

: <https://revelationbyjesuschrist.com/homoousion/>

## Introduction

### Authors Quoted

Due to additional ancient documents that have become available and substantial research progress, the scholarly view of the fourth-century Arian Controversy has changed significantly over the last century. In fact, R.P.C Hanson described the traditional account of the Arian Controversy as a [complete travesty](#).

**Documents discovered** - "In the first few decades of the present (20th) century ... seminally important work was ... done in the sorting-out of the chronology of the controversy, and in the isolation of a hard core of reliable primary documents" (Williams, p. 11-12).

**Research** - "The four decades since 1960 have produced much revisionary scholarship on the Trinitarian and Christological disputes of the fourth century" (Ayres, p. 11).

This article relies largely on books by scholars of the last 50 years and quotes extensively from them. But, to simplify this article, almost all quotes are hidden in 'Show More' blocks. Nevertheless, since the scholarly view of the Controversy has changed so much, and since this is a highly controversial subject, these quotes are a crucial part of this article. This article relies mainly on the recent books by R.P.C. Hanson, Rowan Williams, and Lewis Ayres.

#### [Hanson, Bishop RPC](#)

The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God -  
The Arian Controversy 318-381, 1988

#### [Williams, Archbishop Rowan](#)

Arius: Heresy and Tradition, 2002/1987

#### [Ayres, Lewis](#)

Nicaea and its legacy, 2004

Ayres is a Professor of Catholic and Historical Theology

**Beatrice** = [An article by Pier Franco Beatrice](#); Professor of Early Christian Literature at the University of Padua, Italy  
The word "homoousios" from Hellenism to Christianity.)[/expander\_maker]

## Nicene Creed

[The Nicene Creed](#), as formulated at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, is accepted as official doctrine by most denominations. It states that the Son is homoousios with the Father, meaning 'of the same substance'.

The Creed states that the Son was begotten from the substance (ousia) of the Father and that He is (therefore) of the same substance. Homoousios consists of two parts; homós = same; ousia = substance. See - [The Free Dictionary](#) or [GotQuestions](#). Via the Latin, homoousios is sometimes translated as 'consubstantial'.

## Homoousios - Possible Meanings

Homoousios (same substance) has two possible meanings because the word "same" has two possible meanings. For example, when I say that John and I drive 'the same car', it can mean that we drive one and the same car or two different cars of the same type. Similarly:

Homoousios (same substance) can mean that the Son is a distinct Being with the same type of substance as the Father, just like a human father and son have the same type of substance. This is called qualitative or generic sameness.

"A standard connotation of the term homoousios was membership in a class, a generic similarity between things that were, in some sense, co-ordinate [equal in rank or importance]. The term was used loosely to point to markers of commonality and did not at all exclude relationships between realities that were hierarchically distinct in other ways" (Ayres, p. 94-95).

Or it can mean that the Father and Son are a single substance (one Being). This is called numerical sameness because there is only one.

“As it stands, the homoousios can be read either as an affirmation of the divine unity or as an affirmation of the equal deity” (Hanson, p. 170-1).

Since monoousios specifically means 'one substance', homoousios primarily has a qualitative meaning.

“According to an anonymous Expositio fidei, in the fourth century the Sabellians made use of the more specific term monoousios, no longer of homoousios, the word which in the meanwhile had become the flag of the Nicene party.” (Ps.-Athanasius, Exp. fid. 2 - PG 25, 204 A.

For a further discussion of the different meanings of “same,” see [Right Reason](#) or [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

Arius rejected both these possible meanings of the term because, for him, the Son's substance is different from the Father's.

“No doubt he (Arius) believed that the Father and the Son were of unlike substance, but he did not say so directly” (Hanson, p. 187).

It is often said that the traditional Trinity doctrine teaches that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three Persons. However, leading scholars confirm that the term "Persons" is misleading because, in the Trinity doctrine, the distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit is invisible to humans and because the Father, Son, and Spirit share a single mind and will. Since the essence of the Trinity doctrine is that the Father, Son, and Spirit are a single Being, it interprets homoousios as 'one substance'.

**The word "Person" is misleading.**

“The champions of the Nicene faith ... developed a doctrine of God as a Trinity, as one substance or ousia who existed as three hypostases, three distinct realities or entities (I refrain from using the **misleading** word 'Person'), three ways of being or modes of existing as God” ([Hanson Lecture](#)).

“By the conventions of the late fourth century, first formulated in Greek by the 'Cappadocian Fathers', these three constituent members

of what God is came to be referred to as hypostases ('concrete individuals') or, more **misleadingly** for us moderns, as *prosōpa* ('persons')" (Anatolios, xiii).

### **Invisible to humans**

"By the last quarter of the fourth century, halting Christian attempts ... had led ... to what later generations generally think of as 'the doctrine of the Holy Trinity': the formulated idea that the God ... is Father and Son and Holy Spirit, as one reality or substance, operating OUTWARD in creation always as a unity, yet always INTERNALLY DIFFERENTIATED by the relationships of origin that Father and Son and Holy Spirit have with one another" (Anatolios, xiii).

### **Single Mind**

See the article on [The Trinity](#) for quotes showing that the three 'Persons' only have one mind and will. As Hanson stated above, it is more appropriate to talk of the 'Persons' as "three ways of being or modes of existing as God." ([Hanson Lecture](#))

### **One Substance**

Many dictionaries and definitions, following the Trinity doctrine, explain *homoousios* as 'one substance'.

In the traditional account of the Arian Controversy, the Trinity doctrine has existed from the beginning of that controversy and *homoousios* in the Nicene Council also meant 'one substance'. However, the Trinity doctrine did not exist at the beginning but evolved over the fourth century. ([See Article](#)) On the contrary, subordination was orthodox when the Controversy began. ([See Article](#))

Consequently, this article analyses what *homoousios* meant (1) before, (2) during, and (3) after Nicaea. It will show that scholars today conclude that *homoousios* at Nicaea did not mean 'one substance'. It had a much looser, more flexible, and less specific meaning.

### **Not One Substance:**

"We can therefore be pretty sure that *homoousios* was not intended to express the numerical identity of the Father and the Son" (Hanson, p. 202).

"While a large number of scholars have contended that the council used the term in this latter (numerical) sense, there are good grounds for questioning such a conclusion." [Millard J. Erickson](#), "God in Three Persons - Nicene Creed" p82-85

### **Flexible Meaning:**

"Recent studies on the word *homoousios* have tended to show, not that it can be reduced to two meanings, one identifying two *ousiai* as one, and the other conveying a 'generic' sense of 'God-stuff' (Loofs), but that it was of a much looser, more flexible, indeed less specific and therefore less controversial significance" (Hanson, p. 170).

"Eusebius' discussion nicely demonstrates the extent to which the promulgation of *homoousios* involved a conscious lack of positive definition of the term" (Ayres, p. 91).

"It was intended to have a looser, more ambiguous sense than has in the past history of scholarship been attached to it." (Hanson, p. 202)

"Studor ... notes that the term *homoousios* is not used with precision at Nicaea and that later arguments for *homoousios* always involve *constructing* accounts of its meaning." (Ayres, p. 238)

Hanson agrees with Loofs' statement that "the meaning of *homoousios* was so fluid that we cannot determine its meaning from its appearance in N alone." (Hanson, p. 192)

"Our investigation of the use of *homoousios* before it was inserted in N, then, should have suggested strongly that it would be unwise to give the word a strictly defined or single meaning." (Hanson, p. 196).

## **The Term Arian**

As is discussed [here](#), the term 'Arian' is a complete misnomer because the Arius did not develop a new heresy, had only a few real followers, and did not leave behind a school of disciples. Scholars agree that the term 'Eusebians' would be more appropriate to describe the anti-Nicenes. Nevertheless, this article sometimes still uses the term 'Arian' for the anti-Nicenes because that is the term most people know.

## **Homoousios Before Nicaea**

**Greek philosophy and Egyptian paganism** used the term homoousios, not to say that two things are really one thing, but to compare distinct things. In other words, in these systems, it did not mean 'one substance.

Aristotle was known for using the term οὐσία (ousia) to describe his philosophical concept of [Primary Substances](#). ([Beatrice](#))

"In the theological language of Egyptian paganism the word homoousios meant that the Nous-Father and the Logos-Son, who are two distinct beings, share the same perfection of the divine nature."  
([Beatrice](#))

As shown below, at Nicaea, Emperor Constantine insisted on the term. Beatrice suggests that Emperor Constantine had a previous connection with Egyptian paganism and proposed the term at Nicaea partly because he was familiar with it from Egyptian paganism. ([See Article](#)).

**The Bible** never refers to God's substance and never says that the Son is homoousios with the Father.

The term homoousios "is not to be found in the Holy Scripture" ([P.F. Beatrice](#)). "Nobody could pretend that it was Scriptural" (Hanson, p. 167).

**The second-century Gnostics** used the term, not to say that two beings are one being or even to say two beings are equal, but to describe distinct beings as "belonging to the same order of being." ([Beatrice](#)) Specifically, they used homoousios to say that lower deities are of 'a similar kind' as the highest deity from whom they emanated. However, the word homoousios in the Nicene Creed is not due to a Gnostic influence because "by the fourth century the Gnostic threat to the Christian faith was over" (Hanson, p. 856).

"The term was adopted in the second century by Gnostics, probably to indicate 'same ontological status' or 'of a similar kind'." (Ayres, p. 93)  
It meant, "belonging to the same order of being." (Hanson, p. 191)  
They did not use the word to mean "identity, nor even equality."  
(Hanson, p. 191)

"Hippolytus quotes Gnostics as using the word *homoousios*, none of them suggesting identity, nor even equality." (Hanson, p. 191)

**Tertullian** (155-220), writing in Latin, nowhere used a term like the Greek *homoousios*. However, he did use the term "substance," and believed that God has a body (is a substance) and that the Son is part of God's substance. In other words, he did believe that Father and Son are 'one substance' and a single hypostasis; a single "individual existence." This would mean that the Father and Son are *homoousios* (of the same substance).

Tertullian, "writing in Latin, nowhere uses any term corresponding to (the Greek term) *homoousios*." (Hanson, p. 190)

"Tertullian ... had already used the Latin word *substantia* (substance) of God ... For him God ... had a body ... It was possible for Tertullian to think of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sharing this substance." (Hanson, p. 184)

He used "the expression ***unius substantiae***." "This has led some scholars to see Tertullian as an exponent of Nicene orthodoxy before Nicaea ... But this is a far from plausible theory." (Hanson, p. 184) "The word in Greek translation of Tertullian's *una substantia* would not be the word *homoousios* but ***mia hypostasis*** (one *hypostasis*)." (Hanson, p. 193)

(See [here](#) for more on Tertullian's theology)

**Sabellius** (fl. ca. 215) wrote in the early 3rd century. Sabellianism is named after him. He and his followers used *homoousios* to say that Father and Son are 'one substance' (a single hypostasis or Person). As is discussed [here](#), according to Von Mosheim, for Sabellius, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three parts of God. By the time of the Nicene Council, the church had formally rejected Sabellianism.

"If we can trust Basil here, it is interesting to observe that Sabellius had apparently used *homoousios* in a Trinitarian context early in the third century." (Hanson, p. 192)

"Sabellius used it (*homoousios*) ... in rejecting the distinction of hypostases" (Hanson, p. 192);

He used the term "in the sense of numerical sameness" ([Prof Ninan](#)).

"He considered the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as being three portions of the divine nature." ([Von Mosheim J.L. p220](#))

**Origen of Alexandria** (c. 185 – c. 253), the most influential theologian before Nicaea, did not use the term, despite claims to the contrary. He believed that the Son's substance is different from the Father's and was anxious to avoid the idea that the Father and the Son were of the same material.

"Origen may have rejected the term." (Ayres, p. 92)

"Origen had rejected the term (substance) years before for fear that it attributed materiality to the divine." ([Steven Wedgworth](#))

"Origen certainly did not apply the word *homoousios* to the Son and did not teach that the Son is 'from the *ousia*' of the Father." (Hanson, p. 185)

"It is almost certainly right to conclude that Origen could not have spoken of the Son as *homoousios* with the Father." (Williams, p. 132)

"Origen never says that the Son comes from the substance of the Father." (Hanson, p. 67)

"There is one celebrated fragment ... where Origen appears to sanction the use of *homoousios*. ... But in its present form, this seems too closely bound to the specific interests of the post-Nicene period ... to come directly from Pamphilus, let alone Origen." (Williams, p. 132-3)

"One famous passage in which he seems to use the term *homoousios* ... may have been adulterated by later writers." (Ayres, p. 24)

"The likelihood of Origen having described the Son as consubstantial with the Father is very slim" (Hanson, p. 68). The word "consubstantial ... would have suggested to him that the Father and the Son were of the same material, an idea which he was anxious to avoid." (Hanson, p. 68)

Epiphanius stated that "Origen often declared 'that the only-begotten God is alien from the Father's Godhead and substance' (*ousia*)" (Hanson, p. 62)



In opposition to Tertullian and Sabellius, who taught that the Father and Son are a single hypostasis, Origen believed that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three hypostases; three distinct substances and Persons.

"He (Origen) taught that there were three *hypostases* (meaning three distinct substances) within the Godhead." (Hanson, p. 184)

"He (Origen) deploras those heretics who confuse the 'concepts' of Father and Son and make them out to be one in hypostasis, as if the distinction between Father and Son were only a matter of concepts and of names, a purely mental distinction." (Williams, Rowan, p132)[/expander\_maker]

**Dispute between Rome and Alexandria** - Around the year 260, there was a dispute between Rome and Alexandria about the term homoousios. It began when some Libyan Sabellians described the Son as homoousios with the Father.

**The Sabellians used the term homoousios.**

"Some local Sabellians" described the Son as homoousios with the Father (Ayres, p. 94).

Both "Dionysius of Rome and Eusebius of Caesarea label" "the accusers of Dionysius of Alexandria" as "Sabellians." ([Beatrice](#))

"Stead ... believes ... it was the people in Libya criticized by Dionysius of Alexandria who had introduced the term. Simonetti agrees that it was not Dionysius of Rome who first used the word *homoousios* in the interchange." (Hanson, p. 193)

The bishop of Alexandria (Dionysius), overseeing the church in Libya, believed in three hypostases. He rejected the term homoousios because Sabellius, who claimed that the Father and Son are a single hypostasis, used it.

**Alexandria rejected homoousios.**

"It seems ... likely that Dionysius of Alexandria, in a campaign against some local Sabellians, had denied the term." (Ayres, p. 94)

According to Basil of Caesarea, "Dionysius of Alexandria ... sometimes rejected homoousios because Sabellius used it ... in rejecting the distinction of hypostases." (Hanson, p. 192)

The Libyan Sabellians then appealed to the bishop of Rome (also called Dionysius). Like the Sabellians, Rome believed that Father and Son are a single hypostasis (Person) and described the Son as homoousios with the Father.

**Rome championed the term:**

"Dionysius of Rome ... (also) claimed that Father and Son were homoousios." (Ayres, p. 94)

He "at least took up or championed it (the term homoousios)." (Hanson, p. 193)

**Rome taught one hypostasis:**

"Dionysius of Rome ... found homoousios acceptable but could not tolerate a division of the Godhead into three hypostases." (Hanson, p. 192, quoting Loofs)

"Dionysius of Rome harshly condemned those who divided the Trinity into three distinct hypostases." ([Beatrice](#))

"Dionysius of Rome ... said that it is wrong to divide the divine monarchy 'into three sorts of ... separated hypostases and three Godheads'; people who hold this in effect produce three gods." (Hanson, p. 185)

"His doctrine could only with difficulty be distinguished from that of Sabellius!" (Hanson, p. 193)

Rome then persuaded Alexandria to accept the term but the bishop of Alexandria accepted it reluctantly and as meaning two substances of the same type. In other words, for him, the term did not mean that Father and Son are one Being or even that they are equal. In his view, Father and Son were two distinct hypostases and the Son can still be subordinate to the Father.

**Alexandria accepted homoousios reluctantly:**

Dionysius of Alexandria was "persuaded by his namesake of Rome to accept (the term)" (Ayres, p. 94) but he "only adopted it with reluctance" (Hanson, p. 193).

**Alexandria accepted the term as meaning 'of a similar kind':**

He accepted it "in a general sense, meaning 'of similar nature, 'of similar kind'" (Hanson, p. 192), "belonging to the same class" (Ayres, p. 94), or "meaning that both had the same kind of nature." (Hanson, p. 193)

**This does not mean that they are equal:**

This "did not at all exclude relationships between realities that were hierarchically distinct in other ways." (Ayres, p. 94-95)

**Athanasius, disingenuously, claimed that both bishops approved of the word homoousios.**

He "tried tendentiously to demonstrate that they were all without distinction supporters of homoousios." ([Beatrice](#)).

Athanasius "says, somewhat disingenuously, that both the bishops of Rome and of Alexandria approved of the word homoousios." (Hanson, p. 192)

**Homoousos Condemned in 268** - More or less at the same time, Paul of Samosata used homoousios to describe Father and Son as a single hypostasis (Person). In 268, a council at Antioch condemned both Paul and the term homoousios as Sabellian. This fact caused the fourth-century pro-Nicenes considerable embarrassment.

**One hypostasis**

"In using the expression 'of one substance', Paul declared that Father and Son were a solitary unit;" "a primitive undifferentiated unity." (Williams, p. 159-160)

**Homoousios condemned**

"The council that deposed Paul of Samosata in 268 condemned the use of homoousios." (Ayres, p. 94; cf. Hanson, p. 193-194)

According to Hilary, "Our fathers (the 268-council) ... repudiated homoousion" because "the word to them spelt Sabellianism." (Hanson, p. 194)

"The condemnation of homoousios by this well-known council" caused "considerable embarrassment to those theologians who wanted to defend its inclusion in an official doctrinal statement in the next century." (Ayres, p. 94; cf. Hanson, p. 195)

"There was some suspicion of the word homoousios on the part of the orthodox because of its earlier association with Gnosticism and even Manicheism. Even its defenders experienced some embarrassment about this term because of its identification with the condemned ideas of Paul of Samosata." (Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, p82-85)

## Conclusions

**A Sabellian Term** - Before Nicaea, only Sabellians favored the term. They include Sabellius himself, the Libyan Sabellians, Dionysius of Rome, and Paul of Samosata. For them, it meant that Father and Son are a single Person. The only non-Sabellian who accepted the term was Dionysius of Alexandria, but he accepted it reluctantly and only as meaning that the Father and Son are two distinct substances (two hypostases) of the same type. Therefore, when the Arian Controversy began, the term homoousios was regarded as Sabellian.

"*Homoousios* before it was placed in N must have been regarded as a term which carried with it heretical, or at least unsound, overtones to theologians in the Eastern church." (Hanson, p. 195)

"The word homoousios, at its first appearance in the middle of the third century, was therefore clearly connected with the theology of a Sabellian or monarchian tendency." ([P.F. Beatrice](#))

"The word homoousios had not had ... a very happy history. It was probably rejected by the Council of Antioch, and was suspected of being open to a Sabellian meaning. It was accepted by the heretic Paul of Samosata and this rendered it very offensive to many in the Asiatic Churches." ([Philip Schaff](#))

**Arius was conservative.** In the traditional account of the Arian Controversy, Arius was a heretic. However, Archbishop Rowan Williams, who recently published a book on Arius, described him as an Alexandrian conservative. It follows that Arius' opponent Alexander was not conservative. The analysis above shows that, Arius followed the traditional Alexandrian teaching, which was consistent with the views of the Eastern Church, that the Son is a distinct Person. In contrast, Alexander followed Rome in teaching that the Father and Son are a single Person. See [here](#) for a discussion of Alexander's theology.

"Arius was a committed theological conservative; more specifically, a conservative Alexandrian." (RW, 175)

## **Homoousios at Nicaea**

### **A Surprising Innovation**

The term homoousios was a surprising innovation in the Nicene Creed. It is not found in the Holy Scripture, was borrowed from pagan philosophy, did not appear in any previous creed, was not part of the standard Christian language of the day, and was already condemned in 268 at a Council in Antioch as associated with Sabellianism (Hanson, p. 198). Antioch was the headquarters of the entire church at the time.

#### **Not found in the Holy Scriptures.**

The term homoousios "is not to be found in the Holy Scripture" ([P.F. Beatrice](#)).

"Nobody could pretend that it was Scriptural" (Hanson, p. 167).

#### **Borrowed from pagan philosophy.**

"The pro-Nicenes are at their worst, their most grotesque, when they try to show that the new terms borrowed from the pagan philosophy of the day were really to be found in Scripture." (Hanson, p. 846)

#### **Not Traditional Language**

"To say that the Son was 'of the substance' of the Father, and that he was 'consubstantial' with him were certainly startling innovations. Nothing comparable to this had been said in any creed or profession of faith before." (Hanson, p. 166-7)

Rowan Williams described it as “the radical words of Nicaea” (Williams, p. 236) and “conceptual innovation” (Williams, p. 234-5).

Anti-Nicenes objected that these words are “untraditional.” (Williams, p. 234-5)

“We can detect no Greek-speaking writer before Nicaea who unreservedly supports *homoousion* as applied to the Son.” (Hanson, p. 169)

Furthermore, 'same substance' implies that God has a body, which nobody was willing to grant.

“For Christian writers such notions seemed irredeemably materialist, and made it easy for them to suppose that the mere use of *homoousios* implies a certain materiality.” (Ayres, p. 93)

“This word (substance) was thought, as it was always thought by Arians, to introduce corporeal notions into the Godhead.” (Hanson, p. 346)

The Eusebians argued that we should not understand the terms “Father,” “Son,” and “begotten” in a literal, material sense, as if the Son was begotten like humans are by breaking off a part of the parent.

“Williams points out that the objection based on the Manichean tendency of the word assumed that it implied that the Son was a component or extension of God, thus **representing God as composite, perhaps as material**, and suggesting that there is a kind of common 'God-stuff' shared by Father and Son.” (Hanson, p. 197)

For such reasons, the term *homoousios* seemed especially objectionable to most delegates at Nicaea, the vast majority of whom were from the East. Given these strong objections, some powerful force must have caused its inclusion in the Creed.

#### **Most were from the East:**

“Around 250–300 attended, drawn almost entirely from the eastern half of the empire.” (Ayres, p. 19)

#### **The East opposed *homoousios*:**

The term "seemed especially objectionable to many bishops and theologians of the East." [Bernard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, 1966, p51-53]

"The Origenists had considerable reservation about homoousios and the other phrases containing the term ousios (substance)." ([Erickson](#))

"A majority opposed the Nicene creed. The majority who opposed the creed were not aligned with Arius!" ([Bible.ca](#))

Eusebius accepted homoousion with "obvious reluctance." (Hanson, p. 165)

Not even Alexander favoured the term. For example, a pro-Alexander meeting in Antioch a few months before the Nicene Council formulated a draft creed that "makes no use of the *ousia* language that we see in Nicaea's creed." (Ayres, p. 51) "The word homoousios is not to be found in the extant writings of Alexander of Alexandria." ([Beatrice](#))

### **The Emperor enforced the term.**

The powerful force that ensured the inclusion of the term was the emperor. As astounding as it might sound to people who grew up in a culture of separation of Church and State, in the Christian Roman Empire, the emperors were the final arbiters in doctrinal disputes.

"The history of the period shows time and time again that ... the general council was the very invention and creation of the Emperor. General councils ... were the children of imperial policy and the Emperor was expected to dominate and control them." (Hanson, p. 855)

"If we ask the question, what was considered to constitute the ultimate authority in doctrine during the period reviewed in these pages, there can be only one answer. The will of the Emperor was the final authority." (Hanson, p. 849)

Similarly, the Nicene Council, like all fourth-century general councils, was called and dominated by the emperor. It was the Emperor's meeting. It was not Constantine's goal to find 'the truth' but simply to prevent this dispute from causing division in his empire.

The emperor not only proposed but used his influence to enforce the inclusion of the term.

**He proposed the term:**

The Emperor accepted Eusebius' creed "and he advised all present to agree to it ... with the insertion of the single word 'consubstantial.'" ([Beatrice](#)) (See also - [Eusebius' letter](#).)

"The decisive catchword of the Nicene confession, namely, homoousios, comes from ... the emperor himself." (Bernard Lohse, in 'A Short History of Christian Doctrine', 1966, p51-53)

"Constantine did put forth the Nicene creed term 'homoousios'." "The emperor favored the inclusion of the word homoousios." (Millard J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, p82-85)

**He enforced the term.**

Constantine "pressed for its inclusion." (Hanson, p. 211)

"The Origenists had considerable reservation about homoousios and the other phrases containing the term ousios (substance), but the emperor exerted considerable influence. Consequently, the statement was approved." ([Erickson](#)) [Millard J. Erickson, God in Three Persons, p82-85]

"Constantine took part in the Council of Nicaea and ensured that it reached the kind of conclusion which he thought best." (Hanson, p. 850)

"The emperor "himself proposed and insisted on the word homoousios." ([Erickson](#), Millard J, God in Three Persons, p82-85)

"'Homoousios' and 'from the essence of the Father' were added to the creed by Constantine himself, bearing witness to the extent of his influence at the council." [Jörg Ulrich. Nicaea and the West. *Vigiliae Christianae* 51, no. 1 (1997): 10-24. 15.]

"The concept put into the creed by Constantine himself, the homoousios. " (Bernard Lohse, A Short History of Christian Doctrine, 1966, p51-53)



Constantine "himself ... insisted upon the word homoousia being included in the creed." (Jörg Ulrich. "Nicaea and the West." *Vigiliae Christianae* 51, no. 1 (1997) p 15.)

Emperor Constantine also dared to explain the word to that assembly of the church's leaders. The Creed says that the Son is of the same substance (homoousios) as the Father because He is begotten from the Father's substance. As stated, the Eusebians objected that this is unbiblical and untraditional language and sounds as if the Son was begotten like humans through a material, bodily process, which nobody was willing to grant.

### **Homoousios explains 'begotten from substance'**

"All the theologians ... probably saw homoousios as expanding on and secondary to the phrase 'from the ousia of the Father'." (Ayres, p. 90-91)

### **It sounds materialistic.**

"The phrase 'from the *ousia* of the Father' also had a complex history of use before Nicaea, much of which revolved around its seemingly **materialistic** or inappropriately genetic implications. Origen treats this phrase as implying something like a human birth and thus a materialistic understanding of divine being. ... Eusebius of Caesarea, also writing before Nicaea, demonstrates similar worries that the phrase implies a materialistic diminution of the Father's being in the generation of the Son." (Ayres, p. 97)

To counter such objections and to enable the Eusebians (the Arians) to accept these new terms, he insisted that these terms must be understood without material connotation. This shows his dominant role in the council.

### **The emperor explained:**

Constantine did his best "to placate Eusebians." (Ayres, p. 91)

Eusebius of Caesarea "gives the impression throughout this letter that Constantine took the initiative in all the matters that the letter deals with, apparently regarding himself as qualified to deal with any

discussion about the profound questions raised by the Christian doctrine of God." (Hanson, p. 160)

**Not material:**

"It seems ... that Constantine interceded on behalf of those unhappy with homoousios, insisting on the importance of understanding the term without material connotation." (Ayres, p. 96)

"Eusebius ... writes that Constantine himself spoke, endorsing the term *homoousios*, but insisting that it did not imply any material division in God." (Ayres, p. 90-91)

Eusebius "alleges that the Emperor himself qualified the addition of 'consubstantial' by saying that it must not be understood "in the sense of any corporeal experiences." It also does not mean that the Son "exists as a result of division or any subtraction from the Father." (Hanson, p. 165)

"Eusebius directly ascribes to Constantine only an emphasis on understanding homoousios without reference to material division or the sorts of change associated with corporeal existence." (Ayres, p. 96)

"Eusebius also reports that he himself secured clarity that the phrase 'from the essence of the Father' did not mean 'is part of the Father's substance'." (Ayres, p. 90-91)

Constantine explained that these phrases merely mean that the Son is not out of any other substance, but out of the Father alone.

"This term, however, upon which Constantine insisted, was given a special turn of meaning here. What was being affirmed and insisted upon was that the Son is different, utterly different, from any of the created beings. He is not out of any other substance, but **out of the Father.**" [Erickson, Millard J, God in Three Persons, p82-85]

"Eusebius tells us that once he had been assured that this phrase (from the ousia of the Father) served only to indicate that **the Son was truly from the Father** he could agree even to homoousios." (Ayres, p. 96)

With that non-literal explanation of the contentious terms, all delegates could agree. But the main point is that these untraditional terms were

included in the Creed due to the emperor's domination of the council. For more detail, see the discussion of [Eusebius' letter](#).

## **Why Constantine insisted on homoousios**

But why did Constantine insist on homoousios? [Another article](#) argues that Constantine found the term agreeable because he was familiar with it through his contact with Egyptian paganism. But even if that is true, he would not have proposed the term without some support from the delegates. This section shows that he insisted on this term because he had taken Alexander's part in his dispute with Arius and because Alexander allied with the Sabellians, who preferred the term.

Firstly, like the Sabellians, Alexander believed that the Father and Son are a single Person (one hypostasis) ([See here](#))

"The fragments of Eustathius that survive present a doctrine that is close to Marcellus, and to Alexander and Athanasius. Eustathius insists there is only one *hypostasis*." (Ayres, p. 69)

Alexander described the Son as "*idios* to (a property or quality of) the Father (which) is a Sabellian statement." (Hanson, p. 92.)

But Alexander's one-hypostasis theology was in the minority because the vast majority of the delegates were from the East and, following Origen, believed in three hypostases, meaning the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct Beings. ([See here](#).)

### **Most delegates were from the East.**

"Around 250–300 attended, drawn almost entirely from the eastern half of the empire." (Ayres, p. 19)

"The Westerners at the Council (of Nicaea) represented a tiny minority." (Hanson, p. 170)

### **They believed that the Son is a distinct Person (hypostasis).**

"The great majority of the Eastern clergy (at Nicaea) were ultimately disciples of Origen." (Frend, WHC: The Rise of Christianity) As stated above, Origen believed in three hypostases.

For example, [the Dedication Creed](#) declared a belief in three hypostases.

Since he was opposed by this 'three hypostases' majority, and since his theology was similar to the Sabellians, Alexander joined forces with the Sabellians, led by Eustathius and Marcellus.

### **Eustathius and Marcellus were Sabellians**

Eustathius attended the Nicene Council (Hanson, p. 208) but was deposed soon after Nicaea ("in 330 or 331") (Hanson, p. 210) "primarily for the heresy of Sabellianism" (Hanson, p. 211).

"Marcellus of Ancyra had produced a theology ... which could quite properly be called Sabellian." (Hanson, p. ix) Marcellus of Ancyra "cannot be acquitted of Sabellianism" ([Hanson's Lecture](#)).

"There were present at the Council people, such as Marcellus of Ancyra, who were quite ready to maintain that there is only one hypostasis in the Godhead, and who were later to be deposed for heresy because they believed this." (Hanson, p. 167)

### **Alexander allied with the Sabellians.**

"Eustathius and Marcellus ... certainly met at Nicaea and no doubt were there able to join forces with Alexander of Alexandria and Ossius." (Hanson, p. 234)

"Marcellus, Eustathius and Alexander were able to make common cause against the Eusebians." (Ayres, p. 69)

"Simonetti estimates the Nicene Council as a temporary alliance for the defeat of Arianism between the tradition of Alexandria led by Alexander and 'Asiatic' circles (i.e. Eustathius, Marcellus) whose thought was at the opposite pole to that of Arius. ... Alexander ... accepted virtual Sabellianism in order to ensure the defeat of Arianism." (Hanson, p. 171)

Since the emperor had taken Alexander's side, this alliance made the Sabellians influential at the council.

### **The emperor took Alexander's side.**

"Constantine had taken Alexander's part." (Ayres, p. 89)

"This imperial pressure coupled with the role of his advisers in broadly supporting the agenda of Alexander must have been a powerful force."  
(Ayres, p. 89)

**Consequently, the Sabellians were influential at the council.**

"Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus ... Both were influential at the council." (Ayres, p. 99)

"Marcellus of Ancyra ... had been an important figure at the council and may have significantly influenced its wording." (Ayres, p. 431)

"Marcellus ... played a major role at Nicaea." (Ayres, p. 62)

"Eustathius of Antioch, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Alexander must all have been key players in the discussions." (Ayres, p. 89)

Alexander did not prefer the term. For example, just a few months earlier, the draft statement prepared by [the pro-Alexander council at Antioch](#) did not mention ousia or homoousios. Constantine insisted on homoousios specifically because the Sabellians preferred the term.

**Alexander did not prefer homoousios.**

"Alexander indeed seems to be avoiding homoousios." (Hanson, p. 139)

"Alexander in his extant utterances never uses homoousios, though there are several places where its application to the Son would have been apt." (Hanson, p. 140)

**The Sabellians endorsed homoousios.**

"Marcellus and Eustathius also seem likely to have endorsed homoousios because of the notion of shared being." (Ayres, p. 95)

"Shared being" can be understood as 'one Person'.

"For him (Marcellus) *homoousios*, whose presence in N he must have welcomed enthusiastically ..." (Hanson, p. 229-230)

**Constantine insisted on homousios because the Sabellians preferred it:**

"Once he (Constantine) discovered that the Eustathians [the Sabellians] ... were in favour of it (homoousios) ... he pressed for its inclusion." (Hanson, p. 211)

In conclusion, the Creed was the work of a Minority. The emperor's authority allowed the one-hypostasis minority to include the term homoousios in the Creed, despite the Sabellian history of the term and despite the objections raised by the majority.

"The decisions of Nicaea were really the work of a minority."  
[Bettenson, Documents of the Christian Church, 2nd Ed 1963, p 41]

The reformed website [Bible.ca](http://Bible.ca) states: "We will grant ... that a majority opposed the Nicene creed. ... The majority who opposed the creed were not aligned with Arius!"

### **Chairperson Ossius**

Ossius, whom Constantine appointed as chair of the Nicene Council, was also his religious advisor. In the Council, he acted "as the Emperor's representative" (Hanson, p. 154) and as Constantine's "agent." (Hanson, p. 190) His humble position in the church, as bishop of the small city of Cordova, did not qualify him as chair of that assembly.

He also believed in one hypostasis, similar to [Alexander](#) and [the Sabellians](#). In all probability, it was Ossius who advised Constantine to take Alexander's part.

#### **The emperor's agent:**

"Ossius ... represented the policy of Constantine" (Hanson, p. 170)

#### **He believed in one hypostasis.**

"Ossius evidently believed that God is a single *hypostasis*." (Hanson, p. 870)

"It also seems possible that Ossius at least believed in only one hypostasis." (Hanson, p. 167)

Eighteen years later, in 343, Ossius helped to compose another creed ([at Serdica](#)) (Hanson, p. 201) which had "the most alarmingly Sabellian complexion." (Hanson, p. xix) That manifesto explicitly confesses a single hypostasis.

### **The Anathema confirms Sabellian domination.**

Another indication of Sabellian domination in the Council is the anathema in [the Creed](#) against all "who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance." This seems to say that Father and Son are a single hypostasis (Person) and substance, which is the hallmark of Sabellianism.

### **Only one hypostasis**

"If we are to take the creed N at its face value, the theology of Eustathius and Marcellus was the theology which triumphed at Nicaea. That creed admits the possibility of **only one ousia and one hypostasis**. This was the hallmark of the theology of these two men." (Hanson, p. 235)

"He (Eustathius, a leading Sabellian) could have replied ... that the notorious anathema in N gave him every encouragement to believe that there is only one distinct reality in the Godhead." (Hanson, p. 216)

### **Sabellian**

"The Creed of Nicaea of 325 ... ultimately confounded the confusion because its use of the words ousia and hypostasis was so ambiguous as to suggest that the Fathers of Nicaea had fallen into Sabellianism, a view recognized as a heresy even at that period." ([Hanson's Lecture](#))

"The condemnation ... that the Son is 'of another *hypostasis* or *ousia*' from the Father ... can only have been a highly ambiguous and extremely confusing statement. By the standard of later orthodoxy ... it is a rankly heretical (i.e. Sabellian) proposition." (Hanson, p. 167)

"The anathema of Nicaea against those who maintain that the Son is of a different hypostasis or ousia from those of the Father and the emphatic identification of the ousia and hypostasis of the Father and the Son in the Western statement after the Council of Sardica only seemed to support" Sabellianism. ([Hanson Lecture](#)).

See [here](#) for a further discussion of this anathema.

## **How did the delegates understand the term?**

The delegates did not all understand the term in the same way.

The emperor's vague explanation allowed the Eusebian majority to accept the term reluctantly. They were able to reconcile that explanation with their view that the Son is distinct from and subordinate to the Father. Like Dionysius of Alexandria, the Eusebians at Nicaea were forced to accept the term but accepted it only with a generic meaning.

The Sabellians, on the other hand, understood it as saying that the Father and Son are 'one substance'; a single hypostasis (a single Person). Consequently, as discussed below, after Nicaea, the Sabellians claimed the Creed as support for their doctrine.

### **Different Interpretations**

"Eusebius' discussion nicely demonstrates the extent to which the promulgation of homoousios involved a conscious lack of positive definition of the term. Of course, those who were broadly in the same trajectory as Alexander would have easily been able to sign up to Nicaea's terms but would have read them in **a very different manner.**" (Ayres, p. 91)

### **Eusebian Understanding**

"Eusebius tells us that once he had been assured that this phrase served only to indicate that the Son was truly from the Father he could agree even to homoousios." (Ayres, p. 96)

### **Sabellian Understanding:**

"For him (Marcellus) *homoousios* ... meant not merely 'consubstantial' or 'of similar substance', but '**of identical being**'." (Hanson, p. 229-230)

"Marcellus and Eustathius also seem likely to have endorsed homoousios because of the notion of shared being that was an accepted part of its semantic range, but not because they thought it implied two distinct eternally co-ordinate realities." (Ayres, p. 95-96) ["Co-ordinate" here means two [distinct but more or less equal entities.]

### **Sabellians claimed the Creed.**

"In the controversies which erupted over Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus after Nicaea, both thought their theologies faithful to Nicaea—and they had good grounds for so assuming. Both were



influential at the council, and Nicaea's lapidary formulations were never intended to rule out their theological idiosyncrasies." (Ayres, p. 99)

However, in reality, the Eusebians knew that this term implies Sabellianism. For that reason, the same church mainstream (the Eusebians) opposed the Creed after Nicaea.

"It was impossible to rid the term in the minds of many of Sabellian, if not Gnostic associations." (Hanson, p. 437)

"The terms aroused opposition, on the grounds that they were unscriptural, novel, tending to Sabellianism" (Henry Bettenson, Documents of the Christian Church, 2nd Ed 1963, p 41)

"The language of that creed seemed to offer no prophylactic (prevention) against Marcellan doctrine, and increasingly came to be seen as implying such doctrine." (Ayres, p. 96, 97)

"To many the creed seemed strongly to favour the unitarian tendency among these existing trajectories." (Ayres, p. 431) [The term "unitarian" refers to Sabellianism. For example: "A great deal of controversy was caused in the years after the council by some supporters of Nicaea whose theology had strongly unitarian tendencies. Chief among these was Marcellus of Ancyra." (Ayres, p. 431)]

The Homoiousians (a later group of Arians) rejected "homoousios as leading to Sabellianism." (Hanson, p. 439) "To them an acceptance of homoousios ... would naturally appear to involve them in pure indiscriminate Sabellianism." (Hanson, p. 440)

Athanasius wrote that the Arian objection to the term "homoousios" was that it was considered to be "un-Scriptural, suspicious, and of a **Sabellian tendency**." [mf]Athanasius (1911), "In Controversy With the Arians", Select Treatises, Newman, John Henry Cardinal trans, Longmans, Green, & Co, p. 124, footn[/mf]

## Was Nicaea a Sabellian victory?

There are several indications in the Creed that the Son is subordinate to the Father. For example, the Father alone is called "Almighty," and the

Son is God's agent in creation. ([Read Article](#)) Our authors say that Nicaea was a drawn battle between the Sabellian 'one hypostasis' theology and the Eusebian 'three hypostases' subordinationism. However, since homoousios was known to be a Sabellian term and given the anathema, perhaps it was a Sabellian victory.

"The 'Asiatics' (i.e. Eustathius, Marcellus) ... were able to include in N a **hint of opposition to the three hypostases theory.**" (Hanson, p. 171, quoting Simonetti)

It is not "an openly Sabellian creed." "It is going too far to say that N is a clearly Sabellian document. ... It is exceeding the evidence to represent the Council as a total victory for the anti-Origenist opponents of the doctrine of three *hypostases*. **It was more like a drawn battle.**" (Hanson, p. 172) Ayres says that his conclusions are close to Hanson's. (Ayres, p. 92)

## Homoousios after Nicaea

**Arius'** specific theology was also no longer at issue after Nicaea. He had some extreme views, such as that the Son was made out of nothing, but almost the entire Nicene Council rejected his theology.

As another article explains, people today believe that Arius was important because Athanasius argued that his opponents were all followers of Arius. For that purpose, he quoted Arius at length, pretending to address his opponents' theology. But Athanasius' opponents - the anti-Nicenes - did not follow Arius. ([Read Article](#))

"Arius' own theology is of little importance in understanding the major debates of the rest of the century." (Ayres, p. 56-57)

**Alexander** was also not a main player after Nicaea. He died about three years after Nicaea.

"The Index to the Festal Letters of Athanasius dates the death of Alexander firmly to April 27th, 328." (Hanson, p. 175)

**Nicaea caused Controversy** - The Controversy after Nicaea was caused not by Arius, as is often claimed, but by the acceptance of the Sabellian term homoousios at Nicaea. The conflict in the decade after Nicaea was

specifically about the meaning of this term. The Sabellians claimed that it supported their theology.

### **Nicaea caused the Controversy:**

"Nicaea has been a catalyst for conflict between pre-existing theological trajectories." (Ayres, p. 101)

### **About the meaning of the term *homoousios*:**

For example, the following is one event during that period "probably in 326 or 327:" (Ayres, p. 101)

"The fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Sozomen reports a dispute immediately after the council, focused not on Arius, but ... concerning **the precise meaning of the term *homoousios*.**

Some [the Eusebians] thought this term ... implied the non-existence of the Son of God; and that it involved the error of Montanus and Sabellius. ...

Eustathius accused Eusebius [of Caesarea] of altering the doctrines ratified by the council of Nicaea, while the latter declared that he approved of all the Nicæan doctrines, and reproached Eustathius for cleaving to the heresy of Sabellius." (Ayres, p. 101)

"This event was only one part of the conflict that now began." (Ayres, p. 101)

**Post-Nicaea Correction** - The same war that raged between the followers of Origen and the Sabellians in the third century and at Nicaea, continued in the decade after Nicaea between the Eusebians (often but misleadingly called 'Arians') and the Sabellians. All leading Sabellians were deposed. This decade may be called the 'Post-Nicaea Correction' because it closed the door to Sabellianism that was opened at Nicaea. ([Read Article](#)).

### **Sabellians deposed**

"Within ten years of the Council of Nicaea all the leading supporters of the creed of that Council had been deposed or disgraced or exiled - Athanasius, Eustathius and Marcellus, and with them a large number of

other bishops who are presumed to have belonged to the same school of thought." (Hanson, p. 274)

"Eustathius lost this battle and was deposed at some point between 326 and 331." (Ayres, p. 101)

"The new synod met in the summer of 336 and deposed Marcellus for holding the heresy of Paul of Samosata." (Williams, p. 80) ([Read Article](#))

**Homoousios disappeared** - Since the dispute between the Eusebians and Sabellians focused on the meaning of the term homoousios, the rejection of the Sabellians after Nicaea was also a rejection of the term homoousios. After the Sabellians were removed from their positions, the term homoousios also disappeared from the debate. Nobody mentioned homoousios for about two decades.

#### **Homoousios not mentioned**

"There is a near-fifteen year absence before the creed is mentioned again." (Ayres, p. 100)

"After Nicaea *homoousios* is not mentioned again in truly contemporary sources for two decades. ...This lack of usage also results from the association of Nicaea with the theology of Marcellus of Ancyra." (Ayres, p. 97)

"What is conventionally regarded as the key-word in the Creed homoousion, falls completely out of the controversy very shortly after the Council of Nicaea and is not heard of for over twenty years." ([Hanson Lecture](#))

For example, 16 and 18 years after Nicaea, the Easterners formulated the [Dedication Creed](#) in 341 and the Westerners a Manifesto at the [Council at Serdica](#) in 343. Since both these creeds were formulated during the period when nobody mentions homoousios, they do not mention the term. However, these councils focused on the more fundamental issue, of which homoousios was only a symptom, namely, whether the Son is a distinct Person.

The main purpose of the Dedication Council was to condemn Sabellianism. It explicitly asserts **three hypostases** (three Persons or Beings with three distinct minds).

The Serdica Council never met as one. The Western and Eastern delegates met separately and issued different creeds. While the Eastern creed maintained **three hypostases**, the Western creed explicitly asserts **one hypostasis**.

**Athanasius did not defend homoousios.** - During the years 335-6, Athanasius and Marcellus were deposed by the Eastern Church. Meeting in Rome, they joined forces. At that time Athanasius also developed his polemical strategy; his "masterpiece of the rhetorical art," (Ayres, p. 106-7). However, in the 330s and 340s, Athanasius' polemical strategy said nothing about homoousios.

Athanasius' polemics claimed that:

- Arius originated a new heresy, causing the Controversy.
- All opponents of Nicaea are followers of Arius.
- Athanasius himself preserves scriptural orthodoxy.
- An Arian Conspiracy caused him to be exiled for violence but, in reality, he was exiled for opposition to Arianism.

These statements may sound familiar because the church has believed Athanasius for more than 1500 years, but none are true. The truth of the Arian Controversy was only revealed in the last about 100 years.

**Homoousios Revived** - By the time Constantius became emperor of the entire Empire in the early 350s, Athanasius had become extremely powerful and Constantius attempted to isolate Athanasius. In this time of crisis, in the mid-350s, 30 years after Nicaea, Athanasius revived homoousios to strengthen his polemical strategy. In this way, homoousios came back into the Controversy. Athanasius had become the West's "paragon" (model) (Hanson, p. 304). Following Athanasius, the West also began to support homoousios. ([Read More](#))

### **Athanasius had become powerful.**

"Towards the end of his life he had reached a position in which his power (in Egypt), not only ecclesiastical but also political, was virtually beyond challenge." (Hanson, p. 421)

### **The emperor marginalized Athanasius.**

For example, at Milan in 355 "almost everybody present acquiesced in the Emperor's demands, condemned Athanasius, and probably also signed some formula which was not openly Arian but was patient of an Arian interpretation." (Hanson, p. 333-4)

### **Athanasius revived Homoousios.**

"It is not until he (Athanasius) writes the *De Decretis* (356 or 357) that Athanasius again mentions the word and begins to defend it." (Hanson, p. 436)

"Athanasius' decision to make Nicaea and *homoousios* central to his theology has its origins in the shifting climate of the 350s." (Ayes, p. 144)

**One hypostasis** - Athanasius re-introduced the term into the Controversy because, as discussed [here](#), like the Sabellians, he believed that the Father and Son are a single Person (one hypostasis). Specifically, he believed that the Son is part of the Father.

### **In the Father**

"In the Father we have the Son: this is a summary of Athanasius' theology." (Hanson, p. 426)

### **One hypostasis**

"The fragments of Eustathius that survive present a doctrine that is close to Marcellus, and to Alexander and Athanasius. Eustathius insists there is only one *hypostasis*." (Ayes, p. 69)

Athanasius explained the term homoousios as follows: "Just what the Council intended this expression to mean is set forth by St. Athanasius as follows: `... that the Son is not only like to the Father, but

**inseparable from the substance of the Father, that he and the**

**Father are one and the same** ... as the sun and its splendour are inseparable." ([Philip Schaff](#))

### **Sabellian**

"The Westerners had at Serdica in 343 produced a theological statement which appeared to have the most alarmingly Sabellian complexion, and Athanasius had certainly supported this statement, though he later denied its existence." (Hanson, p. xix)

**An Anti-Sabellian Front** - In the late 350s, after Athanasius had re-introduced homoousios into the Controversy, the Eusebians ([the so-called Arians](#)) opposed the term but had differing views about the Son's substance. Nevertheless, they were united against Sabellianism. This confirms that homoousios was a Sabellian term and that Sabellianism remained the main enemy.

### **Eusebians were divided:**

- The [Homoiousians](#) said the Son's substance is similar to the Father's.
- The Heterousians argued that no being's substance can be like or similar to the Father's because the Father alone exists without cause.
- The [Homoians](#) rejected all talk of God's substance, including homoousios.

### **United against Sabellianism:**

The [Homoians](#) "included bishops of different stripes." What "united" them was "the desire to find a solution to the ongoing controversy that would rule out any theologies seemingly tainted with **Marcellan emphases**." (Ayres, p. 138)

"Basil (of Ancyra - leader of the [Homoiousians](#)) made ad hoc alliances with theologians such as Acacius (leader of the Homoians) against **Photinus and Marcellus**." (Ayres, p. 150) (Photinus was "perhaps the most visible representative of a Marcellan theology in these years (in the 350s)." (Ayres, p. 134))

Since Arius' theology did not cause the Controversy, it should not be called the 'Arian' Controversy. Rather, since Sabellianism was already

rejected in the third century but continued to oppose the Eusebian majority in the fourth, it could more appropriately be called the 'Sabellian Controversy'.

**Basil of Caesarea**, the first Cappadocian father, was the first to accept both the term homoousios and that the Son is a distinct Person. He wrote in the 360s and 370s. He did not follow Athanasius and did not base his theology on the Nicene Creed. He began as a [Homoiousian](#) who later also accepted the term homoousios. However, while Athanasius and other pro-Nicenes explained homoousios as meaning one hypostasis, Basil, like most other Easterners, taught that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct substances (three hypostases or Persons or Beings) with exactly the same type of substance.

Basil said they are "like unalterably according to ousia." (Hanson, p. 696-7)

([Read Article on Basil](#))

The Trinity doctrine, as it eventually became accepted, combined Athanasius' and Basil's theologies. It says that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one Being with one mind and will, which is what Athanasius taught, but added Basil's verbal formula of three hypostases, but without Basil's proposal of three minds.

**Meletian Schism** - In the 360s and 370s, in what is known as [the Meletian Schism](#), a dispute between the Western and Eastern pro-Nicenes, Basil's view of three hypostases brought him to oppose Athanasius and Westerners who taught one hypostasis. It is called the Meletian dispute because it manifested particularly in a dispute about who the bishop of Antioch must be. While Basil supported Meletius, the Westerners (Athanasius, Damasus of Rome and Athanasius' successor Peter) supported Paulinus (another 'one-Person' theologian).

"The opening of the year 375 saw the ironical situation in which the Pope, **Damasus**, and the archbishop of Alexandria, **Peter**, were supporting Paulinus of Antioch, a Sabellian heretic ... against **Basil** of Caesarea, the champion of Nicene orthodoxy in the East" ([Hanson Lecture](#))



See the article on [the Meletian Schism](#).

## The Core Issue

### One or three Hypostases?

The core issue in the Controversy was whether the Son is a distinct Person. In the Greek of the fourth century, the core issue was whether the Father and Son are distinct hypostases:

It began in the second century. While the Monarchians said that 'Father' and 'Son' are two names for the same Person, Logos theology dominated, claiming that the Son is a distinct hypostasis.

In the third century, while the Sabellians confessed one hypostasis, Origen's view dominated, teaching three hypostases.

In the fourth century, the Sabellians, Alexander, Athanasius, and the West continued teaching one hypostasis. With the emp[eror's assistance, that view dominated at Nicaea but, for most of the century, the Eusebian three hypostases dominated.

Later in that century, the Cappadocians taught three equal hypostases but were opposed by Athanasius and the Western pro-Nicenes, who taught one hypostasis. ([See here](#))

However, in 380, Emperor Theodosius made Western 'one hypostasis' theology the State Religion of the Roman Empire. ([See here](#))

### Related to Homoousios

The term homoousios was not the core issue. For example, the term disappeared from the Controversy soon after Nicaea and only again became part of it in the 350s. But the term homoousios relates directly to the question of whether the Son is a distinct Person:

**One Person => One Substance** - All theologians who believed that the Father and Son are a single Person also believed that the Son is homoousios with the Father. In this view, homoousios is understood as saying that the Father and Son are 'one substance'. Therefore, like the Father, the Son is eternal and immutable. These theologians included Tertullian, the Sabellians, Paul of Samosata, Alexander, Athanasius, and the Western Church generally.

The second-century [Monarchianism](#), the third-century [Sabellians](#), and Athanasius in the fourth had different forms of one-hypostasis theology:

- The Monarchians stated that Father and Son are two names for the same Person.
- Sabellius proposed that the Son and Father are two parts of the one Person of God.
- Athanasius said the Son is part of the Father.

But they all believed in one hypostasis, as opposed to three hypostases as proposed by Origen and the fourth-century Eusebians. Therefore, the fact that Athanasius re-introduced homoousios into the Controversy confirms the one-hypostasis implication of the term.

**Two Persons => Different Substance** - But if the Son is a distinct Person, as Origen, Arius, and the Eusebians believed, then the Father alone exists without cause, which implies that the Son's substance is different from the Father's. At Nicaea, almost all Arians accepted the term homoousios but not as meaning 'same substance'. They had accepted the emperor's vague explanation of the term.

## **Ways of understanding the Bible**

The core issue relates to two ways of understanding the Bible:

In the **Old Testament**, God is one. There is little indication of a second divine Being.

But the **New Testament** reveals a second 'God', namely, the Son of God who is also called 'I am' and 'the First and the Last', who is God's Agent in the creation of all things and maintains all things. So, the question arose, how does the Son relate to the Father?

The 'one hypostasis' theology argues from the Old Testament and claims that, since the Old Testament asserts only one God, the 'Father' and 'Son' must be one Person.

'Three hypostases' theology accepts the evidence from the New Testament that the Son is indeed a distinct divine Person. It identifies three divine Persons (three hypostases); the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

([See here for the article on the Real Main Issue.](#))

## Overview

The fourth-century Controversy continued the controversy of the preceding century, which was mainly between Sabellius' one-hypostasis theology, which adopted the term homoousios, and Origen's three hypostases, which rejected the term. In that century, Sabellianism was defeated.

However, at Nicaea, through the emperor's support, a Sabellian 'one hypostasis' minority had the upper hand and was able to insert the term homoousios in the Creed, despite the majority's objections. Emperor Constantine appeased the majority's fears by explaining the terms ousia and homoousios highly figuratively, saying that it only means that the Son is truly from the Father. This enabled the Eusebian majority to accept the Creed.

After Nicaea, the Sabellian dominance at Nicaea re-ignited the third-century controversy. The Sabellians claimed that the term homoousios means that the church had accepted a one-hypostasis theology. This caused a few years of intense strife during which all leading Sabellians were exiled.

After that, nobody mentioned homoousios for more than two decades. For example, neither Athanasius nor the councils in the 340s mention homoousios but focus on the more fundamental issue: whether the Son is a distinct Person (hypostasis).

In the mid-350s, 30 years after Nicaea, Athanasius, who also had a 'one hypostasis' theology, brought the term back into the Controversy, causing the Eusebians to divide into three major views with respect to the Son's substance.

In the 360-370s, Basil of Caesarea, the first Cappadocian father, was the first pro-Nicene to explain homoousios as three hypostases. This caused some fierce conflict between Basil and Athanasius.

In the end, the church was divided into at least the following factions:

**Western pro-Nicenes** defended homoousios and explained it as saying that Father and Son are a single hypostasis (one Person). ([Read More](#))

**Eastern pro-Nicenes** (the Cappadocians) also accepted homoousios but interpreted it in a generic sense, meaning three distinct but equal hypostases. ([Read More](#))

**[Homoians Eusebians](#)**, who dominated the church for much of the 350s to 370s, rejected all talk of God's substance, including the term homoousios.

**[Homoiousian Eusebians](#)** claimed that the Son's substance is similar to the Father's, but not the same.

**Heterousian Eusebians** taught that the Son's substance is different from the Father's.

In the year 380, [Emperor Theodosius](#) made the Western pro-Nicene view the State Religion of the Roman Empire and subjected Arians to severe persecution. Over the subsequent centuries, with the support of the Imperial Forces, that State Religion became the Roman Church (the Church of the Roman Empire) and dominated the Middle Ages. Bible prophecy symbolizes it as the 11th horn of the fourth beast in Daniel 7.

([Read More](#))

In conclusion, throughout the Arian Controversy, the only people who regarded homoousios as saying that Father and Son are one substance, as the Trinity doctrine also claims, were the one-hypostasis (Sabellian) theologians. In reality, the Trinity doctrine continues ancient Sabellianism.

([Read Article](#))

## Other Articles

- [Origin of the Trinity Doctrine](#) - Including the pre-Nicene Church Fathers and the fourth-century Arian Controversy
- [All articles on this website](#)
- [Is Jesus the Most High God?](#)
- [Trinity Doctrine - General](#)
- [The Book of Daniel](#)
- [The Book of Revelation](#)
- [The Origin of Evil](#)
- [Death, Eternal Life, and Eternal Torment](#)