitz (De Gruyter, 1935–1941), 2/I:1–45. The English translation I have used of this text can be found in Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Routledge, 2004), 176–211. This passage comes from *De Decretis*, no. 19.
64. Athanasius, *De Decretis*, no. 21.
65. David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 152–64, at 153, https://doi.org/10.1177/10638512940030020 (emphasis in original).
66. Ayres, "Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'In' the Scriptures?," 1292 (emphasis in original).
67. Council of Nicaea, "The Profession of Faith of the 318 Fathers," in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:5.

first and foremost, its rejection of Arius.[68] Indeed, rejection is too soft a word. The letter says of Arius, "Of that man and the fate which befell him, you have doubtless heard or will hear," which Williams understands to mean that "he was excommunicated and probably degraded from the presbyterate."[69] Neither the anathema nor the letter cites any passage of or makes any allusion to Scripture, but, like the creed, both prize clarity—one in its condemnation, the other in its synopsis—and believe they achieve it through language that is steeped in, without being duplicative of, Scripture.

As for Nicaea's twenty canons, almost half of them have their roots in the canons of Arles, Ancyra, or Neocaesarea, and as we have seen, those earlier canons address topics that are practical—issues such as clergy conduct, sexual mores, administration of the sacraments, and recovering from lapsed faith—and that are relevant because they are connected to Scripture.[70] The same is true for each canon of Nicaea, regardless of whether it issues from an earlier local council or not. Three times, Nicaea cites a specific passage of Scripture in its canons: first, 1 Timothy 3:6–7, when, in the second canon, it forbids the recently baptized from being ordained because a new convert "may be puffed up and fall into the condemnation and the snare of the devil"; second, Proverbs 26:11, when, in the twelfth canon, it declares Christians who renounced military service rather than apostatize, but then returned to that service, "have run back like dogs to their own vomit"; and third, Psalm 15:5, when, in the seventeenth canon, it punishes clergy who practice usury, forgetting that the one who wishes to dwell in the tent of the Lord must be one "who does not put out his money at interest." The verse from Proverbs, as noted earlier, strikes a chord of mockery more than anything else, but what we see from 1 Timothy and Psalms makes explicit the pattern that usually remained implicit in previous local councils: issuing binding decisions on practical matters precisely because Scripture addresses those same matters. The canons that neither trace back to local synods nor cite Scripture explicitly take on a variety of situations affecting the church, among them, the suitability and behavior of men in the clergy, how the excommunicated ought to be treated, the regional primacies enjoyed by the churches of Alexandria and Antioch, the import of the church of Jerusalem, the rehabilitation of the followers of Paul of Samosata, and the proper posture to be observed during the celebration of the Eucharist.[71] Some of these canons possess an

68. The letter also reports on two additional matters: (a) the proposed resolution of the Melitian schism (for more, see Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 99–100; and Williams, *Arius*, 32–41); and (b) that the whole church will adopt the practice of the church in Rome and the churches in Egypt for the dating of Easter. Only the Greek version of this final portion of the letter survives.

69. Council of Nicaea, "The Letter of the Synod in Nicaea to the Egyptians," in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:17; Williams, *Arius*, 70.

70. For helpful commentary on the entire collection of canons, see Fernández, *Nicaea 325*, 226–30; Percival, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 8–52; and Andreas Weckwerth, "The Twenty Canons of the Council of Nicaea," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 158–76.

71. For more on the canon concerning Paul of Samosata, see Weckwerth, "The Twenty Canons," 171–72.

explicit link to topics addressed in Scripture (clergy, excommunication, posture), others not (Alexandria and Antioch, Jerusalem, and the Paulinists), but since all concern church order at some level, all have at least some roots in Scripture, though, admittedly, those roots are thinner in some canons than they are in others.

Any number of significant texts, both from individual persons and regional councils, appeared in the immediate aftermath of Nicaea, but space permits the review of only a limited selection of them. The choice that makes the most compelling case is Athanasius's *Orations Against the Arians*, three pieces that he wrote between 339 and 343 after succeeding Alexander in the See of Alexandria. Because the orations as a whole "represent the doctrinal substance of Athanasius's mature reflections," they must not be ignored.[72] Not unexpectedly, he hardly makes any reference in them to the *homoousios* of Nicaea, but he does devote nearly the whole of this lengthy work to interrogating several scriptural verses that were bulwarks for the Arians against would-be attackers.[73] Whatever Nicaea lacked in exegesis, *Orations* makes up for, and then some.

The Arians deployed one set of verses, which includes Philippians 2:9 ("Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name") and Proverbs 8:22 ("The Lord created me [i.e., Wisdom] at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago"), to argue that the Son's divinity was caused by the Father, rather than being eternal. Athanasius accuses the Arians of seizing on the "therefore" of v. 9 and the "created me" of v. 22 to suggest a sequencing wherein the Father temporally precedes the Son. In so doing, Athanasius retorts, they miss that throughout the New Testament, God and Christ are identified with one another. And this identification is about more than mere nomenclature. It is about ontology. Anatolios explains it this way: "The basis of Athanasius's logic is that when the New Testament identifies Christ by having him share in the divine names of the God of Israel, it reveals that the preexistent Christ also shares in the divine nature. To reiterate this basic premise, the sharing of names indicates sharing of nature."[74] In other words, the scriptural sin that the Arians commit, in Athanasius's eyes, is settling for too narrow a reading of individual verses, thereby closing their eyes to the broader scriptural witness.

The second set of verses claimed that the Son's taking on human flesh accorded him a level of divinity subordinate to that enjoyed by the Father. The strategy of *Orations* contra this line of attack "insists that the Christological narrative is twofold, to be applied distinctly to the divine and human stages of the incarnate Word."[75] Thus, passages such as John 10:30 ("The Father and I are one") and John 14:10a ("Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me"), which signal an equality of the Father and Son—when compared to other passages that show Christ's suffering

72. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 19–20.
73. For an excellent description of how the Arians used these verses and Athanasius responded to them, see Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 108–26.
74. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 112.
75. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 110.

or ignorance of the day and hour of the final consummation, which signal an inferiority of Christ to God—are hardly instances of contradiction. Athanasius, in Anatolios's words, "insist[s] that the lowliness of Christ's humanity be seen not as indicative of a lower divinity but rather of the self-humbling of divine *philanthrōpia*, which is considered to be an attribute of the divine nature."[76] What, for the Arians, is proof positive of the Son's possession of some lower form of divinity is, for Athanasius, a doubling down on the Son's equal divinity.

Athanasius's *Orations*, in addition to displaying how he wielded Scripture in his clashes with his opponents, illuminates once again two aspects of the Council of Nicaea that should, by now, be familiar to us. First, the handling of these two sets of verses, to say nothing of those we have omitted, underscores that the church never abandoned, or even distanced itself from, a way of speaking that was scriptural, either because it used the language of Scripture, or language that, though non-scriptural, had firm roots in that text. To suggest as much, especially in light of Athanasius's work, would mean that the church planted itself in the symbolic world of Scripture prior to (recall Arles, Ancyra, Neocaesarea, Antioch, Arius, and Alexander) and in the decade or two after (recall Athanasius) Nicaea, yet removed itself from the universe during the council. Such a disappearance is implausible. Second, that Athanasius wages these battles over scriptural readings more than fifteen years after the close of Nicaea reminds us of the well-known truth that Nicaea did not solve all of the problems that it either set out to address or thought that it had resolved. But it also reminds us of a fact that can often be forgotten: that Nicaea, even a decade after its close, was not the monumental event that all would eventually declare it to be. Both of these aspects of Nicaea are on display yet again in the third and final period we are considering.

The Postlude: From 341 to 361

Once Athanasius ascended to the See of Alexandria following Alexander's death in 328, there began a seesawing of his status among ecclesial and secular authorities, at times being favored by them and other times not. At issue theologically was the still-ongoing clash between Athanasius's appropriation of Nicene orthodoxy and an Arian Christology. In 341, the conflict came to a head when Pope Julius summoned a local council in Rome that sided with Athanasius: It ousted his replacement in Alexandria, recalled him from exile, and restored him as bishop there. Bishops from the East were outraged that the Bishop of Rome intervened in the already-settled matters of Athanasius's sacking and his successor's elevation, and they seethed over the fact that Julius described the conflict as being between the "Athanasians" and the "Eusebians," whom he also called "Arians." Thus, 341 is an appropriate starting point because, to

76. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 126.

return to Lienhard, it was in that year "that the Eastern bishops learned that they were being called 'Arians.'"[77]

In response to this effrontery, the Eastern bishops took advantage of the occasion of the dedication of a golden-domed church in Antioch—built by Constantine and completed by one of his sons, the Eastern Emperor Constantius—to convene a council at which the emperor himself was present. The ninety-seven bishops who gathered there produced several creeds, and the second of them (the only one ratified by the so-called Dedication Council in its own name) is an ideal text for us to consider.[78] Kelly says of it, "The intensely Scriptural tone is unmistakable. Not only is its doctrine expressed as far as possible by extracts from the Bible, but the signatories themselves claim biblical authority for their teaching and ostracize all who presume to deviate from the narrow Scriptural path."[79] Three initial aspects of this creed are worth noting. First, Anatolios surmises that the council "attempted to replace the Nicene Creed," which is yet another indication that Nicaea and its documents became normative only over time, not immediately.[80] Second, the Dedication Creed, as it came to be known, lacked at least one pronounced advantage that the Nicene Creed enjoyed: succinctness. It, along with just about every other fourth-century profession of faith other than Nicaea's, was long and unwieldy, while the creed of the 318, even with its clumsy insertions, was brief and relatively smooth. Third, the creed lacks many of the Nicene watchwords, chief among them *homoousios*, but its anathemas do condemn anyone who says that the Son is "a creature as one of the creatures," which is at least a partial rejection of Arianism. Thus, the creed can be viewed neither as wholly Arian nor wholly Nicene.

The "intensely Scriptural tone" flagged by Kelly manifests itself in a variety of ways: numerous Johannine names for Jesus (Light, Way, Truth, Resurrection, Shepherd, Door); scriptural quotations such as John 1:1c ("And the Word was God") and John 6:38 ("For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me"); and explicit statements about the centrality of Scripture, such as, "And if anyone teaches contrary to the sound and right faith of the Scriptures, that time or season or age either is or has been before the generation of the Son, let him be anathema," and "For all that has been handed down in the divine Scriptures, whether by prophets or apostles, we do truly and reverently believe and follow." Even if the Dedication Creed failed to solve the post-Nicene crisis of who was and was not an Arian—indeed, Antioch hardened and exacerbated those divisions—its authors firmly grounded their words in Scripture.

For the remainder of this time period, which, again, includes more texts than we could possibly consider here, Athanasius and the Eastern bishops hurled charges of Arianism and Sabellianism back and forth at one another; councils issued condemnations and professions of faith; authorities exiled bishops—Athanasius himself was exiled three times; and the need for another council along the lines of Nicaea became

77. Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy," 417.
78. For both the original Greek and the English translation of this creed, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 268–70.
79. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 270.
80. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 144–45.

more and more apparent. The year 361 becomes a reasonable stopping point both because of Constantius's death and because "the three Cappadocian Fathers received the baton of orthodoxy from Athanasius and continued the defense of the Nicene doctrine."[81] And that year is as good a time as any to re-name the church's pilgrimage route: What was the road heading from Nicaea has become the road heading toward Constantinople, where the second ecumenical council met in 381.

Living Again in the World That Scripture Produces

However we name that road, the point on it that we call "Nicaea" lies distinctly in the church's past. This essay has argued that the Council of Nicaea, far from being the beginning of the end of the church's speaking in a scriptural mode, came from, dwelled in, and handed on the symbolic universe of Scripture. In so doing, it has given a gift to today's church, and in particular, to its theologians. And that gift is an invitation to return with it again to the world that Scripture produces.

As we saw earlier, this idea of "the world that Scripture produces" comes from Johnson who contrasts it with "the world that produced the Scripture." Study of that second world puts at its center the languages, linguistics, economics, social systems, thought patterns, literature, customs, and cultures that obtained in the places where, and during the time periods in which, the biblical books were produced. In short, "the world that produced the Scripture" is the object of investigation of historical-criticism, and Johnson, himself a biblical scholar, holds, "Since the triumph of the historical-critical paradigm within biblical studies, the relationship of theology to Scripture has resembled that of an archaeologist to the site of an ancient and uninhabited city. Without any unfairness, the historical-critical paradigm can be designated a kind of literary archaeology."[82] Such studies of the ancient world, for Johnson, are entirely legitimate, but they exact a cost when biblical scholars employ them as their primary, if not exclusive, instrument for inquiry into the Bible. The detachment that exegetes require from the world they are examining, in this case, the biblical world, "drives an implacable wedge between the world imagined by Scripture and the worldview of the biblical critic."[83] What results is that the theologian, "rather than being first of all a reader of Scripture who explores its world from within, confident that, though much has changed its world remains the theologian's world as well, is now reduced to a client of the biblical guild, dependent on the results of its excavations of a world that, with each dig, became increasingly remote."[84] The end picture that Johnson paints is a disquieting one: "The academic study of the Bible has, for the longest portion of its

81. Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy," 415. Lienhard suggests that this is the terminus of a "clear and dramatic picture" of the Arian controversy, but that that picture lacks nuance at various points. Seeing 361 as an end of sorts, however, is not among those points.
82. Johnson, "Imagining," 125–26.
83. Johnson, "Imagining," 127.
84. Johnson, "Imagining," 128.

career, been set against the life and faith of the church as a constant and often hostile critic."[85]

Johnson paints with broad brush strokes, and whether they are too broad could be a matter well worth debating. Stanley Hauerwas, for one, might find them too narrow. He advocates for Christian churches to "take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America" because such people read the text "not as Christians, not as people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their 'common sense' is sufficient for 'understanding' the Scripture."[86] Bringing such a lens to the biblical text, if this is, in fact, what a critical mass of Christians in North America does, exacerbates the problem Johnson identifies: Not only is this group failing to imagine and live in the world Scripture produces, it believes that the world that produces Scripture aligns closely enough with the sensibilities of people living in a twentieth- or twenty-first-century liberal democracy. Others, no doubt, would find talk of the ill-effects of the historical-critical paradigm, of theologians being clients of the biblical guild, and of the opposition of the study of the Bible and the life of the church, far too exaggerated. Here is not the place to adjudicate these matters, but if the points Johnson and Hauerwas raise have any truth to them, if biblical scholarship, Christian theology more broadly, and the church as a whole, have become alien from the world that Scripture imagines, then a return to that world is imperative. And Nicaea testifies that that return is possible.

One must hasten to add what a return to the world that Scripture imagines does not include. It is not "a *sacrificium intellectus* by which we as contemporaries living in a world of astrophysics and evolutionary biology retreat out of fear into a biblical cosmology and psychology and pretend that they are adequate to our present-day sense of science."[87] So doing would not be an authentic return to the world that Scripture imagines; it would be a performative returning to the world that produced Scripture. What Johnson offers, and what Nicaea can model for theologians and the church, has nothing to do with this sort of a retreat. Instead, what he proposes begins with the metaphor of the world produced by Scripture as a city, not the "ancient uninhabited city" that the exegete-cum-archaeologist excavates, but the living, breathing, bustling, dynamic city that Christians called home for the first sixteen centuries of their existence. People were once able to find their way around that city; they knew the best route to get from here to there; they intuited where traffic would snarl; they understood what they were hearing and seeing; and they had an innate sense of the customs, the smells, the weather, and the rhythm of the city. A return to that city, a city "in which every creature is at every moment summoned into being by a Power and a Presence that is at once distant and close, ageless and instant," is possible, but getting there, says Johnson, demands a leap of faith.[88] He presents his readers with four essential elements, all of

85. Johnson, "Imagining," 131.
86. Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.
87. Johnson, "Imagining," 132.
88. Johnson, "Imagining," 120.

which work together and do not flow sequentially, for making that leap to recover a scriptural imagination. We have witnessed each of the four at and around the Council of Nicaea, and what is more, the council provides a map for returning to that city. What we have uncovered about Nicaea, in other words, expands upon Johnson's work by giving practical illustrations of what these elements have looked like in the past, thus priming our minds for how the elements might function now.

The first element invites Christians to apprehend Scripture not as a set of texts describing the world, but as a body of literature imagining a world, "and by imagining it, *reveal*[*ing*] it, and by revealing it, enabl[ing] it to be brought into being within this physical space that human beings share with one another."[89] Some of the most imaginative claims of Nicaea, all of them drawn from Scripture, were actually the most theologically uncontroversial at the council: an all-powerful God who made all things; Jesus Christ as God's son, through whom creation came to be; that Christ became incarnate, suffered, rose, ascended to heaven, and will return again to act as judge of all; the Holy Spirit. The canons, too, legislated from the world imagined by Scripture—a world in which, for instance, ministers must be tested over time and approved by fellow ministers; in which people can stray from belief but still find a way back to the community, even if that way is arduous; in which those on the brink of death are also on the brink of a new state of life. No doubt, huge swaths of Christians and, one would hope, nearly all Christian theologians, would assent to these claims of the creed of the 318 and the scriptural underpinnings of the canons. But do we routinely go further than agreeing with these points? Do we imagine that the world where we work, study, and participate in the public square is a world where these mighty deeds of God have taken place and continue to take place?

Johnson's second element recommends the formation of communities of practice, which means communities that read Scripture, but who also enact what they read through common prayer, lives of piety, and works of justice and reconciliation. If there is any hope of living again in the world Scripture produces, the leap one must take to get there cannot be a theoretical or abstract affair only. It must become a part of a community's muscle memory. Even though we have no *acta* from Nicaea or the relevant regional councils that preceded it, it is likely that, at some point, the participants assembled together for prayer of some sort with one another, even if their engaging in communal works of service seems less likely. For sure, the Fathers of Nicaea asked the church of Egypt to pray that the decisions they made at the council remained secure; is it not reasonable to assume that the bishops, too, were praying for their people? The challenge posed to theologians with this second element has everything to do with context. So many of us display these behaviors on almost a daily basis, but what would it look like to enact them—prayer, sharing lives together, service—from our profession as theologians seeking to live in the world imagined by Scripture?

89. Johnson, "Imagining," 132 (emphasis in original).

The third element consists of learning to approach Scripture again qua Scripture, to approach it as a saving word, and not as a text that must first pass through the gauntlet of exegesis. As Johnson puts it, "If Scripture is being read to enliven the mind and heart, or to expand the imagination, or simply to allow the reader to play contemplatively in the fields of the Lord, then multiple modes of reading are welcome."[90] Remembering that, in one sense, the Bible is a single, unified book—even if, of course, there are other ways of thinking of it—helps a great deal, even if this "one book" approach will need to be defended against charges of reductionism. This mindset allows persons or communities to trace themes through the whole of Scripture, not worrying about the fact that a certain book's use of the metaphor of the vineyard, say, differs substantially from how it functions in another book. One can do the same with characters, names of places, foods, and other things that appear across multiple biblical texts. Surely, this is how Arius, Alexander, Athanasius, and the Fathers of Nicaea and the regional councils before and after Nicaea read Scripture. Indeed, this is how virtually everyone read Scripture for well over a millennium after Nicaea closed. Today, however, any academically-trained reader of Scripture, especially theologians, will need to marshal a fair amount of discipline to lead with this sort of expansive lens rather than with the tools of criticism that are far more familiar, and on their surface, far more powerful.

The fourth and final element Johnson offers reminds us that our commitment to imagine the world that Scripture produces ought not to distract us into losing focus on what is transpiring in our daily lives. To introduce such a separation undoes the goal of imagining the world Scripture produces, and instead returns to the world that produced Scripture, casting it as utterly different from our world. The characters at the Council of Nicaea surely manifested an acute awareness of what was happening around them, in both ecclesial and secular politics, and they linked what they found there to Scripture, even to the point of using one of its verses to liken people to dogs returning to their own vomit. For theologians and the church at large to read Scripture this way, with one eye always trained on the world around them, lets them behold the world that Scripture imagines, while also enabling that world to be realized more deeply. When put into play, this fourth element, especially when it unfolds alongside the other three, has every chance of achieving what Johnson identifies as the ultimate goal: "To live in this world as one created at every moment by an unseen Power who drenches us with grace and transforms us into God's own image, and to regard our own story, and every human story that we hear, as truly revealing the truth of that world."[91]

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The original plan exactly 1700 years ago was for the Council of Nicaea to be another Council of Ancyra. Constantine insisted on a change of location, however, because Nicaea allowed for easier access for the western bishops, and because it was

90. Johnson, "Imagining," 136–37.
91. Johnson, "Imagining," 142.

not far from the imperial summer residence at Nicomedia, which enabled the emperor to observe and participate in the proceedings. In his letter convoking the council, though, Constantine adds a third reason for the shift: the beautiful temperature of the air in Nicaea.[92] He must have been speaking literally because, metaphorically, the air was hardly calm. There were gusts of the winds of controversy, and those winds were freshening in the approach to, the execution of, and the decades following the council. In at least one sense, though, we can read Constantine's words as a metaphor. The beautiful temperature of the air in Nicaea still has the force to fill the sails of the barque of the church and to help propel it forward if we see the council as residing in the heart of the symbolic universe of Scripture and inviting the church of every age, including ours, to join it in the world that Scripture imagines.

ORCID iD

Peter M. Folan, SJ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0590-7835

Author biography

Peter M. Folan, SJ (PhD, Boston College) is an assistant professor in Georgetown University's Department of Theology and Religious Studies. His current research includes topics in ecumenical theology, ecclesiology, and the use of the Bible in ecclesial life and the public square. He is the author of *Martin Luther and the Council of Trent: The Battle over Scripture and the Doctrine of Justification* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

92. See "Kaiser Konstantins Schreiben zur Einberufung der nicänischen Synode," in *Urkunden*, no. 20.