

# NICAEA

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THE RISE OF THE  
IMPERIAL CHURCH

BY

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# FORWARD

The history of the early Christian Church is often misunderstood. Many believe that the Church, its structure, and its doctrines were ordained by the Apostles under the leadership of Peter (Simon Bar-Jona) as the heir to Jesus' mission on earth. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Followers of The Way (as the early Christians called themselves) continued performing the healing works of Jesus and his disciples. They lived their lives, following the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles, while trying to avoid persecution and death at the hands of the Romans. They had only their faith to sustain them. Many were martyred for their beliefs.

To the Romans, Christians (a derogatory term that the Romans used for the Followers of The Way) were an infestation that needed to be wiped out. Because of the peaceful nature of the Followers of The Way, they were easily captured. The captives provided great sport in the arena as they were tortured, burned alive, or fed to hungry lions – all while being watched by the Romans, who shouted at their captives to call upon their God and save themselves.

Over time, many of the Followers of The Way either stopped performing healing works to avoid calling attention to themselves, or they found the discipline required to perform the healing works of Jesus too hard. They lost the ability to do the works of Jesus, and they were unable to teach others to do these works. Soon, the works of Jesus moved from practice to memory to legend. These Followers began to doubt that the healing works and other miracles had been performed by anyone other than Jesus and his Apostles. In their attempts to understand Jesus' ability to perform miracles, they reasoned that Jesus' abilities came not from an ability that lies within each true believer, but from an

exclusively divine source. This conclusion evolved into a belief that Jesus must have been divine himself. This was the birth of the great schism between the early churches.

The faithful Followers of The Way continued performing the works of Jesus during this time, but an ever-growing number of the early Christians (as they now openly referred to themselves) followed only the words of Jesus – misinterpreted and misunderstood by the belief that Jesus was God on earth. The two factions within the early churches could not reach an agreement between the original theology of the churches and the new, revised theology being embraced by more and more Christians.

By the early 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD, two figures emerged as the champions of the two factions. Alexander of Alexandria, a believer in the divinity of Jesus, was the Bishop of Alexandria, making him one of the five Patriarchs of the churches along with the Bishops of Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Rome. Arias, a priest from the church at Baucalis near Alexandria who had been considered for the position of Bishop of Alexandria, was a staunch believer in The Way. The two men argued constantly over which theology was correct, but both were unmovable from their beliefs.

Then, in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD, a number of things happened that would change the face of Christianity forever. Constantine I, the Emperor of the Roman Empire, successfully defeated his political rivals (by open warfare and by guile and treachery) and consolidated the rule of the Eastern and Western Empires under himself. His lifelong friend and confidant, Hosius of Córdoba (a Christian Bishop in Hispania), urged Constantine to end the persecution of Christians. In 313 AD, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, allowing Christians to worship openly throughout the empire.

Constantine, then the absolute ruler of the Roman Empire, knew that his legions alone could not hold the empire together indefinitely. The legions' roles were to defend the empire from its enemies and to conquer new lands. Constantine wanted a way to unite the hearts and minds of his citizens, so he turned to his old friend Hosius for help. Hosius suggested making Christianity the state religion of the empire and using the churches to unite the citizens. Constantine agreed and directed Hosius to make it happen.

Only one thing stood in the way of Hosius' plan for the churches: the intractability of the two theological factions under Arias and Alexander. After a number of failed attempts to induce the two factions to reach common ground, Constantine grew restless. He needed a united Church to help him hold the empire together, and he needed it soon. So, in 325 AD, he invited the Christian Bishops to gather at his palace in Nicaea to decide once and for all what the one official theology of the churches would be.

This is the story of the men at the center of the controversy that led to the first Council of Nicaea, the debates between those who believed in The Way and those who believed in the divinity of Jesus, and the rise of a new Imperial Church created to serve the needs of the Roman Empire.



# CHAPTER 1

As he entered his chamber, Arias immediately knew what the scroll on his chair was even before he saw the all-too-familiar wax seal in the center. *What does Alexander want this time?*

Arias glanced out the window on the far side of his chamber and noticed the messenger standing in the shade of a date palm tree. *He's waiting for my reply. Alexander's demands must be urgent if he wants my response sent back immediately.*

Arias picked up the scroll and sat in the chair, running a finger along the seal of the Patriarch of Alexandria stamped into the wax. The theological disagreement between Arias and Alexander had been going on for years, but recently, the tone of Alexander's epistles had become more like edicts rather than part of an ongoing discussion, and Arias wondered if it were still possible for the two men to engage in a polite, rational discussion of their differences.

Alexander was the Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, making him one of the five Patriarchs of the churches devoted to Jesus Christ. Arias had been considered for the post, but he was passed over in favor of Alexander. Arias retained his post as the priest of the church in Baucalis, near where the Apostle Mark had been martyred, but his relationship with his superior grew more strained by the day.

Arias broke the seal on the scroll and unrolled the letter, feeling the rough texture of the paper in his hands and smelling the smoky scent of the charcoal pencil used to write the words. He immediately recognized the handwriting of Athanasius, Alexander's scribe and chief assistant. As he read Alexander's epistle, Arias wondered how someone could become one of the five Patriarchs with such a distorted view of theology.

*Brother Arias,*

*It has come to my attention that you have once again ignored my instructions to alter your preaching and bring your public views on theology in line with what has been approved. Never forget that you serve your congregation at my pleasure. If you wish to retain your post, you will obey my instructions.*

*I am aware of your reservations regarding the Divine Trinity, but the Trinity is part of the accepted doctrine of the churches. Your position that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate and distinct entities is not in keeping with the doctrine approved by the Patriarchs of the churches. Further, your position that there is no scriptural basis for the concept of the Trinity is heresy and will not be tolerated.*

*You are commanded to obey my instructions, or you risk disciplinary action. My messenger has been told to wait for your response.*

*Alexander, Bishop  
Patriarch of Alexandria*

Arias leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his shoulder-length, silver streaked hair. *This again! The Patriarchs have forgotten what the healing ministry of Jesus was all about. For centuries, the faithful Followers of The Way have healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out disorders of the mind according to the teachings of our Master. These are not miracles performed only by a divine entity and his closest followers. These are natural occurrences that can be performed by anyone who studies the words and works of our Master. But because the Patriarchs have forgotten how to heal, they assume that the power to heal is divine and therefore that Jesus must have been a divine entity in order to wield that power. Their new theology is little better than pagan superstition.*

Arias glanced at window across the room and watched the messenger waiting outside. When the messenger turned toward the window, Arias recognized him – Athanasius. *Alexander sent his*



*chief lackey to deliver the message and take back my reply. There's more going on here than I'm aware of.*

A soft knocking on his chamber door pulled his attention away from the window. "Enter," he said. Botherik, Arias' Goth servant, entered the chamber carrying a tall flagon of liquid.

"Refreshments, sir?" Botherik asked softly.

"Yes, thank you," Arias replied. As Botherik retrieved a cup from the table in the corner of the room and filled it with the liquid from the flagon, Arias asked, "Have you offered anything to our guest outside?"

"No, sir," Botherik replied, handing Arias the filled cup. "I wasn't sure if such courtesies were to be extended to *him*."

Arias hid a smile. Athanasius was well-known in Baucalis and disliked by all who served with Arias there. He had publically challenged Arias several times on behalf of Alexander, and his zeal for antagonizing Arias and his followers was a frequent topic of conversation.

"We must continue to practice charity toward those who need it," Arias reminded his servant. "Those who are impolite and speak with little or no respect have the greatest need for our compassion and good deeds. We cannot allow their manners to alter our duty to mankind as taught to us by our Master. Jesus taught us to love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, and pray for them which despitefully use us, and persecute us. And while I don't consider Athanasius an *enemy*, his demeanor toward us certainly cries out for our love. Please take him refreshments, and tell him that I will have my reply to Alexander ready as soon as I am able."

"Yes, Arias." Botherik nodded and left the chamber.

Arias stared at Athanasius, still standing in the shade one of the date palms that lined the courtyard outside Arias' chamber. Athanasius was a tall man with a pleasant face and curly dark hair. His features made him look Greek.

A moment later, Arias smiled when he saw Botherik bring Athanasius a cup and a plate of fruit. *We must never allow those who antagonize us to change who we are. Those who are the hardest to love are the ones we must love the most. And if it requires extra effort on our part to love them, it's because their need is greatest. This is an opportunity to demonstrate the love that*

*our Master showed to his persecutors. If Jesus could forgive those who crucified him, I can certainly show forgiveness and love to Athanasius and Alexander.*

Arias put down the scroll on his desk and walked across the room to a cupboard where he kept his writing supplies. He selected a pencil and a blank scroll before returning to his chair. The chamber was not a large room – certainly smaller than the sanctuary where he preached his sermons to the faithful Followers of The Way but large enough to serve as Arias’ bedroom, office, and a classroom for instructing his acolytes. The floor was made of stone tiles, covered in rugs, and the walls were ornately carved and painted wood – a gift from a long-forgotten patron to one of Arias’ predecessors in gratitude for being healed of consumption through The Way. There were two windows – one faced the courtyard, and the other, on the adjacent wall, overlooked a small garden. The chamber was comfortable, but Arias preferred being in the company of the faithful – preaching, healing, and helping others learn The Way.

He sipped from his cup and then began writing his latest reply to his superior in Alexandria.

*Brother Alexander,*

*I have received your latest epistle, and while your instructions are quite clear, I must once again decline to obey. I implore you to cease your support for this revisionist theology that can serve no purpose but to lead mankind farther and farther from The Way as given to us by our Master.*

*Since you specifically mention the Trinity, I will attempt to confine my reply to that theological issue. I am aware that the concept of a Divine Trinity is the latest doctrine change approved by the Patriarchs. However, there is no difference between the five Patriarchs declaring a man to be a god and the Roman Senate declaring that Julius, Augustus, and Livia were gods. Man cannot create God, and by declaring that the Father and the Son are the same entity – in direct contradiction to the gospels where Jesus denied that he was God and drew clear distinctions*

*between himself and his Father – you and the other Patriarchs are attempting to do just that.*

*The writings of the prophets and the apostles, as well as the gospels, give us the names for God. Yahweh and Jehovah were the tribal name for the Hebrew God of Abraham. Adonai is the name used by some of the prophets as their concept of God grew to embrace the idea of one God over all of creation, not just the god of the Jews. Elohim is the name of God first introduced by the third prophet Isaiah as the God who created the heavens, earth, and man in his image and likeness. Now you and the other Patriarchs are attempting to add the name of Jesus of Nazareth, or Joshua Bar-Joseph, to the list of the names for God. But you are not prophets, and you are not apostles, so where does your authority come from to declare that our Master is a god?*

Arias leaned back and closed his eyes, thinking about how he wanted to word the next part of the letter. Then he took a sip from the cup and started writing again.

*For years, I have endured listening to you and other bishops and priests misinterpret the scriptures. Jesus' statement that "I and my father are one" is NOT stating that the Father and the Son are one entity, but that the Father and the Son are of one mind – acting in concert with each other, yet distinct and separate persons. Our Master's failure to deny that he is God on earth to the priests is also mistakenly seen as proof that he is, indeed God. As one of your acolytes put it, "Jesus is God, but he didn't want anyone to know that he is God, so he denied that he is God to some and refused to answer the question to others. This is proof that he IS God because his denial is what you'd expect from the true God in disguise on earth." What utter rubbish! For every verse of scripture you point to that lends evidence to your position that Jesus is God, I can point to twenty others that show the opposite.*

*Even you must acknowledge our Master's assertion: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." I also believe that you*

*preach the infallibility of God. But if Jesus lied to his disciples and the priests about being God, then he is a liar. How can a liar be infallible? If our Master were willing to admit that he was the Messiah and the Son of God, why would he deny being God if he were, in fact, God? If Jesus lied about his divinity, what else did he lie about? And if he were God, how could he die on the cross? You cannot have it both ways. Either God is infallible or he is a liar. If he is infallible, then Jesus is NOT God; if he is a liar, then he is fallible, the gospels are false, and our faith is also false.*

Botherik quietly entered the chamber, trying not to disturb Arias. The servant placed a plate of food on a small table beside Arias' desk and then withdrew quickly, closing the door gently behind him. Arias continued writing.

*The concept of the Divine Trinity being three facets of a single entity is supported neither by scripture nor by rational thought. For more than two hundred years, the church here in Baucalis has faithfully followed The Way as taught by our Master. The Way has existed for nearly three hundred years – ever since our Master walked on this earth – and it has been practiced since the early disciples first began spreading the word by preaching the gospel beyond the borders of the Judean Province. I will not abandon The Way in favor of this new revisionist theology that you and the other Patriarchs are insisting upon, because you have no authority to misinterpret scripture, based on your own misunderstanding, and call it our new doctrine. I will continue to preach what I have always preached, and I will continue to demonstrate The Way as I have always demonstrated it, no matter how you and the other Patriarchs choose to change the theology of the churches. There have been many Patriarchs in the past, and there will be many more in the future, but The Way is always The Way, and I will not deviate from the words and works of our Master simply to suit your demands.*

*Arias, Priest Presbyter  
Church of Baucalis*

Arias put down his pencil and re-read the letter. Satisfied, he rolled the scroll and tied a ribbon around it to keep it closed. Then he stood. Looking through the window, he saw Athanasius sitting on the ground with his back against the date palm tree. *Time for him to return to Alexander.*

Arias left the chamber and exited the building through the archway that led to the small garden. When he reached the courtyard, Athanasius saw him and got to his feet.

“Peace to you, Brother Athanasius,” Arias said formally as he approached the man. “Does Alexander have no other messengers that he can use for such errands?”

“Peace to you as well, Arias,” Athanasius replied with a curt nod. “I do Alexander’s bidding, as should you.” Seeing the scroll in Arias’ hand, Athanasius added. “Is that your reply to Alexander’s letter?”

Arias nodded and handed the scroll to Athanasius. Arias was of lean build, and Athanasius appeared to be more athletic. Athanasius used his different in size to appear intimidating, which only amused Arias.

Athanasius placed the scroll in the leather pouch that hung from a strap around his neck. “Will you end this contention with the Patriarchs and finally give in to their demands?” he asked.

Arias smiled thinly. “I am a faithful Follower of The Way, Athanasius. I will not deny my faith, no matter what threats are made against me. The Apostle Peter denied being a disciple of Jesus out of fear of what the Judeans would do to him. I am not afraid of what the Patriarchs will do to me. When it is my time to stand before God and answer for my life, I do not intend to be counted with Peter. My intention is to be counted with John, the Obedient Apostle. I obey our Master, Jesus; and in matters of theology, I acknowledge no other authority.”

“Peter is the rock upon which our churches are built,” Athanasius reminded Arias.

“Peter’s declaration of Jesus as the son of God is the rock upon which our churches are built,” Arias corrected him, “not Peter the man. Our Master would never build his church on the shoulders of a man who had denied him three times in the days

leading up to the crucifixion. No structure could survive a foundation that weak.”

“You’re a fool, Arias,” Athanasius said, bending down to pick up the empty cup and plate. “You have no concept of what’s happening within the other churches. It’s not wise to stand against the Patriarchs.”

“If the three Hebrew boys survived being thrown into the fiery furnace and the Apostle John survived being boiled in a pot of oil through their faith in and reliance upon God, surely I can survive the superstitious ignorance and animosity of my fellow priests in the same way.”

Athanasius shook his head and handed the empty cup and plate to Arias. “There’s no reasoning with you, is there, Arias?”

“Reasoning is possible between two reasonable people, Athanasius. My position is reasonable because it is the same position held to by the priests of this church since its founding. Your position has no such foundation, so which of us is being reasonable?”

“There’s more going on here than a simple theological disagreement, Arias.” Athanasius turned to leave. “You may find that losing your church here is the least of the fates that await you if you don’t curb your tongue and start preaching as instructed by the Patriarchs. The heresy that you and your supporters are preaching and teaching will not be tolerated. Keep that in mind.”

“Oh, I promise to keep that in mind, *Brother Athanasius*,” Arias said as the young man strode out of the courtyard to his waiting horse. Arias stood motionless as Athanasius mounted and rode off. The wind caught the cloud of dust kicked up by the horse’s hooves and blew it away from the courtyard.

Arias turned and saw Andrew, Barnabas, and Euric waiting for him across the courtyard on the edge of the garden. He walked over to his three acolytes, who bowed to him as he approached.

“Was that Athanasius?” Andrew asked.

Arias nodded.

“What did *he* want?” Barnabas asked as they followed Arias through the garden. Both Andrew and Barnabas were Greek, but they had lived in Egypt since they were children.

“What he always wants,” Euric said with his heavy accent. His straw-colored hair fluttered in the breeze. “He’s Alexander’s lackey and takes pleasure acting like the voice of the Bishop.”

Like Botherik, Euric was a Goth. Two years earlier, Euric had written to Arias, asking for an opportunity to learn from the priest. When Arias accepted Euric as an acolyte, the young Goth left his home and traveled south.

“Be kind, Euric,” Arias said, amused. “Always be kind to others. Your rewards come not from those you help but from heaven. If you fail to help others – even to show them kindness when they are not present – then you forfeit heaven’s rewards. Love is the way. Never forget that.”

“Yes, Arias,” Euric said.

“But what *did* he want?” Barnabas repeated.

“To demand that I preach the Divine Trinity instead of The Way, and to make threats of what will happen to me if I don’t,” Arias replied as he led his acolytes to his chamber.

“The same as the last time he was here?” Andrew asked.

Arias nodded. “And the time before that, and the time before that.”

“And what will you do?” Euric asked.

“I will be a faithful Follower of The Way,” Arias replied, sitting down and gesturing for his three acolytes to sit on the bench facing his desk.

Arias spent the next two hours teaching his acolytes in The Way, emphasizing the healing ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. Botherik entered the chamber once the acolytes had left. He removed the remnants of the food that he had brought in earlier, and when he saw Arias take fresh scrolls from the cupboard, he lit several candles to provide extra light.

Late that afternoon, as the sunset filled the chamber with shades of red and orange, Arias sat at his desk, busy writing letters to the Bishops who still faithfully followed The Way and stood with Arias against the attempts to revise the gospels. *Athanasius is right. There is more going on here than a simple disagreement over theology. Alexander has never been tolerant of my views, but he’s never threatened me before. Perhaps the others have heard something. We need to be watchful. For over two hundred years, we were hunted down by the Romans. In the 20 years since the*

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*Edict of Milan allowed us to worship openly, the doctrine of the churches has been altered, leading us away from the true faith. If The Way is going to survive, we need to know who is behind these alterations and why it's happening.*

He finished the last letter and tied the scroll closed. He looked at the small stack of scrolls on the edge of his desk. The names of the other recipients were visible on the outside of each scroll: Zephyrius, Dathes, Secundus of Ptolemais, Theonus of Marmarica, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Maris of Chalcedon, Theognus of Nicaea, Paulinus of Tyrus, Actius of Lydda, and Menophantus of Ephesus.

Arias wrote the name of the recipient on the outside of the last scroll – Hosius of Hispania – and placed the scroll on top of the other scrolls.

*I'll have Euric take these letters to the harbor and arrange for messengers to deliver them. He's a resourceful lad; I wouldn't be surprised if he found a way to have Hosius' letter carried by Imperial Courier. Hopefully I'll hear from Hosius before the next epistle from Alexander arrives. He's always given good advice about how to deal with Alexander. I don't know what I'd do without his support and friendship.*

Arias summoned Euric and gave him the letters and money to pay for the messengers. After Euric had left the chamber with his instructions, Arias sat down, blew out the candle on his desk, and looked out the window facing the courtyard, watching the colors of the sky change as the sun set in the west.

The sun sat low on the horizon by the time that Athanasius was finally escorted into Alexander's chamber. It was a short distance from the church of Baucalis to Alexandria, and Athanasius had returned with Arias' reply several hours earlier. But Alexander had been tied up in meetings all afternoon and couldn't be disturbed. Athanasius waited outside Alexander's chamber until the bishop was ready to receive him.

Once inside, Athanasius handed Alexander the scroll from Arias. "Arias' reply, sir."

Alexander looked up at Athanasius. "Were you received well?"

"Yes, but I don't think that your letter was."



Alexander snorted in disgust and untied the scroll. The bishop was a robust man who was several years older than Arias and Athanasius, but his skin was pale and burned easily in the sun. He read the letter while Athanasius waited motionless on the other side of the desk.

After he finished reading Arias' letter, Alexander slammed the scroll onto his desk. "What arrogance! What defiance! Does he alone think he's the final word on the truth? I give him instructions, and he digs his heels in even deeper. He presumes to lecture me on theology when I'm his superior, a bishop, and one of the five Patriarchs of the churches! Who does he think he is?"

Alexander's pale face grew red with anger. After a few moments, he calmed down. "Do you still have a copy of the original letter that I sent to Arias?" he asked.

Athanasius nodded. He walked over to a cupboard against the wall, pulled out a scroll from one of the slots, and brought it back to Alexander.

"Good," Alexander said, taking the scroll from Athanasius. "I need to send it and this reply to Hosius in Hispania. I need his counsel on how to handle this situation. Go arrange for a messenger while I write a quick letter to Hosius. I want this on its way before morning."

"Allow me to take the messages to Hosius," Athanasius offered.

"You have other duties," Alexander reminded his chief priest.

"I know, but do you want to entrust something this important to a simple messenger? Besides, I can give Hosius a first-hand account of my conversation with Arias.

Alexander stared at Athanasius, thinking about what the young man had said.

"And what if Hosius is not at his church in Córdoba?" Athanasius continued. "A simple messenger would either wait for Hosius to return, or he would come back here with the messages undelivered. I could go and find Hosius; I know where to look."

Alexander thought about this and then nodded. "Very well. Gather what supplies and clothing you'll need, and be back here quickly."

"Yes, sir," Athanasius said happily as he left the chamber.

Alexander wrote a quick note to Hosius. He then put the note, the copy of the letter he had sent to Arias, and Arias' reply, into a leather pouch. He looped a piece of leather through the opening of the pouch and knotted it to keep the pouch sealed until it reached Hosius.

Athanasius returned a few moments later. Alexander handed the pouch to Athanasius, along with payment and money to cover expenses for the journey from Alexandria to Hispania. "Find Hosius, and return as soon as you're able." Alexander instructed.

Athanasius bowed and left the chamber, closing the door behind him.

Alexander stared at the empty dish on his desk. *What am I going to do about Arias? I hope Hosius can guide me through this. Arias and his followers are few in numbers but strong in their faith. The last thing we need is for a mere priest to become a beacon for the discontented. We need unity if the churches are going to grow and take their rightful place in the world. This disagreement is doing nothing but giving our enemies fuel to pour on our funeral pyre. It must end.*

Alexander shook his head. *Don't Arias and his followers understand that their heresy will condemn them in the afterlife? By denying that Jesus is God, they condemn themselves to damnation. Is that what they want?*

Alexander stood and walked across the room to the window. He looked out over the city as the torches cast their light along the streets of the city under the starlit sky above. *Hosius will know what to do. He always does.*

