

# Athanasius Against the World

Davenant Hall Summer Term, July 4 – August 26, 2022

Dr Matthew JJ Hoskin

## Description of Course

St Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 373, some of the most turbulent years of the Arian/Nicene controversy. A staunch defender of orthodoxy, Athanasius is one of the most famous and significant theologians of the fourth century—indeed, of the whole ancient church. His single most important contribution was articulating and nuancing what orthodox, “Nicene” believers meant by the word *homoousios* (consubstantial/of the same essence/of the same being), showing how it is the case that God the Father eternally begets the Son without preceding him in time. His tenacity in holding firm to the faith once delivered got him exiled five times, but even when “the world groaned to find itself Arian”, Athanasius never wavered in his commitment to the full divinity of Jesus the God Word. This tenacity bore forth the phrase, “Athanasius contra mundum”—Athanasius against the world. It did not matter what emperors, councils, or fellow bishops believed. Athanasius would stand up for orthodoxy, no matter the cost.

In this course, we will explore the life and times of St Athanasius, seeing not just a controversial polemicist and theologian but also a man at prayer, a pastor for his flock, and the great promoter of the monks of the Egyptian desert. The works we shall read are *Against the Heathen (Contra Gentes)*, *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione)*, *The Life of Antony (Vita Antonii)*, *Defence Against the Arians (Apologia contra Arianos)*, *On the Decrees (De Decretis)*, and the letters to Serapion of Thmuis on the Holy Spirit. Each week’s reading will comprise around 30-50 pages of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Vol. 4.

## Course Format

The course will meet once a week for 2.5 hours per session. Approximately half the time will be spent in a lecture, and half in discussion. **For-credit students are expected to participate in discussion.** Come with one question and one thing that surprised you for discussion.

## Course Outline

Week starting	Topic	Readings
July 4	Introduction and the Council of Nicaea	Constantine’s Summons to the Council of Nicaea; Nicene Creed; Eusebius’ Letter to His Congregation; Nicene Canons; Council’s Letter to Church in Egypt; Constantine’s Letter to the Church of Alexandria; Constantine’s Letter Concerning the Date of Easter

July 11	Athanasius & Constantine	<i>Against the Heathen</i>
July 18	Why God became a man	<i>On the Incarnation</i>
July 25	Monasticism or “Why God became a man, Part 2”	<i>Life of Antony</i>
August 1	Fighting Arians 1	<i>Defence Against the Arians</i> , chh. I-III
August 8	Fighting Arians 2	<i>Defence Against the Arians</i> , chh. IV-end
August 15	On the Nicene Creed	<i>De Decretis</i>
August 22	The Holy Spirit	Letters to Serapion

## Readings

Week 1: All readings in the above table are found here:

<https://www.fourthcentury.com/council-of-nicaea-ad-325/>

Week 2: *Against the Heathen (Contra Gentes)*: NPNF2 4:1-30

Week 3: *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione)*. **See required texts below.**

Week 4: *Life of Antony (Vita Antonii)*: NPNF2 4:188-222. *There is a different, recommended translation listed below under Texts.*

Week 5: *Defence Against the Arians*, chh. I-III (*Apologia contra Arianos*): NPNF2 4:97-127

Week 6: *Defence Against the Arians*, chh. IV-end (*Apologia contra Arianos*): NPNF2 4:127-149

Week 7: *De Decretis*: NPNF2 4:149-173

Week 8: Letters to Serapion: in *Works on the Spirit*, pp. 51-138. **See required texts below.**

## Texts

For this course, you will need to buy two books, but are encouraged to get your hands on two others if possible.

### Required

*On the Incarnation* by Saint Athanasius, translated by John Behr. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2011. **For Week 3**

*Works on the Spirit* by Athanasius the Great and Didymus the Blind, translated by Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and Lewis Ayres. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2011. **For Week 8.**

## Recommended

*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Volume 4: Saint Athanasius.* AKA “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Vol. 4” or simply “NPNF2, vol. 4.” Available digitally for free, on Kindle for cheap, and used fairly affordably.

*The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life* by Athanasius of Alexandria, translated by Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2003. **For Week 4.**

## Further Reading on Athanasius

Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1998.  
Barnes, Timothy D. *Athanasius and Constantius*. New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2001.

## Further Reading on the Fourth Century

Anatolios, Khaled. *Retrieving Nicaea*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.  
Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and its Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.  
Behr, John. *The Nicene Faith*. 2 Parts. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2004. NB: Athanasius is in Part 1.  
Hanson, R. P. C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988.  
Young, Frances, with Andrew Teal. *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010.

## Assessment

### Attendance and participation: 10%

For-credit students are required to attend the course live and to participate in discussion. Non-participation in discussion will result in a lower grade. **Come each week with a question and something that surprised you**

### Athanasius the Bishop: 40% (2000 words)

Read the Festal Letters of St Athanasius (NPNF2 4:506-553). First: What are they about? What do they all have in common? Second, consider them from a pastoral perspective. What was Athanasius dealing with besides the Nicene controversy? What issues were there amongst those under his care beyond Trinitarian theology? Third, do they reveal anything different about Athanasius?

### Final Essay: 50% (4000 words)

Choose one of the texts studied in class and write a research paper on it. Research questions should be approved by Dr Hoskin no later than the end of Week 8.