

Purging *Homoousios* of Sabellian Imprint

Athanasius' Post-325 Clarification of The Nicene Faith

*Joseph Nguyen Huu Thap, OP**

Dominican Institute of Theology, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam

*Jannel N. Abogado, OP***

Faculty of Theology, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Abstract: The First Council of Nicaea (325) declared the Son to be *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father, affirming that the Son is God in the same way the Father is God. Despite its doctrinal significance, the term became the subject of heated controversy because of its non-biblical origin and earlier usages that did not match its later orthodox use. To better understand the controversies surrounding the term, this article investigates the diverse pre-Nicene uses, showing how they contributed to widespread misunderstanding of the Nicene definition. Specifically, it examines the role of Marcellus of Ancyra and the miahypostatic tradition in reinforcing the accusation that the Nicene formula collapsed the distinction between the Father and the Son. The study further analyzes the terminological ambiguity surrounding *ousia* and *hypostasis* and shows how this ambiguity shaped fourth-century Trinitarian debates. Finally, it highlights the decisive contribution of Athanasius of Alexandria, whose later theological works reclaimed *homoousios* by differentiating its orthodox Nicene meaning from both Sabellian modalism and Arian subordinationism.

Keywords: Council of Nicaea, *homoousios*, *ousia*, *hypostasis*, Athanasius of Alexandria, post-Nicene theology, Marcellus of Ancyra, Arianism, Sabellianism

* Joseph Nguyen Huu Thap, OP can be contacted at huuthapop@yahoo.com.

** Jannel N. Abogado, OP can be contacted at jannelabogado.op@ust.edu.ph.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5044-481>.

Introduction

Historically, the promulgation of the Nicene *homoousios* marked a turning point in the Church's struggle against Arianism. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Church issued an ecumenical decision on the divinity of the Son of God. Through the formula *homoousios*, the Council taught that the Son is fully divine, as God the Father is, because He is of the same essence (*homoousios*) as the Father. With this definition of faith, the Son is professed to be co-eternal and co-equal with the Father, which opposes the Arian claim that the Son is of a different essence, thus not co-eternal or co-equal, and, consequently, subordinate to the Father. However, the Nicene *homoousios* did not, doctrinally, obtain the consent of all church leaders and the faithful, mainly the supporters of Arius. This was because they did not grasp, whether maliciously or not, the Nicene meaning of the term *homoousios*. The most devastating criticism of this was a Sabellian misrepresentation of Nicaea. This study explains why and how the Nicene *homoousios* was mistaken for Sabellianism and accounts for the recovery of its orthodox significance by Athanasius of Alexandria.

The Nicene *Homoousios* and its Sabellian (Mis)Reading

To interpret the Nicene *homoousios*, readers need an explanation of how the term originated and was defined at the Nicene Council of 325. This investigation will examine the various interpretations of the term *homoousios*. It will place particular emphasis on the Sabellian perspective of *homoousios*, both before and after its inclusion in the confession of faith of the First Ecumenical Council.

A. *The History of the Use of Homoousios and Its Function at 325 Nicaea*

The term *homoousios* was not an innovation of Nicaea, as it had already been in use with various significations, even before the council fathers considered making it the cornerstone of their opposition to Arian Christology. Its various employments predating Nicaea caused confusion in the years following its inclusion in the conciliar promulgation. Inquiring into the diverse senses of *homoousios* could provide a context for understanding the meaning assigned to it by its advocates during the great council and for understanding the reservations of those who opposed it.

1. The Different Senses of *Homoousios*

We shall use John N. D. Kelly's comment as the starting point of analysis: "*Homoousios* is, of course, a compound adjective with *ousia*, or substance, as its

principle element.”¹ It consists of two Greek words, *homo* and *ousia*, which, when combined, indicate something or someone being of the same *ousia* as another. As a noun, *ousia* is the essential element to define the sense of the term *homoousios*. In other words, the meaning of the term *homoousios* depends on what sense *ousia* bears. “Its fundamental significance can be at once defined as ‘being,’ ‘essence,’ ‘reality,’ but these synonyms only bring out the cause of ambiguity.”² Kelly explains:

Sometimes the term was generic: it stood for the universal, the class to which a number of individuals belonged. This was what Aristotle had called ‘secondary substance.’ Sometimes, however, the dominant meaning was ‘individual.’ An *ousia* was a particular entity regarded as the subject of qualities: what Aristotle had intended by ‘primary substance.’ Thus St. Athenagoras stated that Thales had defined demons as ‘*psychic ousia*.’ But, thirdly, to people of a Stoic cast of thought (and the impact of Stoicism on the mind of ancient world was a powerful one) *ousia* might suggest just matter, stuff, nothing more or less.³

The term *homoousios* has a long history of semantic development. Because *ousia* had been utilized before Nicaea in three different senses, *homoousios*, as a consequence, signifies, said three meanings. First, when *ousia* is understood in a generic sense, *homoousios* indicates a substance common to many individuals of the same kind. For example, human beings are grouped into one class because all human individuals share the same humanity as their common substance. Thus, people can be said to be *homoousios* to one another. Applied to the Trinity, with a generic sense of *ousia*, the term *homoousios* preserves the belief that the divinity (substance) of the Son is also that of the Father, which makes the Son and the Father of one kind. However, from this perspective, saying the Son is *homoousios* to the Father is the same as saying Peter is *homoousios* to Paul. With a generic understanding, the substance of the Son and that of the Father are taken as “the same kind of substance,” not as “the same identical substance.” It does not fully convey the sense intended by Nicea.

Now, concerning the material sense of *ousia*, under which the Arians, leading to the Nicene Council, preferred to interpret *homoousios*, Kelly states: “the heresiarch himself brushed aside the insinuation that the Son was ‘con-substantial portion’ (μερὸς ὁμοούσιου) of the Father: it seemed to him, as many contexts show, to imply a division of substance.”⁴ Writing to Alexander of Alexandria, Arius

¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *The Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 243.

² Kelly, *The Early Christian Creeds*, 243.

³ Kelly, *The Early Christian Creeds*, 243-244

⁴ Kelly, *The Early Christian Creeds*, 245-246.

denied the following definitions, mainly sustaining materialist implications, as applied to the Son:

As Valentinus pronounced that the offspring of the Father was an issue; nor as Manichæus taught that the offspring was a portion of the Father, one in essence; nor as Sabellius, dividing the Monad, speaks of a Son-and-Father; nor as Hieracas, of one torch from another, or as a lamp divided into two; nor that He who was before, was afterwards generated or new-created into a Son.⁵

For Arius, the Father is One God, Who is “alone Ingenerate, alone Everlasting, alone Unbegun, alone True, alone having Immortality, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign; Judge, Governor, and Providence of all, unalterable and unchangeable, just and good, God of Law and Prophets.”⁶ According to this, the unique properties of God the Father are incommunicable, let alone His substance. From this, the view that the Father shares His Divinity with the Son, or that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, could only be explained by admitting that the Father’s essence has been divided into two, which is counterintuitive to Nicaea.

This particular interpretation of *homoousios* was already evident in the works of the Gnostics, active in Asia Minor, in earlier centuries. In fact, the term *homoousios* might have been first used within the Gnostic circles, as argued here by Christopher Stead:

The word *homoousios*, usually translated ‘con-substantial’ or ‘co-essential,’ appears to have been introduced by Gnostic Christians of the second century. It occurs in summaries and criticisms of Gnostic teaching made by Irenaeus; it was used by Ptolemaeus and is attributed to some other second-century Gnostics, and it also occurs once in the *Poimandres*; otherwise, it is not found in pagan writers before Plotinus.⁷

Stead discloses that no earlier works outside the Gnostic tradition show the term *homoousios* appearing. And its sense, as employed, “originally meant, ‘having the same substance,’ *ousia*; and in the majority of cases at least, the notion of *ousia* that is implied is either material or conceived in physical terms. It thus means roughly, ‘made of the same...kind of stuff.’”⁸

⁵ Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 16, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 458.

⁶ Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 16 (NPNF 4, 458).

⁷ Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 190.

⁸ Stead, *Divine Substance*, 190.

With respect to *ousia* indicating a particular entity, understood as the Aristotelian primary substance, *i.e.*, using it interchangeably with *hypostasis*, with the meaning of object or person, Narcissus of Neronias, one of the Eusebian bishops,⁹ insisted that to say three *ousia* in the Godhead is simply to say three *hypostaseis* or persons.¹⁰ This new (mis)reading of *homoousios* stems from another earlier usage of the term. It is no longer the Gnostic reading that provided structure to this objection to its use at Nicaea, but rather its employment in the works of Sabellius and Paul of Samosata. This particular perspective of *homoousios* was witnessed, for instance, towards the end of the third century, when Dionysius of Alexandria was accused by members of his congregation who were of Asiatic origin of not believing in the divinity of the Son because he would not subscribe to the idea of using *homoousios* to describe the Son. To this accusation, R. P. C. Hanson asserts that Dionysius rejected *homoousios* because Sabellius used it incorrectly.¹¹ According to this Sabellian reading, the formula *homoousios*, when applied to the Son, indicates that the Son was of one *hypostasis* or one person with the Father. Dionysius, who advocated that the Son is a distinct *hypostasis* from the Father, was cautious to use the term *homoousios* precisely because of this, though he affirmed the divinity of the Son using several analogies.¹²

Similarly, Paul of Samosata harmonized the term *homoousios*, bearing the sense that denies the Son a distinct personal reality, with his adoptionist Christology, condemned at the local Synod of Antioch in 268. Leo Donald Davis confirms this: “The term was associated with heresies since it had been [...] condemned at the Council of Antioch in 268 as used by the Adoptionist Paul of Samosata.”¹³ Both Davis and Hanson argue that, in Paul of Samosata and Sabellius, the term *homoousios* reflects a strict and exclusivist version of monotheism. At this point, we can anticipate saying that this Sabellian/Samosatene perspective was mediated in the fourth century to Marcellus of Ancyra. Speaking of the Ancyran bishop, Davis states: “He was perhaps the staunchest supporter of the *homoousios* of Nicaea since it seemed to support his basically Sabellian views,”¹⁴ “as used by the Adoptionist Paul of Samosata.”¹⁵

⁹ The Eusebians, those who followed the lead of Eusebius of Nicomedia, carried the cause of Arius after Nicaea. See Jannel Abogado, “Eusebius of Caesarea’s Christology and the Nicene Confession,” *Philippiniana Sacra* LIX/179 (May-August 2024), 190.

¹⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 244.

¹¹ R. P. C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Publishers, Ltd., 1988), 192.

¹² Dionysius the Great, *Epistle to Dionysius, Bishop of Rome*, IV, 6 in *Anti-Nicene Fathers* 6, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 92.

¹³ Leo Donald Davis, *First Seven Ecumenical Councils, Their History and Theology* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Grazier, Inc., 1987), 61-62.

¹⁴ Davis, *First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 76.

¹⁵ Davis, *First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 62.

Kelly rounds up his analysis of *homoousios* by saying that at Nicaea *ousia* is “referred to the being of the Godhead, or of one of the divine Persons, from the point of view of its substance, or essence.”¹⁶ This differs from the three senses of *homoousios* discussed above. For, according to this, claiming that the Son is *homoousios* to the Father is equivalent to saying that He possesses the same Godhead as hypostasized in the Person of the Father. It advocates that there is one *ousia* (being, God), without collapsing the three *hypostases* (persons) in the Trinity. In other words, the term *homoousios* conveys for the orthodox Nicenes a sense of numerical identity of essence between the Father and the Son, who are not numerically identical individuals.

2. The Proposition of *Homoousios* at the 325 Council of Nicaea

The spread of the Arian controversy in the early fourth century outside of Alexandria caused division within the empire. The situation alarmed Constantine, prompting him to convene a council to sustain mainly the unity of the empire, not necessarily to achieve doctrinal unity. David Bernard confirms that Constantine “had little interest in or understanding of the crucial theological issue at stake – the Deity of Jesus – but was concerned that the dispute could cause division in his empire.”¹⁷ With this purpose, in 325, Emperor Constantine convened the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (present-day Isnik, Turkey) for six weeks, with an estimated 250 or 300 bishops present. Throughout the council, the emperor kept the unity of Christendom in mind while the Church sought a Christological doctrine that did not depart from the faith handed down by the apostles.

With the counsel of Ossius of Cordoba, the emperor eventually supported the use of *homoousios*, which, at that point, he was made to understand by its proponents, could not only safeguard the belief in the oneness of essence of the Son with the Father, but also would restore unity among the quarreling factions, which was what he was looking for. However, gaining unanimous consent for the Nicene *homoousios* was not as straightforward as it was for its proponents, given the diversity of theological traditions from which the participants came and the preconceived ideas they held about the term in question.

The bishops who participated at Nicaea could be categorized into three main groups based on their attitude toward the formula *homoousios*. First, there was the select group of Nicene bishops, called in modern scholarship homouseans, led by Alexander of Alexandria, with the capable assistance of his deacon, Athanasius, responsible for endorsing the term *homoousios*. Second, there was the minority

¹⁶ Kelly, *The Early Christian Creeds*, 244.

¹⁷ David Bernard, *The Trinitarian Controversy in the Fourth Century*, (Hazelwood, Missouri: Word Aflame Press, 1996), 12.

group, which included Eusebius of Nicomedia, Arius, and his supporters, who refuted the essential unity of the Son with the Father that the formula *homoousios* was trying to establish. As they had argued for the diversity of essence of the Son and the Father,¹⁸ they opposed the inclusion of *homoousios* in the Creed. The third group was the majority of the participants who did not fully grasp the issue at hand, especially the technical aspects of the theological discourse, but had a general notion of the Son of God as handed down and cultivated in the living faith of their respective communities. Even though they “were reluctant to condemn Arius or adopt the homousean position,”¹⁹ as Bernard puts it, they eventually accepted the Nicene Creed, including the anathema levied on Arius and his teaching.

Despite strong opposition from the Arians, the term *homoousios* eventually gained the approval of most of the council fathers, partly because of the support from Emperor Constantine and partly because of the Nicene effort to demonstrate the term’s orthodoxy and its consonance with biblical revelations about the Son. Though nowhere in the Scriptures does *homoousios* appear, its advocates insisted on it not just because it invalidates Arian doctrine, but because it bears and preserves the summary of biblical revelations about the Son. Alois Grillmeier comments on this: “Without having thought through all the implications and problems, the Fathers of Nicea had the courage to maintain the tradition of the ‘Son of God’ to be found in the Bible and the Church in all its strictness, in part with unbiblical words.”²⁰ Thus the fathers at Nicaea unprecedentedly correlated the unbiblical *homoousios* with what the Bible teaches about the Son of God.

Looking at the wording of the Nicene Creed, one can notice that it wanted to be unambiguous about its refusal of the Arian teaching that the Son

¹⁸ Origen was not an Arian, but it is easy to see how the Arians reached their conclusions not merely from misunderstandings of his teachings but from his actual premises. Origen’s thought is all the while informed by his Greek philosophical education, specifically that of the Middle Platonic tradition, notably the works of the Jewish Platonist Philo of Alexandria and the Neopythagorean philosopher Numenius of Apamea (fl. 150-176 C.E.). From Numenius, Origen likely adopted the conception of a “second god” proceeding from a first, ineffable being called the One, “First God,” or Father. Numenius referred to this “second god” as Demiurge or craftsman, and taught that he created the cosmos by imitating the intellectual content of the “First God.” Origen applied this basic notion to his doctrine of Christ, whom he also called Demiurge (*Commentary on John* 1.22), and went on to describe Christ as a reflection of the Truth of the Father, stating that compared to human beings Christ is Truth, but compared to the Father He is falsehood (Jerome, *Epistle* 92, quoting Origen; see also *On First Principles* 1.2.6). Later, Arius used the same biblical quotations as Origen did to describe the subordination of the Son to the Father. In John 14:28, Jesus says that the Father is “greater than I,” and Proverbs 8:22 says something similar: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.” With these teachings, people believed Origen paved the way for the Arian confirmation of the essential distinction between the Son and the Father.

¹⁹ Bernard, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 16.

²⁰ Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, vol 1, From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2nd ed., John Bowden, ed., (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 270.

is ‘of another substance than the Father.’ As such, the Creed proclaims that the Son is ‘from the substance of the Father,’ and includes other affirmations to this effect, before it culminates with the declaration that the Son is ‘of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father.’ The full implications of the Nicene affirmation that ‘the Son is *homoousios* to the Father’ to the nature of divinity and the teaching of soteriology would be unpacked years after the conclusion of Nicaea in the writings of its champions, noteworthy of whom was Athanasius of Alexandria. But, at this juncture, it is sufficient to say that the majority of the bishops at Nicaea appeared to have been convinced by the initial explanations provided for the term *homoousios* as a description of the Son in relation to the Father such that it was eventually accepted and incorporated into the text of the confession of Nicaea. The Arian controversy, though, lingered much longer.

B. Marcellus of Ancyra as the New Sabellius

As argued above, the sense of the term *homoousios* depends on the sense of the term *ousia*. Even among those who supported the Nicene *homoousios* against the Arians, interpretations varied because they did not share a common understanding of *ousia*. A case in point is Marcellus of Ancyra, an ardent supporter of *homoousios* who understood it differently from his orthodox colleagues. Marcellus and his like-minded supporters took a radical view of affirming the oneness of the Godhead at the expense of denying the distinct personal existence of the Son.

1. Miahypostatic Theology and Marcellus

Etymologically, the term ‘miahypostatic,’ first coined by Joseph Lienhard²¹ from the two terms, *mia* and *hypostasis*, sustains the teaching of only one *hypostasis* in the Godhead. This tradition was rooted in radical Christian monotheism, which professes only one God and no other besides Him. It professes the God of one *ousia*, one *hypostasis*, and also, according to some authors, one *prosopon*.²² This one God also generated the Word, or the Son, and sent forth the Holy Spirit. It looks very Trinitarian as it speaks of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, it does not describe exactly what the Word and the Holy Spirit really are. It fails to talk about the plurality in the Godhead. This tradition claims one *ousia* and one

²¹ Joseph T. Lienhard was the first to coin this term to identify a group of bishops in the fourth century with a characteristic strict monotheistic theological vision similar to what is found in the works of Marcellus. See his work, “*Ousia and Hypostasis: The Cappadocian Settlement and The Theology of ‘One Hypostasis,’*” in eds. Stephen Davis et al., *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on The Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 110-111.

²² See Joseph T. Lienhard, “The Arian Controversy: Some Categories Reconsidered,” in *Theological Studies* 48/3 (1987), 425.

hypostasis in the Godhead, but does not give any proper distinction between the divine persons.

Marcellus of Ancyra's theological vision could be characterized as miahypostatic. A radical monotheist, he claimed that God is one *ousia*, one *hypostasis*, and one *prosopon*. He collapsed the senses of *ousia* and *hypostasis* as "being" or "existence." Meanwhile, *prosopon* is taken to mean "source of action." He further argued that if there was one *hypostasis*, there must be one *prosopon*, because the former is the reality behind the latter. In other words, if there is one being or one existence (*ousia* or *hypostasis*), there must be one source of action (*prosopon*).²³ The teaching of Marcellus safeguards the simplicity and oneness of the Godhead, but inasmuch as he collapsed the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* under the sense of 'existent' or 'subject,' the description of his view as Sabellian was justified.

2. *Marcellus' Reading of Homoousios*

During the explosion of the Arian crisis, Marcellus was already an established bishop, both theologically and politically. His reputation had prompted Alexander to approach him for support in his undertaking to proscribe the teaching of his presbyter, who was then gaining support from other bishops in the East. Soon, he became a staunch enemy of Arius and his associates. A couple of years after Nicaea, when the new imperial policy allowed the anti-Nicene bishops to reorganize, he, along with Athanasius and other prominent Nicene bishops, came under attack from their theological opponents. He was subjected to synodical scrutiny and later deposed from his see by the bishops who gathered at Constantinople in 336.²⁴ In 340, he went to Rome to seek the help of the Roman pontiff, where Athanasius, the celebrated successor of Alexander at Alexandria, later joined him. The Western Council of Serdica 343 exonerated him and Athanasius.²⁵

The outline of Marcellus's theology can be drawn from his major work, *Contra Asterium*. This work, which was examined and deemed erroneous by the same council that deposed him, was written to counter the *Apologia* of Asterius for Eusebius of Nicomedia. It has come to us in fragments within the two works of Eusebius, *Contra Marcellum* and *De ecclesiastica theologia*. Marcellus defended the Christian doctrine of monotheism against the pluralistic theology of Arius and the Eusebians.²⁶ By referencing several passages of Scripture that express the

²³ For a detailed discussion, see Lienhard, "The Arian Controversy," 425.

²⁴ Cf. J. Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum, Marcellus of Ancyra and Fourth-Century Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 136.

²⁵ Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum*, 144-152.

²⁶ Cf. Abogado, "Eusebius of Caesarea's Christology," 190-196.

oneness of the Father and the Son, he consistently refuted Asterius's assertion that the Father and the Son are two distinct hypostases.²⁷ He believed the fundamental issue with his opponents' theology was their commitment to separate the Logos from God, which forced them to ascribe a different substantial existence to the Logos. This concern is absent in the theology of the Ancyran bishop, who held that the Logos is inseparably united with God. The term Marcellus preferred to convey the single, undivided substance of the Godhead is *προσωπον*.

Marcellus viewed God as an undivided monad. For him, to admit that the Logos has a separate existence independent from God would lead to two unacceptable ideas: either one would have to accept two unbegotten principles or concede that the Logos is a lesser God—the latter position, he stressed, is the error of the Arians. To support his doctrine of the Logos, Marcellus took the Johannine prologue as its biblical foundation. The pre-incarnate Logos, he said, is no different from the word in man.²⁸ The Logos was “immanent during the time that the Father was silent, but active in fashioning creation, just as our speech is inactive when we are silent, but active when we speak.”²⁹ He further claimed that the Scriptures employ the name Logos only for his pre-incarnate stage and clarified that when he is called Son in the Old Testament, this predication should be understood only prophetically, as referring to his human dispensation. The Logos became the Son only during the incarnation.³⁰ For this reason, he preferred to speak of the origin of the Logos from the Father as ‘coming forth’ instead of ‘generation.’ This preference is not just because he did not want any anthropomorphic meaning to be read into it, but more importantly, because the evangelist has not referred to the Logos as begotten.³¹

Marcellus has illustrated the inseparability of the Logos and its distinction from God by drawing a distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*. In his account of creation, he averred that the Logos was in God before the creation of the world. But when God decided to create the universe, the Logos proceeded forth as a creative force to produce the world. The creative energy (*energeia*) that came forth from God is the same Logos that prepared the work of creation and remains in God (*dynamis*). The Logos as *dynamis* should be understood as a non-hypostatic operative faculty in God from which flowed the creative activity (*energeia*) that

²⁷ Marcellus, *Die Fragmente Marcells* 63 (Re 57), *Eusebius Werke IV, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, or GCS vol. 14. eds. Günther Christian Hansen (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung 1906), vol. 14, 196).

²⁸ Marcellus, Fr. 48 (Re 42) (GCS 14, 193; Eusebius, *ET* I, 18, 2; TP 144, 75).

²⁹ Quoted in Eusebius, *Contra Marcellum* I, 1, 4 (trans. R.P.C. Hanson, *Search*, 224).

³⁰ Marcellus, Fr. 42 (Re 36) (GCS 14, 192).

³¹ Marcellus, Fr. 43 (Re 37) (GCS 14, 192).

produced the created natures. In this case, the unity of the Godhead is preserved in that the Logos as *dynamis* is never severed from God, while the distinction is explained in terms of the activity that proceeded forth but, at the same time, remains rooted in this same power of God.

When speaking of the incarnation, Marcellus explained it in the same terms. The *energeia* of the Logos, which became active first at creation, was designed to take on human flesh.³² Eusebius of Caesarea had objected that the system of Marcellus allows one to imagine God deprived of his proper Logos: since the Logos is God's reason, then God would be without reason when the Logos proceeded out of the Father at the time of incarnation.³³ It is, however, a misreading of Marcellus' idea. When Marcellus spoke of the Logos, he ordinarily thought of it as 'word' and never as 'reason.'³⁴ And just as man's word cannot be separated from him, so the Logos is from God.

However, one must not suppose that Marcellus thought that the Father is the subject of incarnation just because he advocated that the Father and the Son are indivisibly one. On the contrary, Marcellus was firm in his conviction that the Logos acts in the assumed corporeal body through his active energy. While the Trinity is inseparably one immanently, this is not the case in the economy, as they are distinct from each other, that is, Father and Son. The Son is here understood as the Logos proceeding from God, as active energy taking on the flesh born of the Virgin. Marcellus allowed the talk of separation of the Logos from God only as an active force from the perspective of salvation.

From the foregoing, Marcellus understood the Nicene statement that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father in the fashion that the Son is not separate from the Father, for they are an undivided monad or substance. Although during the incarnation it could be observed that the Logos had a distinct existence in the assumed body and performed the work of salvation independently of the Father in physical terms, spiritually the Logos is never disconnected from the Godhead. For this reason, Marcellus spoke not of separation but of the extension of the Godhead in the incarnation. The objection to *homoousios* sketched by Hilary of Poitiers in *De Trinitate* confirms this Marcellan deduction:

“[The anti-Nicenes] declare that the meaning of the phrase, that is, of one substance, which in Greek is called *homooúsion*, must be used and expressed in this sense, that He Himself is the

³² Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum*, 58-61.

³³ Cf. Eusebius, *ET* II, 14, 4 (TP 144, 127-128).

³⁴ J. Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum*, 51.

Father who is also the Son; in other words, as a consequence of his infinity He has been extended to the Virgin, from whom He assumed flesh and annexed the name Son to Himself in that body which He assumed.”³⁵

The bishop of Poitiers articulated how the opponents of Nicaea viewed *homoousios*, which, upon closer analysis, as we have already noted, was taken from the perspective of Marcellus of Ancyra.

C. The Identification of the Concepts Ousia and Hypostasis as Source of Confusion

In the years following Nicaea, opposition to *homoousios* rested on its Sabellian interpretation. Opponents of Nicaea accused it of teaching a single *hypostasis*, or merely a single person, in the Godhead. In particular, the Arian objection to Nicaea relied on the identification of *ousia* and *hypostasis* in its pronouncements, interpreted through the lens of Marcellus of Ancyra, as explained above. Such identification can be found in the third anathema, which says: “But as for those who say, [...] He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change - these the Catholic Church anathematizes.”³⁶

The Arians postulated a difference in substance between the Father and the Son. In contrast, the Nicenes espoused oneness of substance in the Godhead. The fathers at the Council of Nicaea drafted the Creed to discredit a deficient Arian understanding of the nature of the Son and to ascertain the identity and equality of the Son’s divinity with the Father. In the said anathema, the terms *hypostasis* and *ousia* were assigned the meaning of substance by the drafters of the Creed. Moreover, though the Nicenes confessed one unique substance in the Godhead, they also believed in the plurality of Persons in the Godhead. But there is a parallel understanding to this anathema in Marcellus of Ancyra’s interpretation, which the Arians stubbornly held as its definite interpretation.

The Sabellian reading of the Nicene Creed, emanating from the identification of *hypostasis* and *ousia* under the sense of individual subsistence, persisted because an established tradition sustained such interpretation. Lienhard, as we have seen above, has identified this tradition, Marcellus of Ancyra being its most prominent representative, as *miahypostatic*:

³⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, IV,4, in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. S. McKenna, reprint (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 93.

³⁶ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 232.

Study of documents from the fourth century shows that there existed a theological tradition that was already to oppose the Arians' teaching, but also insisted that it was proper to call God one *hypostasis*, just as He was called one *ousia*. Elsewhere I have named this tradition miahypostatic theology.³⁷

Their peculiar reading of the anathema, which gives preference to *hypostasis* as an individual subsistence and makes it a controlling concept for understanding *ousia*, leads to Nicaea being perceived as a Sabellian council. Gerald O'Collins's observation on this is on point:

The upshot for the Nicaea of this inherited ambiguity about *hypostasis* was that taking *ousia* and *hypostasis* as equivalents ran the risk of *homoousios* being understood in a Sabellian way. (The Sabellians treated the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* more or less as synonyms for an individual substance.) Father and Son would then not only be of the same *ousia* but also of the same *hypostasis* – in the sense of *hypostasis*. Then there would be no real distinction between Father and Son; they could not be distinct, individual subsistence or subjects.³⁸

Indeed, the inclusion of anathema was intended to further exclude the Arian differentiation of the essence between the Father and the Son and not to render a Sabellian reading of the Father and the Son. Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that both terms, interchangeable as they are, bear not the 'sense of an individual object,' as Marcellus would want them to be read, but the 'sense of essence.' It is the 'sense of essence' that gives intelligibility to the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* under the given context, a sense that shall be emphasized by Athanasius in his letter addressed to the African bishops, written in reaction to the developments in the Synod of Constantinople in 360. Commenting on the same third anathema, Athanasius told the African bishops:

But what is that which is proper to and identical with the essence of God, and an Offspring from it by nature, if not by this very fact coessential (*consubstantiale*, ὁμοούσιον) with Him that begot it? For this is the distinctive relation of a Son to a Father, and he who denies this, does not hold that the Word is Son in nature and in truth. This then the Fathers perceived when they wrote that the Son was coessential (*consubstantiale*, ὁμοούσιον) with the Father,

³⁷ Lienhard, "Ousia and Hypostasis," 108.

³⁸ Gerald O'Collins, SJ, *The Tripersonal God - Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 118.

and anathematized those who say that the Son is of a different *hypostasis*: not inventing phrases for themselves, but learning in their turn, as we said, from the Fathers who had been before them.³⁹

Notwithstanding Athanasius's effort to clarify the doctrine signified by *homoousios*, his refusal to publicly sever his association with Marcellus did not help the cause of distancing Nicaea from the accusation of Sabellian derivation.⁴⁰ While the Nicene fathers had employed the formula *homoousios* to profess the unity of essence in the Godhead, and had further articulated the same doctrine in the appended anathema stating that the Son is not from a different *ousia* or *hypostasis* of the Father, with both terms understood as 'essence,' the Nicene opponents immediately associated this with Sabellianism for the reasons discussed above. It influenced the Nicene attitude, prompting almost immediate silence among them regarding the Nicene Creed after its promulgation.

Athanasius Reclaims *Homoousios*

After the promulgation of the Nicene Creed, the Arian controversy was expected to be resolved, but the opposite proved true. The issue of *homoousios* became an even bigger problem for its Nicene adherents. The Nicenes realized that the term *homoousios* was causing problems for many, as stated by Socrates in this record: "Yet as we ourselves have discovered from various letters which the bishops wrote to one another after the synod, the term *homoousios* troubled some of them."⁴¹ Consequently, the majority ecclesiastics, as they were not comfortable with it, refrained from talking about it. Mainly the reason for the discomfort or the trouble of the bishops with the *homoousios* was its being closely associated with the Sabellian teaching of Marcellus of Ancyra.

A. *Decades of Silence on Homoousios after 325 Nicaea*

The ecclesiastical unity forged around the Nicene Creed, containing the controversial term *homoousios*, proved to be weak in the years that followed the council. The influence of the emperor, who desired that peace be restored

³⁹ Athanasius, *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 8-9, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 493; PL XXVI, 1043-1044.

⁴⁰ See Kelley McCarthy Spoerl, "Athanasius and the Anti-Marcellan Controversy," in *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 10/2006, 34-55.

⁴¹ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 23, *Nicene Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 27.

immediately rather than the clarification of the faith in the Son of God, may have contributed to why the full implications of *homoousios* and the theology it bears were not discussed thoroughly at the council, and in the years immediately after it. With the prodding of imperial authority, most bishops at the council signed the Nicene Creed, even though they did not fully understand the issues involved. Thus, there was room for doubt about the Nicene Creed, especially because it incorporated expressions that needed further clarification. The Arians, its fiercest opponents, were waiting for favorable conditions to reassert their opposition. Such a moment came sooner than expected. Regarding this, Bernard writes: “In hindsight, Nicaea was a watershed of history, but at times it did not settle anything. The Arian controversy became even more intensified. The next fifty years were a seesaw battle between the Athanasians and the Arians, and during much of this time the Arians seemed to prevail.”⁴²

Explaining the attitude of the Nicene bishops toward *homoousios*, Jannel Abogado avers: “The Nicene bishops must have realized that instead of clarifying the right doctrine of God, *homoousios* would become an obstacle to the understanding of the faith as it could occasion confusion and possibly lead simple minds farther away from the truth about God.”⁴³ To avoid further confusion among the faithful and scandalize their faith, it seemed more expedient to remain silent about the use of *homoousios*. The reason for this can be deduced from this comment of Vaggione:

When a philosophical word is introduced into a creed, it is because its comparative clarity makes it possible to specify the meaning of scriptural words more clearly. The usefulness of such words, therefore, depends on clarity. But if that is the criterion, then *homoousios* is not – to say the least – an obvious choice.⁴⁴

Athanasius reckoned that *homoousios*, as a foundational term for interpreting the Christian faith in God the Father who sent His Son to save the world, had created more problems than it had clarified. But he also realized it was the only formula that could effectively combat Arianism. Thus, he must have inferred, as the theological controversy dragged on, that it would be more beneficial for the Church to clarify its meaning than to shy away from it.

⁴² Bernard, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 25.

⁴³ Jannel N. Abogado, O.P., *Hilary of Poitiers on Conciliating the Homouseans and the Homoeouseans: An Inquiry on the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Controversy* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2016), 79.

⁴⁴ Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2000), 54.

B. *Athanasius Returns to Homoousios and Clarifies its Sense*

The *homoousios* formula was not only hard to understand for most ecclesiastics and the lay faithful, but its incorporation into the Nicene confession allowed the Arians to charge the entire council with Sabellianism. We have already seen above how this Sabellian misreading of the faith of Nicaea became possible. It would appear that the Nicenes considered abandoning *homoousios*, as it did not appear for a long period in any writing of those who supported it, even from Athanasius. The Nicene *homoousios* appeared to have lost influence, while Arian teaching flourished, mainly because a succession of imperial authorities supported it and wanted it as the foundation of their respective religious programs. The danger it brought to the Christian faith became evident to Athanasius, so he broke his silence on *homoousios* and reestablished its authority as the only doctrine that could drive out the Arian virus from the Church.

There are, at least, three works composed by Athanasius in the 350s in which he expressed his renewed interest in championing the term *homoousios* to assert the divinity of the Son and his equality with the Father: *De Decretis* (353/5), *De Sententia Dionysii* (350/7), and *De Synodis* (359/61). T. Barnes believes that the addressee of the *De Decretis* was the new bishop of Rome, Liberius.⁴⁵ “With *De Decretis*, Athanasius intended to persuade the said bishop to reject the document from Sirmium and consequently his condemnation by exposing its proponents as upholding the Arian doctrine, and whose ultimate objective was really to undermine the Creed of Nicaea.”⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the *De Sententia Dionysii* seeks to reclaim Dionysius of Alexandria as the authority behind Nicaea, inasmuch as the Arian believers appealed to his person for support in refusing *homoousios* and, by extension, the whole of the Nicene Creed. Moreover, the *De Synodis* was composed as a reaction to the twin councils of 359, in Rimini for the Latins and in Seleucia for the Easterners, convoked by Constantius II, with the objective of resolving once and for all the religious division in the empire under his preferred religious program, which was characteristically Arian, or to be precise, using the modern categorization, under the homoean faith.⁴⁷

The three Athanasian treatises mentioned expose three features that clarify the sense of *homoousios* as conceived by the fathers at Nicaea in 325. The first feature in Athanasius’s exposition of the Nicene expression in question is that it is actually a rereading of the biblical phrase “from God,” thereby providing a proper context for understanding the Nicene teaching, which is none other than

⁴⁵ Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993) 110-111.

⁴⁶ Abogado, *Hilary of Poitiers*, 80.

⁴⁷ Abogado, *Hilary of Poitiers*, 91.

the revelation about the Son in the Sacred Scriptures. Athanasius developed this in *De Decretis* by demonstrating that the expression ‘from the essence of God,’ which is the foundation and of which the expression *homoousios* is an apposition, is consistent with the biblical phrase ‘from God,’ the acceptable description of the Son for the opponents of Nicaea. Having demonstrated this point, Athanasius appealed to a *fortiori* logic, stating that if they —referring to the homoeans and their radical associates in anomoeans— accepted the phrase ‘from God,’ they should in no way refute the expression ‘from the essence,’ and, consequently, the expression ‘*homoousios*’ to the Father.⁴⁸

Athanasius’ argumentation can be perceived in how he advanced it in the *De Decretis*, where the discussion of the Nicene terms in question, namely ‘from the essence of the Father’ and ‘*homoousios* to the Father,’ is prefaced by a long introductory discussion of how the biblical title ‘Son of God’ (explicitly revealed in the Baptism of Jesus, Mt. 3:17) should be understood. Athanasius’ analysis results in the distinction between the ‘Son of God,’ as applied to Jesus, with the sense of being the natural son/offspring, therefore of the same essence as the Father who begot Him, and the expression ‘son of God,’ applied to the rest of humanity, with the sense of son of God by adoption, therefore not sharing the same essence with the Father, not being begotten by Him, but made into offspring by the grace of God. The summary of the analysis of the *De Decretis* by Abogado makes this point clear:

The defense of ὁμοούσιος comes towards the end of the work, starting from sections 19 to 24. Again, for the better understanding of its function and meaning, it has to be considered in relation to the broader context of the argument set forth in the work. Here Athanasius was attempting to make a faithful exposition of the doctrine of Nicaea as requested by the addressee himself. Upon reading the text, one would not fail to grasp that the principal occupation of the author was to demonstrate that the Logos is the natural Son of the Father, as this is what the Sacred Scriptures reveal about the Son and also stressed by the fathers in Nicaea. All the other affirmations about the Son, more particularly the exposition of the theological statement ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’ and ‘*homoousios* to the Father,’ were offered precisely to demonstrate and safeguard this basic dogmatic truth.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Cf. Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 21, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 164.

⁴⁹ Abogado, O.P., *Hilary of Poitiers*, 82-83.

The second clarificatory point from Athanasius traces *homoousios* to the authority of the Fathers. In Sections 25 to 26 of *De Decretis*, Athanasius found support for the decision of Nicaea to make use of the disputed Nicene expressions among the venerated teachers of the Church, particularly Theognostus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Dionysius of Rome.⁵⁰ He wrote about this, explaining thus:

Theognostus then, after previously investigating in the way of an exercise, proceeds to lay down his sentiments in the foregoing words. Next, Dionysius, who was Bishop of Alexandria, upon his writing against Sabellius and expounding at large the Saviour's Economy according to the flesh, and thence proving against the Sabellians that not the Father but His Word became flesh, as John has said, was suspected of saying that the Son as a thing made and originated, and not one in essence with the Father; on this he writes to his namesake Dionysius, Bishop of Rome, to allege in his defense that this was a slander upon him. And he assured him that he had not called the Son made, nay, did confess Him to be even one in essence... And that the Word of God is not a work or creature, but an offspring proper to the Father's essence and indivisible, as the great Council wrote, here you may see in the words of Dionysius, Bishop of Rome, who, while writing against the Sabellians, thus inveighs against those who dared to say so.⁵¹

There are two things that we can say about the quoted passage. First, by doing so, Athanasius argued that the initiative of the fathers at Nicaea to make use of these expressions, including *homoousios*, which proclaim the full divinity of the Son, was not a random, spontaneous, or careless declaration. But it was an expression of faith exercised and taught by the teachers of the Church over a long period of time, and “that they did not invent them for themselves (since this is one of their excuses), but spoke what they had received from their predecessors.”⁵² In *De Sententia Dionysii*, Athanasius argued the same point but focused solely on the authority of Dionysius of Alexandria alone, intending to reinstate the legacy of Dionysius, the revered bishop of Alexandria, for the Nicenes, whom their Arian opponents had likewise claimed in support of their position, thereby smearing his orthodox reputation.⁵³

⁵⁰ See Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 21 (NPNF 4, 166-168).

⁵¹ Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 25 (NPNF 4, 167).

⁵² Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 25 (NPNF 4, 166).

⁵³ See Athanasius, *De Sententia Dionysii*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 176-187.

Second, Athanasius made mention of the use of the expression *homoousios* not only in the context of affirming the divinity of the Son is equal and the same with that of the Father, but also in the face of distancing the Nicene teaching from that of Sabellius. One could already read here Athanasius addressing those who opposed him and the Nicene confession on account of their misreading of Nicaea as under Sabellian influence. In fact, in the Athanasian works of the 350s that we are concerned with, Athanasius has recourse to several analogies that bring out the sense of *homoousios* and safeguard it from any Sabellian misreading. These analogies can be listed into four categories: 1) The analogy of human paternity, of father and son (*De Decr.* 20, *De Syn.* 41, etc.); 2) The analogy of continuous natural process seen in fountain and stream (*Sent. Dion.* 24), light source and ray of light (*De decr.* 23, 24, *De Syn.* 51, and in vine and branches (*Sent. Dion.* 10); 3) The analogy of two men simpliciter (*De Syn.* 53, *Sent. Dion.* 10); and 4) The analogy of mind and word (*De Syn.* 51).⁵⁴

These analogies describe dual or multiple realities that share the same essence whose existences cannot be separated from one another, though they cannot be collapsed into a single entity. Certainly, the Sabellian charge prompted these analogies. Despite employing an analogy from created reality, Athanasius cautioned against a simplistic application of the analogy, since God is, in fact, incorporeal and of incomprehensible essence. As Abogado puts it: “The interpretation of the expressions employed to describe the divine reality – offspring, from the *ousia* of and *homoousios* with the Father – should rather depart from this basic fact that God is incorporeal.”⁵⁵ The correspondence between ‘*homoousios*’ and ‘equality in essence,’ Athanasius would further expound in *De Synodis*.

Athanasius’s third point of elaboration demonstrated his understanding of *homoousios* as conveying exactly what the Nicene Council had thought. In *De Decretis*, Athanasius postulated, as we have alluded to above, that *homoousios* is revealed as “a corollary to the formula ‘from the *ousia* of the Father,’ which is the principal formula at Nicaea to speak about the essential relationship of the Son to the Father.”⁵⁶ Athanasius argued, as made explicit in Section 24 of the work, that the introduction of *homoousios* is to reaffirm the teaching of the Council already sustained in the sense of ‘from the essence’ of the Father, the Son being generated by the Father as His Offspring. Thus, the term *homoousios* preserves the two Persons of the Godhead, namely, the Son, who is begotten from eternity, and the Father, who begot the Son from his essence in eternity, and their oneness of essence, similar to human generation, where the essence of the human father necessarily is the same as the begotten human offspring.

⁵⁴ We are indebted to Stead (*Divine Substance*, 262) for identifying this list of analogies.

⁵⁵ Abogado, *Hilary of Poitiers*, 89.

⁵⁶ Abogado, *Hilary of Poitiers*, 82.

In *De Synodis*, Athanasius addressed the term *homoousios* in two discussions. The first appears in Sections 33 to 38, where he refuted the homoean agenda, whose confession of faith, largely based on the Dated Creed, was adopted at Constantinople in 360, the council that concluded the twin councils of Seleucia and Rimini. But for our purposes, the more relevant discussion is the later treatment of *homoousios* in Sections 39 to 54. In these sections of the treatise, Athanasius addressed the group of bishops, which modern scholarship terms homoeouseans, to show how their belief aligned with the Nicene confession. Referring to them, Athanasius openly avowed that they “who accept everything else that was defined at Nicaea, and doubt only about the ‘co-essential,’ must not be treated as enemies; nor do we here attack them as Ario-maniacs, nor as opponents of the Fathers, but we discuss the matter with them as brothers with brothers.” Athanasius found that the doctrine of the Nicenes (homouseans) and the homoeouseans are essentially similar, differing only in their preferred respective theological formulas. While the homouseans used the term *homoousios* (of one essence), the homoeouseans used *homoiousios* (like in essence) to describe the Sonship of the Son to His Father.

The main purpose of the treatise was not only to refute and expose the Arian inspiration underlying the homoean doctrine but also to initiate conciliation with the teaching of the homoeousean group led by Basil of Ancyra. Within this conciliatory context, Athanasius affirmed that *homoousios* is equal in essence to the Father, arriving at this conclusion by taking the homoeousean doctrine of ‘likeness in essence’ as a starting point. For the homoeouseans, ‘likeness in essence’ is the proper description of the Son of God because He is the natural ‘Offspring’ of God the Father. Bearing this in mind, Athanasius argued that the natural relationship between God the Father and God the Son, which, for Basil of Ancyra and his colleagues, is a non-negotiable fact of revelation and on which they anchored their conviction in the ‘likeness of essence’ theology, is presupposed in the Nicene affirmation of the Son’s *homoousios* character with the Father. In fact, the entire argument of the *De Synodis* hinges on demonstrating that the biblical title ‘Son of God by natural Sonship’ encapsulates the notion of *homoousios*, as articulated in the following succinct affirmations that conclude his discussions:

So, the sense of the ‘Offspring’ and ‘Coessential’ (ὁμοούσιος) is one, and the whoso considers the Son an offspring, rightly considers Him also as coessential.” (*De syn.* 42,2) [...] “When we speak uncontroversially of the Coessential (ὁμοούσιος), we signify a genuine Son born of the Father. (*De syn.* 54,2)

So far, we have identified the clarifications Athanasius made about the Nicene doctrine, particularly its teaching on *homoousios*, to preserve the Son’s full divinity. But why did he insist on equality in substance between the Son and the

Father? Athanasius did not just refute Arianism to unmask a logical inconsistency in their understanding of the biblical faith handed down to the Church by the apostles. His main intention was to preserve this biblical faith, allowing for belief in a God who has made himself accessible to humanity and made true on his promise of communing his divine life with his creation. It is not that the Arian version of Christianity did not account for the doctrine of salvation, because Arius and colleagues did so, making the Son of God, being ‘not just anyone of the creatures,’ *i.e.*, more than the rest of the creatures, the mediator between God and creation. But this Arian reckoning of mediation, Athanasius ruminated rather than delivering salvation for the people, denies it, as it renders a God who is either impotent or snobbish about the plight of the people.⁵⁷

C. *Evaluation of the Athanasian Clarification of Homoousios*

At the beginning of the letter sent to the bishops of Egypt and Libya, warning them of the initiative to replace the Nicene Creed, Athanasius evoked that the Lord Jesus Christ had already foreseen those who would invalidate his salvific works in the eyes of the faithful through false teachings. It is necessary to recall that this letter was composed after the adoption of the homoean creed, which favored the formula ‘like the Father according to Scriptures’ and prohibited any discourse about the relation of the Son and the Father on the level of *ousia*, at the 360 Synod of Constantinople. The bishop of Alexandria identified the group of Acacius of Caesarea as implementing the Arian agenda about which the Lord Jesus Christ had already warned the faithful, as can be perceived in the following quotation:

All things whatsoever our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as Luke wrote, ‘both has done and taught (Acts 1:1),’ He effected after having appeared for our salvation; for He came, as John says, ‘not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:17).’ And among the rest we have especially to admire this instance of His goodness, **that He was not silent concerning those who should fight against us, but plainly told us beforehand**, that, when those things should come to pass, we might straightway be found with minds established by His teaching.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See Khaled Anatolius, *Retrieving Nicaea, The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 118-121.

⁵⁸ Athanasius, *Ad episcopos Egypti et Libyae*, 1, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987), 223. Emphasis is mine.

The salvific acts narrated in the Scriptures actually happened as described and brought about humankind the grace of salvation because the subject of those acts is not a human person but a gracious God who has demonstrated his love for humanity (*philanthropia*). For this reason, Athanasius defended the Nicene *homoousios* to proclaim the Son's divinity as being the same substance as the Father's. In defending the Nicene *homoousios*, Athanasius affirmed not only the full Divinity of the Son, reclaiming Him as substantially equal in being divine, eternal, transcendental, and united with the Father, but also the truth of the revelation of the Scriptures about God, who is merciful toward his creatures and who went out of his way to save humankind from the path of certain destruction that his finite existence was walking toward without divine intervention. In this biblical narrative, the doctrine of the Son's subordination to the Father, advocated by the Arians, has no place.

Athanasius maintained the motif of creation's incapacity to access God by the natural difference between creation and the Creator. There is an infinite qualitative difference between the divine and the world God created. For Athanasius, the gulf between creation and God could only be bridged from the divine side, as it is beyond the reach of creation. In other words, the mediation cannot be conceived as a function performed by any other creature, however exalted, but only as the condescension of divine love. Athanasius returned to proclaiming the Nicene *homoousios*, because such a concept verifies the salvation won by God who came down to save humanity, as recorded in the Bible, not by some initiative of a creature because no amount of effort would have salvific value unless performed by a divine agent, salvation being a gratuitous divine act.⁵⁹

It can be said that Athanasius was successful in refuting the Arian doctrine, but with regard to safeguarding Nicaea from Sabellian interpretation, he was less successful. As noted above, the problem of misinterpreting the Nicene *homoousios* was rooted in considering the term *ousia* synonymous with *hypostasis*. During this period, *ousia* generally carried both the primary sense of essence, as understood in Aristotelian metaphysics, and the secondary sense of individual subsistence. Likewise, *hypostasis* has the primary sense of individual concrete existence (= secondary sense of *ousia*) and the secondary sense of essence (= primary sense of *ousia*). When the Nicenes employed the term *homoousios*, they had in mind the primary sense of *ousia*, i.e., essence, because that sense proscribes the Arian doctrine. Hence, to declare the Son *homoousios* to the Father means that the Son is of the same essence as the Father. However, some in the old Nicene alliance understood the term *homoousios* through the secondary meaning of *ousia*, i.e., individual concrete existence, equivalent to the primary sense of *hypostasis*.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion, see Anatolius, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 118-121ff.

Under this perspective, saying that the Son is *homoousios* to the Father becomes problematic, as it suggests that the Son has an identical personal existence with the Father.

Despite the considerable effort of Athanasius and his colleagues to champion *homoousios* and to introduce qualifications to ensure its proper interpretation, the reservation among not a few ecclesiastics about using it still persisted, because the Nicenes lacked a language that could distinguish what is one and what is three in the Godhead, a language that could have shielded the homousean doctrine from Sabellian imprint. Around this period, what is plural and what is one in the Godhead is sometimes termed *ousia*, sometimes *hypostasis*, thereby making it susceptible to misapprehension. In the following quotation from *Ad Afros*, the equivalence of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*, as Athanasius was clarifying their usage in the third anathema of Nicaea, is in full display.

They who assembled at Nicaea [...] confessed that the Son was of the Essence of the Father. But the others, after being deposed again and again, and once more at Ariminum itself, ventured to write that it ought not to be said that the Son had **Essence** (οὐσίαν) or **Subsistence** (ὑπόστασιν). This enables us to see, brethren, that they at Nicaea breathe the spirit of Scripture, in that God says in Exodus (3:14), ‘I am that I am,’ and through Jeremiah, ‘Who is in His substance and has seen His word;’ and just below, ‘if they had stood in My subsistence and heard My words:’ now **subsistence** (ὑπόστασις) is **essence** (οὐσία), and means nothing else but very being, which Jeremiah calls existence, in the words, ‘and they heard not the voice of existence.’ For **subsistence** (ὑπόστασις), and **essence** (οὐσία), is **existence** (ὑπαρξίς): for it is, or in other words exists.⁶⁰

The introduction of the term ‘existence’ (ὑπαρξίς) as the definition of both ‘essence’ (οὐσία) and subsistence (ὑπόστασις) toward the latter part of the quotation seems to substantiate a Sabellian reading. But this is not the case, inasmuch as Athanasius was simply reiterating the Nicene doctrine that the ‘Son was of the essence of the Father,’ which excludes the Arian assertion that the Son is of a different essence from the Father, the same Arian position that was being resurrected in the mentioned western synod of Arminium (Rimini) in 359. When Athanasius then spoke of ‘existence’ (ὑπαρξίς) as the common sense for ‘essence’ (οὐσία) and ‘subsistence’ (ὑπόστασις), he was not thinking of ‘concrete individual,’ which would rather result in a Sabellian reading of his statement, but

⁶⁰ Athanasius, *Ad Afros*, 4 (NPNF 4, 490; PG XXVI, 1053). Emphases are mine.

of ‘essence’ subsisting in a ‘concrete individual’—inasmuch as no essence is not concretized in an existing individual, otherwise it would not be a real essence, but a logical postulate with no objective reference—for his intention was to ratify the Nicene doctrine on the full divinity of the Son is consistent with the Scriptural declarations, as found, particularly in the books of Exodus and the Prophet of Jeremiah.

The confusion of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*, which was the root of the charge of Sabellian reading to the Nicene *homoousios* was never addressed by Athanasius in his works. This is a limitation in Athanasius. The Nicene defenders who came after him, specifically the Cappadocian Fathers, recognized this handicap and set out to distinguish these two concepts, assigning *ousia* to what is one in God and *hypostasis* to what is plural in God, thereby picking up where Athanasius had left off.⁶¹ With the introduction of the distinction by the Cappadocians, the opposition to the Nicene Creed, especially its description of the Son as *homoousios* to the Father, gradually dissipated. Consequently, in the years and decades that followed, the authority of the Council of Nicaea in 325 became unchallenged, and its confession of faith became normative doctrine for the entire Church.

Conclusion

It was once believed that the promulgation of the formula *homoousios* at the Council of Nicaea in 325 had put an end to the Arian controversy. We have seen throughout our work that this was not true. There were reservations about employing the term *homoousios* because of its non-scriptural root and its complicated history of usage. Specifically, the interchangeable character of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* did not favor the cause of *homoousios* after its adoption at the Council of Nicaea. It set the stage for the Arians to perceive the Nicene teaching as a form of Sabellianism. The place of Marcellus of Ancyra, who championed a strict *mihypostatic tradition*, within the Nicene alliance aggravated the accusation. In the decades following the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius came to realize that only a theology based on *homoousios* could exclude the Arian doctrine, which was then reasserting itself with the help of the imperial authority. He reclaimed the significance of *homoousios* to argue for the divinity of the Son and His oneness of essence with the Father, while also offering several clarifications. However, like the drafters of the Nicene Creed, Athanasius did not make the necessary distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, which could have shielded his elaboration of the Nicene teaching from Sabellian misunderstanding. For this

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion, see Lienhard, “*Ousia and Hypostasis*,” 99-121.

reason, despite Athanasius' endeavor to reclaim the orthodoxy of *homoousios*, he could not eradicate the accusation that it proclaims a Sabellian view of God.^{PS}

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En el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo
Amen. En el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo
Amen. En el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo
Amen.

¶ La salve Regina es una

Ellue te Dios Reyna yma
dee de misericordia. Vida
dulçura y esperança nra. Dios
te salue a ti llamamos los desle
rrados hijos de Eva. El ti suspi
ramos gimiendo y llorando en
aquelte valle de lagrimas. Ea
pues abogada nuestra, buelue
a nos otros con tus misericor
diosos ojos. y despues de a. 3.