

## Did Arius Have More Scriptural Support than His Opponents?

Before commencing an analysis of this question, it will be helpful to set out a brief history of Arius and a summary of his beliefs (usually known as “Arianism”).

With the end of state persecution of the Christian Church (“the Church”), the entire Roman Empire was open to Christian teaching. However, a negative aspect of this was that it also facilitated the promulgation of heretical teaching, particularly if such teachers claimed that their teaching came from a correct interpretation of scripture. Arius (died 336 A.D.), a Libyan by descent, came from a long heretical tradition. He was trained in the theological school of Lucan, himself a disciple of Paul of Samosota who was excommunicated in 268 A.D. at the synod of Antioch for his views on the relationship between Christ and the Father. Lucan continued Paul’s teaching until his martyrdom in 311/12 A.D.

Arius’s teaching was not totally aligned with that of Paul and Lucan, but he had a similar limited view of the monotheistic nature of God. This led him to completely subordinate Christ to the Father and to contend that Christ was a created being who had not, therefore, always existed and was not of one essence, nature or substance with God. Thus in the Arian view Jesus was a demiurge, a kind of lesser God, who had been created out of nothing by God the Father to act as his agent or intermediary for the creation of and interaction with the material world and everything in it. As Arius would have put it, Jesus is “full God”, but not “very God”.

As we shall see later this view leads to immediate polytheistic difficulties rather than franking the monotheism it is supposed to support.

Some scholars contend that the Arian view of Christ as a created being arose out of a misinterpretation of the Greek “Logos” in John 1:1 as “wisdom” and the correlation of this with the “wisdom” of Proverbs 8 where it is stated that wisdom was God’s first creation<sup>1</sup>. However, I contend that Arianism has its fundamental roots in pagan philosophies, particularly Neoplatanism, and that it is merely another way of expressing the Gnostic view that God is unable to sully himself with mere matter. Thus the Arians accept the incarnation of Christ, but reconcile that with the anti-material philosophical position by denying his complete Godhood. Certainly, this view goes some way towards explaining the apparent blindness of the Arians towards the polytheistic difficulties implied by their doctrine, which we have already noted.

Let us now turn to the question of scriptural support for Arianism.

The Arians made a number of statements which they claimed indicated the truth of their position and which are to some extent supported by a number of texts from scripture. Firstly, they said that Christ was subordinate to God<sup>2</sup> because he was merely a servant who was exalted because of his obedience<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, they argued that God was unchanging and unchangeable whereas Christ was mutable<sup>4</sup>. Thirdly, they argued that the text of John 17:3<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 8:22

<sup>2</sup> John 14:28, 1 Corinthians 11:3, Colossians 1:15, Revelation 3:14, Matthew 3:17, John 8:42, John 20:17, 1 Corinthians 15:28

<sup>3</sup> Supported by numerous scriptures e.g. Psalms 45:7, John 17:22, Acts 2:36 and. Philippians 2:5-11.

<sup>4</sup> Again supported by numerous scriptures e.g. Luke 2:52, John 12:27 and Hebrews 5:8

speaks of Christ as distinct from “the only true God”. Finally, they argued that both John 17:11 and John 17:22 paralleled the unity of the Father and the Son with the unity of human believers “... so that they may be one as we are one.” strongly indicating that the unity of Father and Son was far short of being of the same essence or substance.

Thus, the Arians certainly sought to support their position with numerous scriptures, but not, in my view, with convincing effect. The argument is essentially one of priority. Do the Arian texts determine the status of Christ, or does Christ’s status condition the interpretation of these scriptures. I shall argue the latter.

Having stated that, I must concede that I do not believe that there is any direct scriptural refutation of the Arian doctrine. However, I do believe that it is possible to advance a number of propositions, each of which has strong scriptural support, and which when taken together effectively refute Arianism.

These propositions are (i) there is only one God, (ii) we should only worship God; no-one and nothing else, (iii) Jesus is to be worshipped, (iv) Jesus himself stated that he was God, and was explicitly referred to as God (v) Jesus had a number of divine attributes.

Our first proposition has clear and unqualified support from both the Old and New Testaments. Texts such as Deuteronomy 6:4 – “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” – and many other Old Testament texts<sup>6</sup> cannot be interpreted in any other way. In the New Testament, the matter is re-affirmed by numerous verses<sup>7</sup>. Thus I contend that scripture affirms this proposition in such a clear and unqualified manner that it must be beyond doubt for any Christian.

Again, our second proposition has clear and unqualified scriptural support, also from both the Old and New Testaments. Deuteronomy 6:13 states “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only ...” and other Old Testament texts convey the same message<sup>8</sup>. This message is also repeated in the New Testament, for example in Matthew 4:10 where Jesus himself says “.. For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” and many other texts<sup>9</sup>.

The third proposition is also supported by a number of scriptural sources<sup>10</sup>. Jesus accepted worship from the disciples,<sup>11</sup> a blind man he healed,<sup>12</sup> upon his entry into Jerusalem<sup>13</sup> and from John<sup>14</sup>. He did not reprove those who honoured him<sup>15</sup>. Indeed the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is an essential element of salvation<sup>16</sup>. Paul looks forward to a time when heaven and earth will worship Christ<sup>17</sup>. God commanded the angels to worship the Lamb<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> For example, Isaiah 44:6, Isaiah 45:5-7, Isaiah 46:9

<sup>7</sup> For example, John 17:3, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, 1 Timothy 2:5

<sup>8</sup> For example, Deuteronomy 5:7-9, Deuteronomy 8:19, Deuteronomy 10:20, Deuteronomy 13:6-8, Deuteronomy 30:17-18, Exodus 23:24, Exodus 34:14, 2 Kings 17:35-38

<sup>9</sup> For example, Luke 4:8, Acts 10:25-26

<sup>10</sup> Such as, Matthew 2:11, Hebrews 13:21, 2 Peter 3:18, Revelation 5:13

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 14:33

<sup>12</sup> John 9:38

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 21:16

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 1:17

<sup>15</sup> John 5:23

<sup>16</sup> Romans 10:9-10, Philippians 2:11

<sup>17</sup> Philippians 2:10-11

and the book of Revelation foretells a time when “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” will sing “to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever”<sup>19</sup>.

According to scriptural record, Jesus affirmed the fourth proposition on a number of occasions<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, John records that he specifically stated that “I and the Father are one”<sup>21</sup>. He was also called “God” on a number of recorded occasions in the New Testament<sup>22</sup>, John’s Gospel is particularly clear on this point.

As regards the fifth proposition, Jesus is said to have the following attributes, all of which are normally associated with God – he is said to be eternal<sup>23</sup>, omnipresent<sup>24</sup>, omniscient<sup>25</sup>, omnipotent<sup>26</sup> and immutable<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, Jesus was said to have the divine offices of creator<sup>28</sup> and sustainer<sup>29</sup>; to have the divine prerogatives of forgiveness of sin<sup>30</sup>, raising the dead<sup>31</sup> and executing judgement<sup>32</sup>.

Thus we have established strong scriptural support, encompassing a great many scriptural references and texts, for all the five propositions set out above. Accepting their truth as established, then, we see that on the one hand Jesus Christ is God and can receive worship, but that on the other hand there is only one God who alone is to be worshipped. These apparently conflicting statements can only be reconciled if we accept that Jesus IS God BUT that he is also of one being and substance with God the Father.

If we were to accept the Arian position that Jesus is a lesser created being who is some lesser kind of God we would be forced into a polytheistic position where we have two Gods both of whom are to be worshipped, which is inconsistent with some of the clearest and strongest statements in scripture. Therefore, I contend that Arian beliefs are inconsistent with scripture. The interpretation of the Arian “proof” texts must be conditioned by what we have deduced of the nature of Jesus from the whole body of scripture, not the other way around. Christ’s mutability must be found in the mystery of the incarnation, his temporal humanity. His exaltation must be seen as an eternal exaltation.

However, this is not to fall into the Sabellian heresy of modalism. God the Father and Jesus Christ are distinct personalities, which interact in a complex and mysterious way within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christ is at the same time an obedient son and eternal God, Christ is distinct from the Father, but he is not separate from him<sup>33</sup>. Although the Son is of one substance with the Father, he often subordinates himself to the Father, for example in

---

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 1:6

<sup>19</sup> Revelation 5:13

<sup>20</sup> For example, John 8:12-59, John 10:24-42, John 12:44-50

<sup>21</sup> John 10:30

<sup>22</sup> For example, Hebrews 1:8, John 1:1-2, 18, Titus 2:13, 2 Peter 1:1

<sup>23</sup> In John 1:1, John 8:58, John 17:5, Colossians 1:17

<sup>24</sup> In Matthew 28:20, Ephesians 1:23

<sup>25</sup> In John 16:30, John 21:17

<sup>26</sup> In John 5:19

<sup>27</sup> In Hebrews 1:12, Hebrews 13:8

<sup>28</sup> In John 1:3, Colossians 1:16

<sup>29</sup> In Colossians 1:17

<sup>30</sup> In Matthew 9:2, Luke 7:47

<sup>31</sup> In John 5:25, John 11:25

<sup>32</sup> In John 5:22

<sup>33</sup> John 17:3,11

the garden at Gethsemane<sup>34</sup> and indeed in many other instances<sup>35</sup>. God is infinite and not able to be fully comprehended by the human mind, so the Trinity will always remain at least partially a mystery to us, although philosophical attempts have been made to rationalise it by such as Hank Schaeffer who argues that a state of being must always be relational and communicative and that the Trinity is meeting this need. It is true that the term “Trinity” does not appear in scripture, but there are several passages which explicitly support Trinitarian ideas<sup>36</sup>.

Arianism did not die in the fourth century. Today there are still groups and cults that deny that Jesus Christ was the Incarnate, Unique, and Eternal Son of God. They would attribute to him some lesser status, maybe a lesser God or similar to God but not very God. These modern Arians, like their forbears, quote scripture (selectively) but their strength is not in direct Bible study, but in pagan philosophical reflection. In varying degrees, modern liberals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and New England Unitarians are Arianistic.

We still need to remember our strong scriptural arguments against Arianism and take the trouble to explain carefully our wonderful (but difficult and ultimately mysterious) Trinitarian doctrine to Christians and would be Christians today, in order that they may keep to the straight highroad of the orthodox Christian faith.

Furthermore, we need to remember (and learn from) the fact that victory against Arianism was only won after a long hard struggle, championed by Athanasius and other tireless workers for the Christian faith. Today we face other, but equally dangerous, deviations from orthodox Christian belief both inside and outside the church. We are beset by apathy for spiritual issues in Europe; by pagan, relativistic, postmodernistic philosophies; by a resurgence of Islam and many other dangerous issues. What we need to learn is that we shall only maintain the unity of the orthodox Christian faith if there are those in influential positions who are prepared to stand up and be counted, if there are those who are prepared to carefully marshal, expound and explain the scriptural position on such issues and lastly if we Christians are prepared to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The church should live by the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”<sup>37</sup>. I pray that it will be so.

---

<sup>34</sup> Matthew 26:39

<sup>35</sup> For example John 8:29, 1 Corinthians 15:28

<sup>36</sup> For example Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14

<sup>37</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17