**Athanasius’ Thorn**

The Schismatic Egyptian Meletians

John W. Gillis

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Sometime shortly after the onset of the Diocletian persecution in 303, the Alexandrian Pope, Peter, was forced into hiding. A response of such passive resistance to the impious demands of tyranny was well-established in the tradition of the early Church, but could also be disdained by some of the faithful, attracted to the virility of martyrdom. Half a century earlier, under the Decian persecutions, “a ‘culture’ of Christian martyrdom”[[1]](#footnote-1) emerged in Egypt, especially up-river, away from the Greco-Roman milieu of the great cosmopolitan city of Alexandria. This culture can be glimpsed in the *Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah*, written during the latter half of the third century,[[2]](#footnote-2) a work combining modes of thought from post-pharaonic Egyptian popular religion with Jewish apocalyptic: eschatologizing conflict, glorifying martyrdom, and promising superior rewards for martyrs, compared to those who flee from the "Lawless One" into the desert.[[3]](#footnote-3) This stalwart Egyptian fervor was recorded by Eusebius[[4]](#footnote-4) during the post-Diocletian persecution under Maximin, as he relates the trial in Palestine of several Egyptian martyrs who ascribe to themselves the names of Hebrew prophets in their defiant witness to the faith. One can also see a similar, albeit less politically charged, spirit of rigorous enthusiasm in the monastic asceticism that emerged in the Egyptian desert during this same period.

It was out of this context of romanticized but stout zealotry that, during the Diocletian persecution, perhaps in 304 or 305, Bishop Meletius of Lycopolis went out from his See into “strange dioceses”, ordaining men willing to defy imperial suppression of the liturgy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet in doing so, he was knowingly flouting the law of the Church.[[6]](#footnote-6) This practice was an affront to Peter, in whose patriarchate it took place, and certainly also to the imprisoned bishops in whose dioceses Meletius had usurped the authority to ordain. Four of these fellow bishops of Upper Egypt, who had been imprisoned together, wrote to Meletius to express their angst, saddened at his "troubling the divine order and ecclesiastical rules".[[7]](#footnote-7) They insisted that, if any ordinations were indeed necessary, he should have brought the matter to the imprisoned bishops, or at least to Peter.[[8]](#footnote-8) Meletius gave no response to these bishops’ complaints. Rather, upon hearing of their executions, he immediately went to Alexandria, where he made an alliance with two sympathetic laymen, Isidore and Arius, who directed him to two presbyters to whom Peter had delegated authority, and who Meletius now either recruited to his cause[[9]](#footnote-9) or excommunicated, appointing others in their stead.[[10]](#footnote-10) In either event, Peter wrote to the Church in Alexandria, instructing them to avoid communion with Meletius until a synod could be assembled to adjudicate the matter.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Meletius was subsequently arrested and imprisoned, and Peter convened a synod which deposed him, but there are difficulties establishing correlating dates. Meletius likely came to Alexandria in 305, and, if we follow Athanasius,[[12]](#footnote-12) the synod that deposed him occurred in 306.[[13]](#footnote-13) Athanasius levels two criticisms against Meletius regarding the synod: that he did not appeal to another council (which would have been the appropriate manner of contesting the judgment); and that he did not “attempt to justify himself before those who should come after”,[[14]](#footnote-14) which suggests that he failed to appear before the synod.[[15]](#footnote-15) The second would have been an unfair criticism if Meletius were in chains at the time, so Meletius must not have been arrested yet, unless he had been arrested and already released by 306. Certainly, it would have been easy to get arrested in Alexandria as a defiant Christian bishop in 305, when the persecution was still at its peak, and this last possibility seems to be the only way to make sense of Athanasius’ statement[[16]](#footnote-16) that offering sacrifice was among the crimes for which Meletius was deposed, since he wouldn’t have been tempted to offer the impious sacrifice unless he were in the hands of the torturers. Such a scenario, however, would surely have – at the least – cast serious doubts upon Meletius’ credibility among his following of zealous resisters, and yet we know that he retained (apparently undisputed) leadership of his faction for another two decades. Furthermore, such action would seem out of character for a man who demonstrated such dissatisfaction even with passive resistance to the Empire, although, admittedly, his principles would ultimately prove to be founded less upon a need to express the integrity of the Church than upon a nationalistic or at least anti-imperial spirit of defiance: “His quarrel was with the world-rulers. If it led on to a quarrel with the other Egyptian bishops, and to schism, that was merely the sequel".[[17]](#footnote-17) Nonetheless, it seems more credible that the accusation of being a *lapsi* is a later accretion inferred from the fact that he was not martyred as many other imprisoned bishops were, but walked out of prison when Galerius issued his rescript in 311. For the purpose of his deposition, such charges would have been superfluous, as there was no denying his usurpations of the episcopal authority of many Egyptian bishops, including the Alexandrian Pope himself.

If Meletius was arrested and imprisoned after the synod deposed him, that raises another problem in regards to the location of the synod. Hefele, among many others, asserts that the synod was held in Alexandria.[[18]](#footnote-18) If Meletius was still free, it seems likely that he was still in Alexandria, as his acts during the preceding period point to a man acting as anti-pope of Egypt, who under the circumstances could hardly be expected to be found hiding or otherwise not present to the Evangelic See. If that is the case, it is hard to see how Meletius, with his small band of local clergy, could have resisted being brought to the synod for deposition if it were local. Furthermore, Alexandria may still have been too dangerous a place for Peter at that time. However, since the synod was called to depose the bishop of Lycopolis, Peter very well may have convened it in Lycopolis – a considerably safer location – where a successor would then have been elected and installed.[[19]](#footnote-19) Regardless of the location, Meletius would neither accept nor contest the judgment of the synod, but rejected its authority by establishing a formally schismatic body which, according to Epiphanius, called itself the *Church of the Martyrs*, in contradistinction from the (Petrine) *Catholic Church*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Another historical difficulty arising out of this synod relates to the person of the heresiarch Arius. One of the judgments of the synod was the invalidity of Meletian baptisms, a judgment which caused a rift between Peter and Arius, who was his deacon: Arius faulted Peter for an incorrect judgment on this matter.[[21]](#footnote-21) Peter subsequently excommunicated Arius, who for this reason has been said to have been a Meletian sympathizer. The difficulty ensues when considering whether this is the same Arius who, as a layman, greeted Meletius when the latter arrived in Alexandria in 305. If it is the same man, then he not only went, in a single year’s time, from being a traitor to his archbishop by embracing the usurper, to being an aide to the archbishop in a position of being able to object to synodal proceedings, but he also would have had to convince the besieged primate to ordain him to the diaconate during the interim. This seems remotely possible if the synod were held in Lycopolis, but unfathomable if it were held in Alexandria, where the populace and local clergy would have known Arius as a recent collaborator of Meletius. If it is not the same man – which seems more likely given the facts – then it seems superfluous to attribute Meletian sympathies to Arius simply on account of his dissent on the matter of Meletian baptisms – Arius’ view would soon be defined as of the orthodox faith, after all – and obstinate dissent from his bishop’s judgment would be sufficient to find him excommunicate. This would also explain why Peter’s short-lived successor Achillas (r. 311-313) re-admitted Arius to communion so quickly, even raising him to the priesthood, and putting him over the church of Baucalis, in the district tradition holds to be the location of St Mark’s martyrdom, as well as that of the fresh blood of Pope Peter.

When Galerius' edict of toleration was published in 311, we thus take it that Meletius was released from confinement, returning to Alexandria to re-establish himself over 'the Church of the Martyrs.' Judging from the legitimacy with which he obviously held his ordinations not only of presbyters, but even of bishops throughout Upper and Lower Egypt, he was likely invested as anti-pope at this time by those Alexandrian presbyters who supported him[[22]](#footnote-22) (if he had not already done so before being arrested), interpreting Peter’s extended absence as abandonment and thus forfeiture of his See. Peter claimed his see, however, upon his own return from hiding. A synaxis in honor of the martyrs became an occasion for violence between the factions,[[23]](#footnote-23) leading to the arrest of Peter at the command of Maximin, who was not eager to embrace his father’s death-bed toleration edict.[[24]](#footnote-24) The hagiographical *Genuine Acts of Peter* asserts that unruly reaction to this arrest on the part of Peter’s followers brought about – or at least hastened – the order for Peter's execution.

The beheading of Peter apparently did little to stem the discord between the two factions, as Athanasius complains of Meletius that he reviled and made false accusations against both successors of Peter: Achillas and Alexander (r. 313-328).[[25]](#footnote-25) Furthermore, the schism was of such import that the status of the Meletians was taken up for deliberation by the Council of Nicaea more than a decade later, in 325. The principal purpose of the council, of course, was to settle the matter of the aforementioned Arius, whose subordinationist Christological ideas were disturbing the Church in the East. Alexander had repudiated Arius’ teaching in synods held at Alexandria between 318 and 321, and the Meletians likewise rejected Arianism as heretical,[[26]](#footnote-26) leading Arius to flee east where he could find support, particularly in the person of the imperially-connected Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia.

Concerning the Meletians, the council determined, in clemency, to reconcile them – much to the eventual chagrin of Athanasius.[[27]](#footnote-27) Meletius himself, however, "should remain in his city"[[28]](#footnote-28) – Lycopolis, that is, not Alexandria – and without episcopal authority [e.g. to ordain], although he would be allowed to keep the honor of his title. The Meletian clergy were to be admitted to communion “after having been confirmed by a more legitimate ordination”,[[29]](#footnote-29) but were to be subordinate to those ordained by Alexander, though they might be allowed to succeed a Catholic in higher office if they were: found fit for such an office, elected by the people, and ratified by the bishop of Alexandria.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In order to prevent Meletius from tendering a limitless string of episcopal appointments to the reconciliation process, Alexander demanded and obtained from Meletius a schedule of the bishops and Alexandrian clergy ordained by Meletius, which bishops numbered twenty-eight: fifteen from Upper Egypt; thirteen from Lower Egypt. Named last among the bishop was John of Memphis, “who was ordered by the Emperor to be with the Archbishop”,[[31]](#footnote-31) being the hand-picked successor to Meletius,[[32]](#footnote-32) also known as John Archaph, whom the Emperor apparently intended to seat in Alexandria as a subordinate to Alexander, with the same privileges of potential to succeed to the See as the other reconciled Meletian bishops in other sees. The actual effecting of the legitimation of the Meletians’ ordinations appears to have taken several years, for Athanasius reports[[33]](#footnote-33) that it took only five months for the Meletians, “like dogs unable to forget their vomit”, to again begin “troubling the Church”, troubling which took place after the death of Alexander, who died 17 April 328. This “troubling” is undoubtedly related to the elevation to the Alexandrian See of Athanasius himself.

Traditionally, the Alexandrian Pope had been elected by local presbyters from among their own number, and subsequently consecrated by the bishops of Egypt,[[34]](#footnote-34) but the Fourth Canon of Nicaea now called for election by bishops: preferably “all the bishops of the province”. The Athanasian election was obviously the first in Alexandria that would have included both Petrine and Meletian bishops. Given the terms of the reconciliation, the Meletians would have had reasonable expectations that John “Archaph” would be raised to the patriarchate, but under the circumstances, a consensus around any candidate for the second-most dignified office in the Church – especially one who was a recently reconciled schismatic – was unlikely. A small group of bishops consecrated Athanasius on 8 June 328, disregarding consensus. Most bishops accepted this, but the reconciled Meletians protested, instead electing a competing Meletian bishop,[[35]](#footnote-35) presumably John, since he succeeded Meletius as the head of the faction upon the latter’s death.[[36]](#footnote-36) However, John appears later in the later historical record in relation to the Eusebian city of Antioch, not Alexandria.[[37]](#footnote-37) Furthermore, the letter of Callistus from the British Museum papyri published by H. I. Bell[[38]](#footnote-38) identifies a Meletian Bishop Heraiscus in Alexandria, probably in 335, while John is in Antioch.[[39]](#footnote-39) The letter also demonstrates that Pope Athanasius, or at least his supporters, were not indisposed to inflict retribution upon the Meletians for their troubling of the Church, and in John we may have the historical irony of a Meletian Patriarch of the Egyptian *Church of the Martyrs* having fled to safe harbor for personal protection, leaving a suffragan behind to attend to matters in the Evangelic See.

Upon hearing of the renewed Meletian schism in Alexandria, Eusebius of Nicomedia sought to unite his “Arian” faction with theirs, and thus the Egyptian Meletians and the Eusebians to the east soon began to conspire together against Athanasius: the Meletians being useful to the Arians for the local accusations they could make against Athanasius, and the Meletians being willing to set aside their earlier rejection of Arian Christology in order to make cause against their common enemy with the powerful Eusebians, eventually becoming almost indistinguishable in both character and doctrinal content from their former opponents.[[40]](#footnote-40) Athanasius would bitterly charge the Meletians with unprincipled treachery, griping that even after the Nicaean Council had graciously restored them, they had permitted Eusebius to buy them "with large promises".[[41]](#footnote-41)

In 332, Eusebius convinced Emperor Constantine to compel Athanasius to re-admit Arius to the Church in Alexandria, and when Athanasius resisted, Eusebius obtained false charges from several Meletians concerning the bishop’s alleged coercion of the public for personal gain, but Athanasius’ presbyters Macarius and Apis refuted the accusation, leading the Emperor to condemn the accusers. But he also summoned Athanasius to his presence in Psammathia (outside Nicomedia). Once there, Athanasius was accused of treasonously supporting an enemy of the Emperor, but this charge was also found by the Emperor to be false.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, a further charge was leveled by the Eusebians against the presbyter Macarius.

In Mareotis, a district Alexandria that had not welcomed the Meletian schism, a disturbed young man named Ischyras had been masquerading as a priest, and when Athanasius learned of it, he had sent Macarius to summon him. Finding Ischyras sick in bed, Macarius charged the lad’s father to warn him to cease his deception, which he did, but Ischyras, rather than complying, fled to the Meletians and their Eusebian allies, bartering from them the promise of a bishopric in return for a tale accusing Macarius of having interrupted a Divine Liturgy, overthrowing the altar, and breaking the sacred chalice of the liturgy.[[43]](#footnote-43) Constantine detected the falsity of these charges likewise, and he wrote a long letter to the Church at Alexandria denouncing mendacity and praising the integrity of Athanasius.[[44]](#footnote-44) Ischyras, furthermore, wrote to Athanasius repenting of his calumny, accusing the Meletians of orchestrating the deceit.[[45]](#footnote-45)

However, the Meletians and Eusebians next added a scurrilous murder charge to their bill against Athanasius, leading Constantine to order the Censor Dalmatius in Caesarea to begin proceedings against him. The Meletians had convinced one of their own bishops – Arsenius of Hypsela – to go into hiding so that John Archaph and the others could charge Athanasius with his murder. They even elaborated the charge by placing the hand of a corpse in a small casket, claiming that it was Arsenius’, which Athanasius had severed for practicing sorcery. Athanasius was summoned to Caesarea in 334 to face trial, but, learning of the intrigue and finding Arsenius, he sent word to Constantine that Arsenius was in fact alive, and the Emperor halted the proceedings. John Archaph, being disgraced by the revelation of his malicious dishonesty, wrote to Athanasius seeking pardon, an act praised by the Emperor in a letter to John.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The following year, however, Constantine desired an Empire-unifying council to enhance the celebration of the consecration of his *Church of the Resurrection* in Jerusalem, a council he convoked in Tyre, insisting that Athanasius appear to answer to the growing accusations against him.[[47]](#footnote-47) Ischyras, embittered at not having been received back in to communion, re-appeared to reiterate his previously recanted accusations concerning the chalice. Some other charges were also made, and then the allegations of Arsenius’ murder were once again broached – the allegedly severed hand even being presented as evidence of the crime. Athanasius again disproved the charges against him, as well as the bad faith of his accusers, theatrically producing the supposedly dead bishop, along with all his hands.[[48]](#footnote-48) The Eusebians, still not shamed into admitting their duplicity, assigned a deputation of Athanasius’ enemies to travel to Mareotis to gather additional evidence concerning the Ischyras affair.[[49]](#footnote-49) Athanasius quit the synod, and, in absentia, was condemned for fleeing, and subsequently deposed. The Meletian John Archaph and his suffragans, were restored.[[50]](#footnote-50) Indeed, even Arsenius was accepted by the synod back into communion and installed as the bishop of Hypsela, so that Socrates notes ironically: “by an extraordinary course of circumstances, the alleged victim of assassination by Athanasius, was found alive to assist in degrading him”.[[51]](#footnote-51) Athanasius would be banished by Constantine to Gaul.

That would prove a shallow victory for the Meletians, however. Though Constantine had exiled Athanasius, he would not allow another to occupy his See.[[52]](#footnote-52) With the sect’s founder dead, and his successor utterly disgraced and finally exiled by the Emperor on account of the factionalism that would erupt in Alexandria after Athanasius’ banishment,[[53]](#footnote-53) the Meletians would find that their Eusebian friends had little use for them once Athanasius was out of the way. None of the men the Eusebians would impose on the Evangelic See were of the Meletians: Pistus, an Egyptian and Arian, but not a Meletian; Gregory, a Cappadocian of the Eusebian party; George, likewise a Cappadocian of the Eusebian party; and Lucius, Arian.

Thus, the faction, which was founded in defiance of imperial domination over Egyptian religion, in the end became a tool in the hands of foreign heresiarchs who manipulated imperial favor for their irreligious ends.

A remnant of the faction would linger for about a hundred years; then they disappear.[[54]](#footnote-54)

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1. Frankfurter, 26 (see Bibliography for full publication information) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.*, 26*f* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eusebius, 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Telfer, 228 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hefele, 1.342 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.,* 1.341 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.,* 1.342 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Telfer, 228 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hefele, 1.343 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Athanasius, *To the Bishops of Egypt,* 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hefele, 1.130, 346*f* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians, 59* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Telfer, 230 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians, 59* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Telfer, 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hefele, 1.130 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Telfer, 230 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hefele, 1.349 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sozomen, 1.15 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Telfer, 230*f* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.,*  231 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Stevenson, 281 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians,* 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hefele, 2.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hefele, 1.352 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Socrates,1.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Hefele, 1.351-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians,* 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Hefele, 1.354 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians,* 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Brakke, 1106*f* [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid.,*  1107 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hefele, 2.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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39. Casey, 287-91 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Hefele, 2.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians,* 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid.,* 59-60 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid.,*  63 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid.,* 61-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid.,*  64 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Ibid.,* 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hefele, 2.16 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Theodoret, 1.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hefele, 2.23*f* [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Ibid.,* 2.25 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid.,* 1.32 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Ibid.,* 2.29 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Sozomen 2.31 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Hefele 1.354 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)