Review of Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325: Reassessing the Contemporary Sources*, Brill, Leiden 2025, 329 pp.

Approaching the Council of Nicaea on the occasion of its 1700th anniversary is not merely a symbolic gesture—a καιρός—but also a scholarly necessity. This is precisely the task undertaken in the present volume by Samuel Fernández (henceforth F.), who advances the ambitious claim of providing an account of the first and most significant ecumenical council in the history of Christianity that does not rely on what he terms the "master narrative". This narrative, traditionally grounded in the authority of a limited number of influential historical figures—above all, Athanasius—has long shaped the standard interpretation of Nicaea. In contrast, F. proposes an approach based primarily on sources that are less ideologically compromised, such as letters, canons, theological statements, and imperial documents (p. XIX). The author designates these materials as "documents", whose evidentiary value he considers superior to that of other types of sources, namely "narratives"—historical accounts written largely by Christian authors who did not participate in the events—and "testimonies", that is, accounts composed some years later by participants themselves, but shaped by a retrospective perspective. A striking illustration of this methodological stance is provided by the treatment of the Arian controversy. The Athanasian "master narrative" famously portrays Nicaea as a struggle between individuals, between orthodox bishops and Arians, whose sole aim was allegedly to introduce impiety into the Church and who are depicted as enemies of orthodoxy *tout court*. F. rightly questions whether such a reductionist framework can adequately account for the complexity of the events, especially when it overlooks the numerous historical, doctrinal, theological, and political factors that contributed to the conflict. He further observes that modern scholarship has often narrowed the dynamics of Nicaea to the anti-Arian dispute alone, whereas in reality these dynamics were far more

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intricate and had already emerged in the theological debates of the third century, including the Meletian schism, the problem of monotheism, Monarchianism, and the legacy of Origen.

These themes are addressed in chapter 1 (pp. 1-62), which is devoted to the "Antecedents to Nicaea". Chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 63-122; pp. 123-174) focus on the Arian controversy, one of the central issues discussed in connection with the council: the former analyses the "outbreak" of the crisis and the historical and theological framework in which it emerged, while the latter examines its "expansion" in the early fourth century as well as the networks that link the principal individuals and groups involved. Chapter 4 (pp. 175-232) offers an in-depth analysis of the proceedings of the council itself, its legal framework, theological debates, and disciplinary outcomes, consistently prioritizing contemporary sources over the traditional reconstructions of the later fourth century, which are often affected by theological retrojections. The fifth and final chapter (pp. 233-294) examines the years immediately following Nicaea, a period notoriously difficult to reconstruct due to the scarcity and fragmentary nature of the sources. Here the author shows how, in the aftermath of the council, the lines of theological and ecclesiastical conflict were profoundly reconfigured, becoming increasingly entangled with disciplinary, political, and juridical concerns, and how Constantine's imperial intervention played a pivotal role in "changing" the ecclesiastical "map".

In the economy of the volume, chapter 1 plays a crucial introductory role, demonstrating that the Council of Nicaea held in 325 was not an abrupt or isolated event, but rather the culmination of institutional and theological processes that had matured over the course of the first centuries of ecclesial life. F. rejects any atomistic reading of the council and instead reconstructs its long-term antecedents, highlighting how synodal practices, disciplinary conflicts, and doctrinal debates gradually prepared the ground for the Arian crisis. The opening section is devoted to the institutional antecedents and addresses

with methodological rigor the problem of the sources, which are fragmentary and often insufficient to allow for a comprehensive reconstruction of pre-Nicene synodal activity. Against a strand of modern scholarship that tends to deny the synodal character of certain second- and third-century assemblies because they do not conform to later models, the author underscores the anachronism of such an approach and argues for the significance of early forms of collegial decision-making. These gatherings already display structural features that would later characterize synods throughout the fourth century: oral inquiries, rational debate shaped by philosophical models, the circulation of documents, and inter-ecclesial cooperation. Underlying these practices is a shared conviction that contradictory doctrines on matters of substance cannot coexist within the Church, and that the unity of the faith requires common mechanisms of discernment. Particular attention is given to the Alexandrian context, initially marked by a plurality of relatively autonomous theological schools. The consolidation of monarchical episcopacy under Demetrius put increasing strain on the balance between episcopal authority and the autonomy of teachers, as exemplified by the conflict with Origen. Within this framework, the Melitian schism is interpreted less as a doctrinal dispute than as a contest over episcopal authority and the limits of the jurisdiction of the bishop of Alexandria. The second part of the chapter reconstructs the pre-Nicene theological landscape, showing that the central issues of Nicaea—above all the relationship between the Father and the Son—had already been the subject of sustained reflection. The author highlights contributions such as that of Hippolytus, whose *Contra Noetum* articulates a Trinitarian confession that clearly distinguishes the Father and the Son while preserving divine unity and clarifies that Monarchianism was not an organized movement but rather a widespread theological tendency driven by the desire to safeguard monotheism. A decisive role is attributed to the Alexandrian school and to Origen in particular, whose reflections

on the eternal generation of the Son and on the relationship between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις provided conceptual categories that would prove central to the Nicene debate. Overall, the chapter convincingly shows that Nicaea represents the culmination of processes long in the making. The churches already possessed institutional instruments and a consolidated theological heritage with which to confront complex doctrinal conflicts; the council did not initiate these dynamics, but it brought them to a decisive turning point, endowing them with a new form and unprecedented authority.

Chapters 2 and 3 form the analytical core of the volume and must be read in close continuity, as they address two inseparable moments of the Arian controversy: its origin ("outbreak") and its rapid diffusion ("expansion"). Taken together, they offer a thoroughly documented and revisionist account of the dynamics that led to the Council of Nicaea, challenging traditional historiographical narratives.

In Chapter 2, F. reconstructs the origins of the controversy through a careful differentiation of the sources, distinguishing between later ecclesiastical histories, the testimonies of the protagonists, and documents contemporary with the events, which are treated as the most reliable basis for understanding the actual development of the crisis. On this basis, the outbreak of the controversy is dated to around 322, with its origin in Alexandria and its swift spread throughout the Christian East. One of the most original contributions of the chapter is the reassessment of the role of Eusebius of Caesarea. The author demonstrates that Eusebius's pre-crisis theology—attested above all in the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, composed before the conflict erupted—was not a reaction to Arius, but rather one of the conceptual conditions that made the controversy possible. Eusebius addresses in a systematic manner the central problem of the debate: how to confess the full divinity of the Son without compromising the oneness of God. The metaphors and models he employs—light and radiance, archetype and image, fragrance and substance—reveal a coherent theological

vision, which is deeply rooted in the Origenian tradition, but which he developed independently. This confirms that the themes which later exploded in the controversy—unity and distinction, generation, and the relationship between the Father and the Son—were already well articulated prior to Arius's intervention. By closely examining contemporary sources, especially Alexander's lengthy letter, the chapter dismantles the traditional narrative that presents the controversy as an episcopal reaction to an individual doctrinal deviation. Instead, the conflict emerges from the outset as a tension between episcopal authority and a group of presbyters who represented established theological traditions. The institutional context of Alexandria, characterized by the existence of multiple communities and *didaskaleia* entrusted to presbyters who enjoyed substantial autonomy, explains why Alexander's attempt to standardize preaching was perceived as an attack on group identity. Arius thus appears not as an isolated innovator, but as the local representative of a broader theological current.

Chapter 3 deals with the decisive transition from a local dispute to a supra-regional ecclesial conflict. From the very beginning, the controversy was public in nature, and it expanded through an intense "letter warfare", as it has been defined by F., which the author interprets as a powerful political and ecclesiastical instrument. Letters functioned not merely as means of communication but as "performative acts": to receive or to reject a letter was to recognize or to deny ecclesial communion. This dynamic produced increasing polarization, progressively eliminating any neutral ground. A crucial element of the analysis is demonstrating that the spread of the controversy was not driven by Arius as an individual, but by the mobilization of pre-existing episcopal networks, especially those associated with figures such as Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea. The surviving letters from this period reveal a remarkable diversity of theological positions: Arius does not emerge as the founder of a new doctrine, but as one voice within a complex and multifaceted tradition. Differences among

the protagonists—particularly concerning the language of the Son's "posteriority" and the expression "from nothing"—reflect divergent strategies for safeguarding monotheism and the transcendence of the Father without denying the full divinity of the Logos. Taken together, Chapters 2 and 3 advance a strong and persuasive thesis: the Arian controversy did not simply pit orthodoxy against heresy, but rather two distinct interpretations of the Origenian legacy against one another. From this perspective, Alexander's principal theological interlocutor was not so much Arius as Eusebius of Caesarea, while Arius functioned as the local focal point of a much broader conflict. The rapid expansion of the controversy made imperial intervention inevitable and led directly to the convocation of the Council of Nicaea.

The following chapter 4 is devoted to this issue, delving into the deeper dynamics of the discussions at Nicaea. It constitutes the core of the volume, offering a detailed analysis of the Council of Nicaea in its juridical, theological, and disciplinary dimensions, as we already said. The author strongly emphasizes the need to privilege sources contemporary with the council over later narratives, which are often shaped by theological retrojections developed only in the second half of the fourth century. The actual dynamics of Nicaea, he observes, remain in part elusive, yet they can be approached only through a careful and critical reading of documents closest to the events. A major contribution of the chapter lies in its reinterpretation of the council's institutional function. The author argues that Nicaea can be understood, at least in part, as a court of appeal for bishops who had previously been condemned, in particular Eusebius of Caesarea. The synod of Antioch had indeed granted such bishops a space for repentance and recognition of the truth at the subsequent assembly of Ancyra, which was later transformed into the council of Nicaea. From this perspective, Eusebius appears not as the leader of a dominant faction, but as a defendant under review, within an emerging fourth-century practice for resolving episcopal conflicts. For the historical

reconstruction of the council, the author assigns decisive weight to two first-hand sources written immediately after the assembly: Eusebius of Caesarea's *Letter* to his church and Eustathius of Antioch's *Fragment 79*. Contrary to the widespread historiographical interpretation that posits the presence of three distinct parties at Nicaea, the chapter demonstrates the implausibility of such a schema. Instead, it proposes a more coherent configuration consisting of two groups: on the one hand, those hostile to Arius and Eusebius, and on the other, those aligned with the theologies under criticism. In this context, Eusebius's letter is shown to be not the proposal of an alternative creed, but rather a defensive attempt to demonstrate his own orthodoxy. Considerable attention is devoted to the debate surrounding the introduction of the term ὁμοούσιος into the creed. The author shows that the term was not an innovation suddenly imposed by Constantine, but one already circulating and debated within the Eastern theological milieu, appearing even in texts associated with Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Arius's rejection of ὁμοούσιος did not stem from a simple denial of the Son's divinity, but from the fear that the term implied either a material conception of the Godhead or the existence of two uncreated principles. Eusebius of Caesarea, while signing the creed, hesitated over the anathema, not because he rejected its doctrinal content, but because he objected to the use of non-scriptural language. The council also adopted an identification of οὐσία and ὑπόστασις, a terminological choice that would generate significant difficulties in later reception. The section on theological outcomes offers a close analysis of the creed and the anathema, showing how they condemn specific positions already present in the preceding debate: the claim that the Son is "from nothing", that he is a creature or a product, and that he is subject to change. The role of the emperor emerges as decisive in the imposition of the final text, with the adoption of ὁμοούσιος and the addition of the anathema serving as instruments of doctrinal uniformity. The final part of the chapter highlights the disciplinary

significance of Nicaea. The twenty Nicene canons, widely transmitted and translated in both Eastern and Western collections, address concrete problems of ecclesial life, including irregular ordinations, clerical discipline, episcopal jurisdiction, and the uncontrolled mobility of clergy. This confirms that Nicaea was not merely a doctrinal council, but also a moment of far-reaching institutional reform. Overall, the chapter offers a more complex picture of Nicaea than the simplified tradition suggests: not an assembly dominated by a single figure or a single agenda, but rather a multidimensional forum in which imperial politics, personal disputes, theological negotiations, and disciplinary reforms intersected to produce one of the most influential events in Christian history.

Chapter 5 examines the years immediately following 325, a period notoriously difficult to reconstruct because of the scarcity and fragmentary nature of the sources, which is often described as the "lost years of the Arian controversy". F. shows that, far from bringing the conflict to a close, Nicaea inaugurated a new phase in which the lines of theological and ecclesiastical confrontation were profoundly reshaped and became intertwined with disciplinary, political, and juridical concerns under the decisive influence of Constantine's imperial intervention. In the early post-Nicene years, the emperor regarded the condemnation of Arianism as the primary means of securing ecclesial unity. Contemporary sources, especially Eusebius of Caesarea's *Vita Constantini* and post-synodal imperial letters, consistently emphasize unity as the central goal of imperial religious policy. Within this rhetoric, a notable strategy emerges: responsibility for the conflict is concentrated on Arius as an isolated figure (μόνος Ἄρειος), set in contrast to the unanimity of the bishops. The author interprets this move not as doctrinal inconsistency, but as a deliberate political strategy guided by the pursuit of ecclesial peace rather than by a precise Trinitarian agenda. Behind this rhetoric of harmony, however, a fierce literary controversy quickly developed. Bishops such

as Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra launched a vigorous theological offensive against the so-called "Eusebians", particularly Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia. The sources indicate that the dispute did not concern the acceptance or rejection of the term ὁμοούσιος as such, but rather its interpretation: critics of the term did not deny the divinity of the Son but feared that it compromised his personal subsistence. A crucial event in this phase was the exile of Eusebius of Nicomedia, most plausibly dated to the end of 325. Imperial letters suggest that the primary reason for his condemnation was not an abstract doctrinal disagreement, but that he protected Alexandrian clerics condemned at Nicaea, an action perceived as threatening ecclesial unity. At the same time, Constantine issued strongly anti-Arian measures, culminating in a veritable *damnatio memoriae* of Arius, the symbolic and juridical weight of which was considerable. In this context, heresy and orthodoxy acquired legal significance, marking a decisive turning point in the relationship between Church and imperial authority. One of the most original sections of the chapter addresses the emergence of a new Christological controversy concerning the human soul of Christ. Alongside the Trinitarian debate, a dispute developed—directed primarily against Eusebius of Caesarea—over the relationship between the divine Logos, the body, and the soul of Jesus. The contrast between a *Logos-sarx* and a *Logos-anthropos* Christology thus became one of the central fault lines of the post-Nicene period. Finally, in its last section, the chapter analyses the shift in Constantine's strategy from around 328 onward. Convinced that exclusive support for the victors of Nicaea had failed to secure ecclesial peace, the emperor increasingly favoured bishops associated with the Eusebian group, recalling Eusebius of Nicomedia from exile and contributing to the deposition of Eustathius. The chapter concludes by showing that Nicaea merely opened a new phase of the controversy, marked by shifting alliances, the emergence of new Christological issues, and an ever more direct involvement of imperial

power in the doctrinal and disciplinary life of the Church. Arius thus becomes more a symbol than the true centre of the conflict, while the heart of the dispute shifts to episcopal theological interpretations and the strategies adopted to preserve ecclesial unity.

We may therefore conclude by highlighting the three most scientifically significant contributions of F.'s research from our perspective. First, there is a methodological innovation: F. proposes a structural overcoming of the aforementioned "master narrative" through a hierarchization of the sources, in which contemporary "documents" are accorded greater weight than has traditionally been the case. This approach does not merely result in the correction of isolated details but rather transforms the overall interpretive framework. Secondly, the volume advances a redefinition of the Arian controversy as an intra-traditional rather than a heterodox conflict, a contribution that may be described as both theological and historiographical. In this perspective, the author demonstrates that the Arian controversy does not oppose orthodoxy to heresy but instead involves two (or more) competing interpretations of the Origenian legacy, all of them internal to the broader Alexandrian–Eastern theological tradition. Within this framework, the protagonists are multiple and cannot be reduced to isolated individuals; rather, they appear as representatives of social groups and theological currents. Finally, the third and last element is a reassessment of Nicaea as a multidimensional event, not only theological but also juridical, political, and disciplinary in nature, which moreover did not possess a definitive or conclusive character and by no means brought the various controversies to an end, but instead inaugurated developments that would continue to shape the history of ancient Christianity and beyond.

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