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The Christology of the Council of Antioch (268. C.E.) Reconsidered

ROBERT L. SAMPLE

Paul of Samosata, who succeeded Demetrianus as bishop of Antioch in 260 C. E., faced heresy charges early in his career and formal interrogations in 264 and 268 at synods in Antioch. The second of these condemned him. This study seeks to reinterpret the Christological position of the faction opposing Paul and to analyze its implications for the later development of eastern Christian thought. Of course, the bishops and presbyters who met at Antioch in the 260s to discuss the morals and doctrines of Paul did not represent a unified doctrinal position. Gathered from various regions, they revealed a diversity of motives and concerns. Even the label "Origenists," often used to characterize the group, is misleading. Although many of the attending prelates followed Origen and his school, there is no record of conscious appeal to the writings of the Alexandrian master.

The evidence does, however, allow two broad conclusions about the goals and sentiments of the anti-Samosatene party. First, we must dismiss as unreliable the "dialogue" of Malchion as recorded in the so-called *Acta* of the second council of Antioch in 268 C. E.¹ Eusebius of Caesarea tells us that Malchion, a presbyter of Antioch, "with stenographers taking notes, conducted an investigation of Paul, which we know to be extant up to the present day; and [Malchion], alone of all, had the ability to unmask the deceitful and wily man."² Usually it has been assumed that the recorded investigation or dialogue mentioned by Eusebius, though not transmitted by him, is that of which we have extant fragments: that is, the *Acta* preserved by eastern writers of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries.³ Along with the

1. Here, as in all cases of references to the *Acta*, I am referring both to the actual "dialogue" between Malchion and Paul and to a supposed synodal "letter" of Antioch, parts of which are often included with the dialogue in the ancient dossiers. None of this material is to be confused with the synodal letter of Antioch whose text is provided in Eusebius *Historia ecclesiastica* 7. 30. 10.

2. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 7. 29. 2 (Ed. E. Schwartz, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 704).

3. These fragments have been collected by Gustave Bardy, *Paul de Samosate: Etude historique*, nouvelle édition entièrement refondue (Paris, 1929), pp. 9-79; Friedrich Loofs, *Paulus von Samosata* (Leipzig, 1924), pp. 320-340; and most recently by Henri de Riedmatten, *Les Actes du procès de Paul de Samosate* (Fribourg, 1952), pp. 136-158. There has been a growing investigation into, and scepticism about, the authenticity of the *Acta*, though no definite verdict has been reached. In the forefront of this research has been the work of Marcel Richard, "Malchion et Paul de Samosate: Le Témoignage d' Eusèbe de Césarée," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 35 (1959) 325-330. H. Chadwick, "Review of H. de Riedmatten, *Les Actes du procès de Paul de Samosate*," *Journal of*

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dialogue of Malchion, these *Acta* include portions of a supposed synodal letter of Antioch, which expresses a doctrine identical with that of the dialogue and is certainly from the same source.

Portions of the *Acta* first appear in the treatise *Contestatio*, written by an unknown author (perhaps Eusebius of Dorylaeum) in 429 C. E.⁴ They supported the interests of those opposed to Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, and attempted to demonstrate Nestorius' "Samosatene-like" leanings in Christology. Fragments of the *Acta* in the Greek also survive in the works of two sixth-century contemporaries, Leontius of Byzantium⁵ and the emperor Justinian.⁶ By the use of these conciliar records they sought to show that Nestorius and his predecessors followed Paul's heresy.

Monophysite documents of the fifth and sixth centuries provide numerous extracts from the *Acta*. Timothy Aelurus, patriarch of Alexandria from 455 to 477 C. E., wrote a work *Against Those Who Say Two Natures* which has survived in an Armenian translation and includes several fragments.⁷ In the sixth century Severus of Antioch attacked the Chalcedonians, the "followers of Nestorius," by using the *Acta*.⁸ And from the eighth century, we have five extracts from the conciliar dialogue and letter in an untitled monophysite dossier designed to discredit the Chalcedonian camp.⁹

We cannot be sure whether these men had independent access to a complete text of the dialogue and letter, or whether they drew their material from previous collections. We do know that as early as Diodore and Theodore, the Antiochenes were under fire as followers of Paul. Their chief opponents, the followers of Apollinaris, collected in dossiers portions of the texts particularly appropriate to the Apollinarian-Antiochene dialogue. Although these dossiers were used principally by the later monophysites, they also were available to anyone trying to discredit such "heretical" factions as the Nestorians. Several other texts, universally recognized as spurious also resulted from this milieu. Such forgeries included the *Symbol of Antioch* and the *Letter of St. Felix to Maximus*, in which the opinions of Diodore and Theodore of Mopsuestia were antedated to the third century and placed on the lips of Paul of Samosata. The group responsible for the

Theological Studies n. s. 4 (1953): 91-94 also provides some very valuable remarks about the creation and redaction of the *Acta*.

4. Eusebius of Dorylaeum *Contestatio publice proposita a clericis Constantinopolitanis* (Ed. E. Schwartz, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, t. 1, vol. 1, pt. Ia, pp. 101-102; reprinted in Riedmatten, pp. 136-137).
5. Leontius *Adversus Nestorianos et Eutychianos* 3 *Patrologia Graeca* 86, 1393; reprinted in Riedmatten, pp. 150-155).
6. Justinian *Tractatus contra Monophysitas* (PG 86, 1117-1120; reprinted in Riedmatten, pp. 157-158).
7. Timothy Aelurus *Against Those Who Say Two Natures* (Trans. T. R. P. Van den Oudenrijn [Latin], reprinted in Riedmatten, pp. 137-139).
8. Severus *Contra Grammaticum* 3. 25 (Trans. Riedmatten [French], pp. 140-145).
9. *Monophysite Anthology* (Trans. Riedmatten [French], pp. 145-147).

creation of these texts was probably the same Apollinarian/monophysite camp of the fourth and fifth centuries.

There is thus considerable suspicion about the authenticity of Malchion's sentiments in the *Acta*. "Malchion" perceived Paul's heresy to be the "division" of the one Christ into two Sons, the Logos and Jesus Christ.¹⁰ But the presbyter insisted that the Son is "an essence essentially existent (οὐσιωσθαι) in the Savior,"¹¹ and that Wisdom itself "dwelled essentially (ἐπιδημησέναι οὐσιωδῶς) in the flesh from Mary."¹² Malchion asserted that there is a "union" (συνάφειαν) between the body and Wisdom "according to essence, not according to participation."¹³ This union was a "composition" (σύντασιν)¹⁴ or "meeting" (συνθέσεως)¹⁵ or "intertwining" (συμπλυκῆν).¹⁶ And, despite the opinions of Sellers¹⁷ and others, it is undeniable that the "Malchion" of the *Acta* saw one of the chief points of disagreement between himself and Paul to be the degree to which complete humanity can be attributed to Christ. Malchion insisted that the Logos was not joined to a "man" (ἄνθρωπος), but to a "body" (σώματι),¹⁸ a body which, it was implied, had no human soul.¹⁹ Here the presbyter contradicted the *Letter of Six Bishops*, an epistle supposedly written by Malchion's compatriots at Antioch, which called Christ both God "and man"²⁰ and declared that the Logos "became man" (ἐνηθροπηθέναι).²¹

These *Acta* cannot be authentic, at least not in their present form. No other reliable evidence indicates that the debate at Antioch centered principally upon the question of Christological "union" or the issue of Christ's "human soul" or full humanity. Eusebius of Caesarea stated in 330 C. E. that Paul of Samosata was condemned "because he asserted a human soul" in Christ.²² Yet Eusebius was by this point an avid opponent of Marcellus of Ancyra. In the remarks just cited, Eusebius compared Paul's

10. "And so you say this, that wisdom lives in him just as we also dwell in our house, as one thing in another. But neither are we part of the house, nor is the house a part of us," says Malchion. Petrus Diaconus *De Incarnatione et Gratia Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (*Patrologia Latina* 62, 85; reprinted in Riedmatten, pp. 148–150).

11. Leontius, *Adv. Nest. et Eut.* 3 (PG 86, 1393).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. *Codex Januensis* 27 (Ed. J. B. Pitra, *Analecta Sacra*, 3: 600–601; reprinted in Riedmatten, pp. 156–157).

15. Leontius *Adv. Nest. et Eut.* 3 (PG 86, 1393).

16. *Cod. Jan.* 27 (Pitra, p. 600).

17. R. V. Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies* (London, 1940), p. 29.

18. Leontius *Adv. Nest. et Eut.* 3 (PG 86, 1393). *Adversus Nestorianos et Eutyehianos*.

19. "Malchion: . . . the very logos, the very wisdom, was in that body as that which moves life in us." *Cod. Jan.* 27 (Pitra, p. 600).

20. *The Letter of Six Bishops* 8 (Bardy, *Paul*, p. 18).

21. *Ep.* 8 (Bardy, p. 18). This divergence, and the general difference in language and thrust of the *Acta* and the *Epistula*, make it clear that the sentiments of the *Epistula* and "Malchion" cannot be from the same, or similar, circles. Bardy (*Paul*, p. 479) insists that Malchion expresses the same doctrines as the six bishops, but it is an untenable position.

22. Eusebius *De ecclesiastica theologia* 1. 20 (Ed. E. Klostermann, *GCS*, vol. 4, p. 88).

beliefs to those of Marcellus, with the latter as the real object of his polemic. He presented Paul's doctrine only to discredit Marcellus by constructing for him an heretical genealogy. It is thus likely that Eusebius misrepresented Samosatene doctrine, a conclusion confirmed by an examination of his original opinion on the matter. In his *Eclogae Propheticae*, an early work conceived before the Arian or Marcellian heresies had risen to prominence, Eusebius gave no hint that Christ's "human soul" or any related notion was an issue in Paul's heresy. Rather, Paul was simply among those who denied Christ's "pre-existence."²³

This issue of pre-existence, the importance of which at Antioch was reaffirmed by Athanasius²⁴ and the pseudonymous author of the fourth century *Contra Apollinarem*,²⁵ barely surfaces in the *Acta*. Nor can one understand how the letter and dialogue fail to reflect the most typical, and the earliest, charge against Paul, that he conceived Christ to be *only* a man.²⁶ Further, Henri de Riedmatten's brilliant analysis of the Apollinarian cast of Malchion's opinions²⁷ ironically confirms my doubts about the authenticity of the *Acta*. Riedmatten contends the *Acta* are genuine. However, it is inconceivable that the language of a mid-third century presbyter, as recorded in the *Acta*, could be identical at points with the language of Apollinaris nearly a century later—language which is inexplicable apart from the decisions and controversies following Nicaea. That a certain Malchion, a priest of Antioch and apparently the head of a rhetorical school in that city, was prominent in the proceedings against Paul is fairly certain,²⁸ and it is probable that written records of some sort issued from the final session of 268. But about Malchion's particular beliefs we can say nothing. The *Acta* were not only collected and utilized by the fourth century Apollinarians but received much of their content from them as well. Consequently the common tack of summarizing the position of Paul's opponents by analyzing the remarks of Malchion is no longer justifiable.²⁹

The second conclusion about the anti-Samosatene party is that its goal was to assure the dominance of Logos Christology in the apostolic see of Antioch. The best evidence for the specific doctrine of Paul's adversaries is the *Letter of Six Bishops (Epistula)*. Supposedly addressed to Paul by six bishops,

23. Eusebius *Eclogae Propheticae* 3. 19 (PG 22, 1021).

24. Athanasius *De Synodis* 45 (Ed. H. G. Opitz, *Athanasius Werke*, vol. 2, pt. 1, fasc. 9, p. 270).

25. Pseudo-Athanasius *Contra Apollinarem* 2. 3 (PG 26, 1135).

26. Pamphilus *Apologia pro Origene* 5 (PG 17, 578–584).

27. H. de Riedmatten, *Les Actes du procès*, pp. 49–50. Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies*, p. 29 also shows that a similar use of "ousia" was made by Apollinaris and his disciples.

28. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 7. 29. 2 (Schwartz, p. 704).

29. For the best analysis of Malchion's thought, on the basis of the *Acta*, see the studies of Riedmatten, *Les Actes du procès*, pp. 149ff., and Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies*, pp. 27–32. Sellers is sensitive to the problem that Malchion's words are at times anachronistic or inappropriate for a third-century theologian, but accepts the authenticity of the sentiments nonetheless.

Hymen, Theophilus, Theotecnus, Maximus, Proclus, and Bolanus, it contains a long creedal statement, interspersed with the exegesis of selected scriptural passages. The treatise was clearly intended to express the opinions of the "orthodox" fathers at Antioch. Two alternatives thus exist: (1) the letter is authentic, a genuine product of the controversy which centered around Paul; or (2) it is a forgery, probably of the fourth century, in which one or another of the theological factions attempted to root its own doctrinal genealogy in third-century orthodoxy, or the genealogy of its opponents in "Samosatene" sentiments. The evidence substantiates its authenticity.

The *Epistula's* statements and confessions reflect many of the earliest understandings of the Samosatene debate, especially its insistence on the Son's pre-existence and divinity.³⁰ Further, its "orthodoxy" is not the high Christology of the fourth century Athanasian/Apollinarian stream, nor the sharply subordinationist doctrine proposed by the Arians. While asserting Christ's "natural" divinity, there is no apparent need, as at Nicaea, to insist on Christ's equality with the Father. While there are certainly fourth-century groups who could be comfortable with the epistle's doctrinal stance, principally the semi-Arians or the "Homoiousians," the *Epistula* most reflects the conservative Christology of the pre-Constantinian period. It represents a period that still holds in tension a curious mixture of subordinationism and ditheism.

Likewise, the issues discussed reflect inadequately the major controversies of the following century. Though the document was probably produced by early Word-flesh Christologians, it is mistaken to call its Christology "Apollinarian."³¹ None of the distinctive language of that fourth-century sect is present; the letter's Christology is tinged with a subordinationist quality that is irreconcilable with Apollinaris' beliefs; and few, if any, of the issues presented touch upon the problem of Christological union.

It is more likely that the letter was conceived in the interests of the later anti-Marcellian party, which at various times included members of the radical Arian, semi-Arian, and Athanasian camps. The discussion of *Epistula* 4, taken in isolation, concerns the affirmation of a "subsisting" and "essential" Logos, in contrast to a mere "instrument" or "insubstantial skill" (*ἐπιστήμησ' ἀνυποστάτου*). Such argumentation resembles objections made in the next century against Marcellus' Logos doctrine. Moreover the closing passages (8) of the epistle seem to confirm this suspicion. "Thus," wrote the bishops, "Christ, before his 'taking flesh,' has been named 'Christ' in the divine writings." Then follow a series of passages, including 2 Cor 3:17; 1

30. Cf. Athanasius *De Synodis* 45. 4 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, fasc. 9, p. 270).

31. See the remarks of Charles Raven, *Apollinarianism* (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 46-65, and Riedmatten, *Les Actes du procès*, pp. 52ff., both of whom insist on the "Apollinarian" or "pre-Apollinarian" nature of the early evidence about Malchion and the Council of Antioch. Bardy has presented a very convincing study of this issue and refutes the notion that the *Letter of Six Bishops* is in any way "Apollinarian" (*Paul* p. 29).

Cor 10:1, 4; and 1 Cor 1:24, which speak of “Christ” as an eternal being. One immediately calls to mind Eusebius’ attempts in the next century to demonstrate to Marcellus that the pre-existent Logos was indeed named the “Son” also. Marcellus, for his part, said that the pre-existent Logos became the subsistent “Son” at the incarnation, and only then could one call the Logos by the titles of Son, Christ, Light, and so forth. The similarities between the *Epistula* and this later debate are notable.³²

However the distinctive terminology of the bishop of Ancyra, of the logos as *δύναμις* and as *ἐνέργεια*, and the debate over the Logos as “utterance” are lacking throughout the letter. Nor are the classic Johannine texts, so crucial to the Marcellian Christology, discussed in the *Epistula*. The Gospel of John is only barely visible in the treatise. The few references are in sections arguing not for the Son’s distinction or unity with the Father, or for the Son’s identity with the Logos, but for the Son’s eternal (versus foreordained) existence and his divinity. In the section which specifically debates the Logos’ subsistence,³³ there is no use of the Fourth Gospel. It is improbable that a document dealing with truly Marcellian doctrines could avoid a discussion of John 10:30: “I and the Father are one.” It is apparent from the *Epistula*, in fact, that much more dependence was placed upon the Pauline epistles in the New Testament for debate and confession. Thus even if their opponent, the bishop of Antioch, expressed doctrines which resembled those of the later bishop of Ancyra, it is clear that the authors of the *Letter of Six Bishops* did not know of the actual Marcellian debate. The exegetical lines were drawn differently, and doctrinal emphases, even the order and plan of debate, varied. The conclusion is that the *Letter of Six Bishops* is an authentic epistle, written sometime before Paul’s final condemnation in 268 C. E., defining what were in the eyes of the orthodox the chief issues at stake in the confrontation at Antioch.

The thrust of the bishops’ argumentation throughout the letter was to establish certain Christological fundamentals. First, Christ is pre-existent: he was “always with the Father;”³⁴ he existed “in essence” for all time;³⁵ he “truly existed” as “living energy” and “substantial;”³⁶ and he it was, not an “angel,” who was revealed to Abraham and the patriarchs.³⁷ Secondly, Christ “descends” to redeem mankind: the Son was “dispatched by the Father,” and taking flesh, became man;³⁸ and he “emptied himself.”³⁹

32. See Loofs’ argument that Paul, like Marcellus, postulated a *λόγος ἄσαρνος* (*Paulus*, p. 274).

33. *Ep.* 4 (Bardy, p. 15).

34. *Ep.* 3 (Bardy, p. 14).

35. *Ep.* 2 (Bardy, p. 14).

36. *Ep.* 4 (Bardy, p. 15).

37. *Ep.* 5 (Bardy, p. 16).

38. *Ep.* 8 (Bardy, p. 18).

39. *Ep.* 8 (Bardy, p. 18).

Thirdly, he is “naturally” divine: the Son is “god by nature” (*ὑποστάσει*);⁴⁰ “the god of all things;”⁴¹ and “god and man.”⁴² Yet this is not the high Christology of the fourth century. The insistence on “natural divinity” does not preclude a definite subordinationism. The Son, claimed the *Epistula*, has only a “measured knowledge” of God.⁴³ Further, the Son clearly submits to the will of the Father.⁴⁴ The prelates at Antioch desired only to assert the basic dogmas of a Logos-oriented faith: Christ’s pre-existence; his descent; and a metaphysical understanding of “divinity.”

The synod and its decisions were significant for the later development of Christian doctrine, though not as one might initially suppose. For example, it would be mistaken to see the decisions of the synod as a precedent for the doctrinal stance taken at Nicaea against the Arians in 325 C. E. Rather, the closest fourth-century parallel with the sentiments of the Antiochene bishops were the beliefs articulated in the fourth century Macroscopic Creed, a confession unequivocally damned by Athanasius.⁴⁵ Admitting, as in the *Letter of Six Bishops*, that Christ was “subject to his God and Father,” the authors of the creed nevertheless insisted that he was “by nature true and perfect God, and was not afterwards made God out of man.”⁴⁶ By balancing both subordinationist and descent motifs, the Council of Antioch in 341 (the Dedication Council), not Nicaea, was the real successor of the Antiochene synod of 268.

The doctrines advanced in the repudiation of Samosatene Christology, however, were critical in the first phase of the Arian controversy. The Council of Antioch in 268 may not have provided a precedent for asserting Christ’s equality with God the Father, yet it did affirm orthodoxy’s marriage to Logos Christology and all that implied. Antioch affirmed that no Christology could be valid without recognizing Christ’s pre-existence and his descent to become man. Athanasius reported that the fathers of Antioch affirmed the proposition that “God became a man” in the incarnation, and not that “a man became God.”⁴⁷ The *Letter of Six Bishops* confirms his assessment of their priorities.

These conciliar conclusions were crucial in the development of early Arianism. In a recent reinterpretation of early fourth-century Arian Christology, Dennis Groh and Robert Gregg have stressed the fundamental concepts of the Son’s “will,” “obedience,” and “advance,” and the complete rejection of the metaphysical or “essentialist” understandings of their

40. *Ep.* 2 (Bardy, p. 14).

41. *Ep.* 5 (Bardy, p. 16).

42. *Ep.* 8 (Bardy, p. 18).

43. *Ep.* 2 (Bardy, p. 14).

44. *Ep.* 3 (Bardy, p. 14).

45. *Athanasius De Syn.* 26 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, fasc. 9, p. 252).

46. Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 2. 19. NPNF translation.

47. Athanasius *De Syn.* 45. 4 (Opitz, vol. 2, pt. 1, fasc. 9, p. 270).

opponents. Their Christ is one who has become Son “from virtue” and “according to grace.”⁴⁸ The concept of “ascent” is critical since the Arian Christ, “was plunged into the world of advancement.”⁴⁹ Jesus “became” the Son for Arius by grace and ethical advance. His sonship did not differ essentially from that of the believer. The Arian hermeneutic, according to Groh and Gregg, maintained that “what is predicated of the redeemer must be predicated of the redeemed. The central point in the Arian system is that Christ gains and holds his sonship in the same way as other creatures.”⁵⁰

This new interpretation of Arianism however, is problematic. The Christology of the early Arians, as we know it from their opponents Alexander and Athanasius, affirmed Christ’s essential pre-existence and his incarnation. In other words, it was formally a descent Christology. But acceptance of “incarnation” and “descent” implies prerogatives for Christ which destroy the unity between Jesus and Christians and question the ethical validity of Christ’s “progress.” The solution to this apparent contradiction may lie in the councils of 268 and 264 at Antioch. While not exaggerating the influence of these synods, the impact of the anti-Samosatene decisions, at least in the eastern mediterranean churches, must have been substantial. The Council of Antioch in 268 was one of the largest synods of the third century, and its constituency included representatives from every major see in the East. Moreover early Arianism had its birth in Antioch in the late third and early fourth century. If the traditions can be believed,⁵¹ Arius and his future allies were schooled at Antioch at the feet of Lucian. One must conclude that the Arian acceptance of the dogmas of incarnation and descent, far from reflecting a genuine expression of traditional Logos Christology, was rather an inescapable consequence of conciliar decisions.

Indeed, Groh and Gregg have shown just how tenuous are these dogmas in the Arian scheme. The Arian Christ received pre-existent glory “in anticipation” of his earthly obedience;⁵² semi-eternal glory appears to be only an outcome of the later sonship.⁵³ A certain amount of tension, even contradiction, still exists in the dual affirmation of ascent and descent. Yet it is essential to realize that Arian cosmology was derivative and foreign to the Christology as a whole.

Thus it is ironic that Arius’ notion of Christ’s pre-existence should have become such a central point of contention with Athanasius and his following. Too often we interpret Arius’ position as a negative reaction against current views of Christ’s “eternality” resulting from his extreme Origenistic

48. Dennis Groh and Robert Gregg, “The Centrality of Soteriology in Early Arianism,” *Anglican Theological Review* 59 (1977): 265-267.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 268. Cf. Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 1. 9 (PG 26, 28).

50. *Ibid.*, p. 270. Cf. Alexander *Ep. ad Alex.* (Opitz, vol. 3, Urk. 14. 28, p. 24).

51. Theodoret *Hist. eccl.* 1. 5. 4 (Ed. L. Parmentier, *GCS*, vol. 44, p. 26).

52. Athanasius *Or. c. Ar.* 2, 5 (PG 26, 156).

53. Groh and Gregg, “The Centrality of Soteriology in Early Arianism,” p. 274.

subordinationism. Athanasius himself wished to characterize the views of the Alexandrian presbyter as just such an “attack” upon the Son. But in fact Arius’ ideas about the Son’s pre-existence were probably a *concession* to pre-Nicene orthodox biases as expressed in the Council of Antioch, however inadequate this concession seemed to Athanasius. Because Antioch had defined the limits of legitimacy for much of the East, Malchion was a chief symbol of orthodoxy for the fourth century, and Paul its arch-heretic. With the standards of descent Christology firmly fixed, even the Arians had to give their allegiance. Thus the Council of Antioch in 268 became a powerful factor in the formulation of fourth-century belief.