

The Bologna Fragments and Homoianism

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Summary: The Bologna Fragments' language of attestation suggests a link to the Homoianism espoused by Wulfila and the Gothic kingdoms. This paper offers a brief treatment of the Homoian movement to deter misconceptions and differentiate it from Arianism. It turns then to the consideration of a few passages with potentially Trinitarian implications, and concludes that whatever the Fragments are about, they not only do not treat Trinitarian theology, but were not written in a context in which such ideas were in dispute. Finally, it notes the *topos* of race in one catena of the first folio.

The Gothic Bologna Fragments contain extensive citations of the Bible, reading both the Old and New Testaments in a Christian way. The document thus declares itself to be unquestionably Christian. In their fragmentary state, however, they do not convey their status as exhortation or argumentation, let alone their position (if any) within theological disputation. Similarly, although the document's Wulfilan language and alphabet, coupled with facts of its material nature, place it among the Gothic groups within the Roman world, its contents are insufficient to determine its political or social relevance, if any. The scholar is therefore entitled to turn to contextual data to condition expectations of the Fragments' meaning.

The discovery of the Bologna Fragments represents an important addition to Gothic studies, and will lead to years of consideration and discussion. This paper will attempt two minor contributions: outlining the actual theological positions associated with Gothic Christianity, and ruling out one possible application of Trinitarian theology to the Fragments.

Christian theology teaches that the Supreme Being is three Persons in one God. Few theologians of any period would claim to explain how this can be so. Most, however, would agree, that there are definable ways in which it cannot be so, which must be rejected for theological or philosophical reasons. Crudely, many of these errors can be expressed as overemphasizing the Oneness or the Threeness, and they were largely demarcated and ruled out in the first centuries of

Christianity's legality. At their extremes, the former would vitiate the individuality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, while the latter would stray into polytheism.

Circa AD 320, the presbyter Arius objected to a formulation concerning the Trinity used by his bishop, Alexander, Patriarch of Alexandria. This dispute set off a chain of events which led to the Council of Nicaea, the first imperially sponsored church council. Because of this teleology, there is a tradition of beginning studies of the Trinitarian controversies with this event, and to regard Arius' own asseveration as either a *nova res* or the first indication of a split long present but unremarked. In Late Antiquity, however, other interpretive frameworks were sometimes employed. For example, the church historian Socrates reports in his account¹ that Arius understood his own objection in the context of a dispute already advanced: He accused Alexander of 'Sabellianism' or modalistic monarchianism, the doctrine that the *personae* of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were different modes of the One God, as perceived by the believer, rather than distinct persons – an overemphasis on the Oneness. Since Alexander clearly rejected this imputation, it may be stated that his and Arius' conflict was over what language was suitably phylactic against an opinion both considered false. Alexander, in Arius' mind, knowingly or inadvertently had spoken of God in a way that suggested the error ascribed to Sabellius. Arius, to Alexander, went so far in avoiding modalism as to make an error of his own in the opposite direction – an overemphasis on the Threeness. For Socrates, their dispute is comprehensible only against the background of another controversy, of then still living effect: Alexander and Arius did not mirror the positions of Sabellius and his chief critic, Tertullian; instead, it was different approaches to their common programme of formulating anti-modalistic definitions that led to conflict.

As in Socrates' anti-Sabellian understanding, the church's repudiation of a particular error did not presuppose agreement on how to actuate this repudiation effectively, a pattern seen again after the Council of Nicaea in 325, which rejected and anathematized Arius and his doctrine. A modern scholarly theory of the crisis,

¹ *Ecclesiastical History*, I.V, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* II.2

which has borne much fruit in German scholarship, situates many participants on both sides of the Trinitarian controversies within the doctrinal tradition of the church father Origen, using his definitions and reviling his opponents. Again, shared use of Origen's vocabulary and premises did not entail agreement on subsequent theological issues.

As the years after Nicaea went by, and councils continued to meet, two general perspectives can be discerned in the church.² One, predominantly Western but including Eastern bishops like Athanasius of Alexandria, regarded Arius' heresy as the most significant threat facing the church's doctrinal purity. The other, largely Eastern and Greek-speaking, was most troubled by the ongoing proponents of modalism, notably Marcellus of Ancyra. By way of analogy, the reader is invited to imagine the politics of his own country, and suspend for a moment his partisan allegiance. There is likely to be a right and a left, even if the two do not map onto other countries' divisions. Within each camp, there are likely to be extremists, perhaps commentators rather than politicians, whose views are not representative of the majority of even their own side. They are tolerated within the camp, however, because of the force with which they smite the shared opponents. Conversely, to the other side, they represent the greatest of bugbears, and the fear that these extreme views are shared by the plurality of one's opponents. Even repudiation by one's opponents may not allay the suspicion that they secretly believe what their extremists argue openly.

Arius was precisely such an extremist, who, because of the power of his critique of modalism, was briefly tolerated by more moderate bishops still concerned with God's Threeness, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, who consecrated Wulfila.³ In the main, however, they were sincere in rejecting him at Nicaea, and his name is never invoked positively by anyone after his death in 336. Marcellus of Ancyra was his opposite number – an extremist for the other side. The welcome he received in Rome and among Western, Oneness churchmen was utterly consternating to the

² Cf. Brennecke 1988 for the entire period and history, the development of distinctions between Homoians, Homoiousians, Homousians, and Anomians through councils, documents, and politics.

³ Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.5. See Amidon 2007: 20.

Eastern bishops. This then was the situation into which Wulfila became a bishop: prelates who preferred to emphasize the Threeness of the Trinity were tarred as 'Arians', after an extremist among their number whom they had long anathematized, while those who preferred to stress God's Oneness were condemned for their association with Marcellus of Ancyra.

Gradually, the debate crystallized around the relationship in essence (Greek οὐσία) of the Father and the Son. In a development that will surprise anyone still thinking in terms of the political analogy, the moderates from both sides came together under the pressure of the Emperor Constantius II. A formula was agreed which forbade the use of the philosophical word οὐσία, characteristic of Oneness theology, as well as the word ὑπόστασις ('underlying reality' or 'substance'), which was beloved of those who emphasized the Threeness. This anti-philosophical compromise is now called Homoianism, because the relationship between the Father and the Son was described as being 'alike', Greek ὅμοιος. Homoianism was the creed of Wulfila, the state religion of the Roman Empire from the 350s to the 380s, and the Christian system under which the Goths were converted.

In its rejection of both the traditional language of Threeness and the traditional language of Oneness, Homoianism was not simply theological conservatism, but repristination. Its proponents had departed from the theological frameworks that surrounded them, using neither the standard language of the Oneness West or the Threeness East. Why? What were the goals and purposes of the theologians who shaped the Homoian confession? Three to some extent mutually exclusive answers are possible, in my view. They may be termed sincere Biblicism, deliberate obfuscation, or the highest common factor, and all are worth considering when we read the Bologna Fragments.

That Biblicism, coupled with a desire to expunge philosophy from religion, inspired the Homoians, is the primary scholarly view today.⁴ Whether modern scholars' views are coloured by Protestantism, which especially in some of its modern, liberal forms, sets itself against the admixture of philosophy with religion, is open to debate.

⁴ E.g., Wiles 1996: 27.

Meanwhile, deliberate obfuscation was by and large the evaluation of contemporary Nicene, orthodox theologians, and is the justification for polemically burdening Homoians with the name of the extremist Arius. The theory runs that ‘ὅμοιος’ was so vague and weak a term, that it could represent only a deliberate evasion of the Trinitarian question. As one contemporary memorably quipped, ‘the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, but not much’.⁵ Thus, Homoians would use their insistence on the word ὅμοιος to mask the fact that they thought there were as many points of unlikeness between the Father and the Son as likeness. They remained distinct from the Anomoians, for whom the most important fact about the Father was His unbegottenness, making the Son unlike Him in any important way. The Homoian antipathy to philosophy would according to this reconstruction be either feigned, or engendered by the tendency of philosophical terms to be used to imply commonality between the Father and Son: οὐσία and ὑπόστασις were both used by some or other of their opponents to describe a degree of Oneness between the Persons unacceptable to the Homoians. Indeed, one scholar has recently argued that attention to the full careers of some of the principal Homoians suggests that the grouping was never theologically committed to the doctrines with which it is associated.⁶

Finally, the statement that the Son is ὅμοιος to the Father can be regarded as a highest common factor, a sort of ‘Mere Trinitarianism’, intended to prove acceptable to a wide variety of theological positions. In theory, Oneness theologians could read the term ὅμοιος very strongly, while Threeness bishops construed it as restrictively as possible. The Bible was authoritative for all parties to the dispute, and thus, again in theory, a restriction to Biblical language might prevent statements exceeding the authority (or warrant) revelation provided. Homoianism’s imposition might therefore have brought peace to a divided church. Every ecclesial communion embraces some degree of diversity of opinion, and some, especially state churches, contain widely divergent theological streams.

⁵ A loose translation of a remark often attributed to Paulinus of Antioch, (e.g., Chadwick 1998: 572), ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν σαγήνη καὶ σπέρματι, καὶ οὐδὲν τούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. *Patrologia Graeca XXVIII.85.A*.

⁶ S. Parvis (2014), pp 49-65.

The idea that the Trinitarian controversies could have been thus calmed seems ridiculous as long as one conceives of the church as the disputant bishops: there was no chance of strident leaders of various parties such as Athanasius and Eunomius agreeing to disagree. There were however other components to the Roman church, some influential, like the Imperial government, and some less so, such as the laypeople in general attendance. It would be pure speculation to try to gauge how actively laypeople identified with the theological labels we have used for bishops and theologians, compared to how much they wished simply for the convulsive discussions to end; no doubt things were different in different locales. The claim can be much better supported, however, that the Imperial authorities valued peace and unity in the church above the triumph of particular doctrines.

The defining characteristic of Homoianism, in any case, is its refusal of non-Biblical, philosophical language to talk about God. Other ideas that are often associated with it are not constitutive of Homoianism, though they might be entailed by it. Often they are formulations which had once been widespread, but gradually came to be regarded as heretical. Entailed by Homoianism is subordinationism, whereby the Trinity has a definite and required hierarchy of rank and honour, the Father above the Son, and the Son above the Spirit. This doctrine is clearly on display in the *Skeireins*, which demonstrates the aversion to Marcellus of Ancyra common to Homoian texts. However, there were also plenty of orthodox subordinationists.⁷

Like the *Skeireins*, the Bologna Fragments contain no direct treatment of Trinitarian issues, which, as the above discussion will have suggested, would be the only sure ground for discerning Homoianism. In the Bologna Fragments, moreover, any distinction among the Persons of the Trinity is elided. When considering Divine actions which the Scriptures (especially the Old Testament) ascribe generically to God, a Trinitarian theologian can either attempt to distinguish among the operations of the Persons, or treat them as having worked

⁷ The *Skeireins* is highly likely to be a translation of a work by Theodore of Heraclea (who died around AD 355), mostly lost to us in Greek, and thus composed prior to the full development of the Homoian position. Its attestation in Gothic is however strong evidence for its circulation and acceptance among Homoians. Cf. Wolfe 2013.

co-operatively. The Bologna Fragments may at first glance appear to opt for the latter course. At 1v 7-9, the author prays to God, who saved Noah: **nasei mik f(rauj)a þuei nauel us swaleikamma midja sweipainais watin g[a]nasides** ‘Save me, O Lord, Thou Who saved Noah out of such water of the deluge.’ At 2r 25-26, the author refers to the culmination of the Creation: **jabai nist g(u)þ bi lvana .[.]þn../.s../.þ. gatawida g(u)þ þana mannan**, ‘If it is not God, of whom ... “God made man”?’

However, even in Scriptural passages where the Second Person of the Trinity is clearly indicated, the Bologna Fragments often refer generically to ‘God’. The actions of the incarnate Christ are thus described: 1v 21-23: ... **þuei ja[h p]aitr[u] sagqanana standandan in marein ganasides...** ‘...Thou Who saved sinking Peter standing in the sea...’ Indeed, the Incarnation itself is treated thus: 2v 6-9: **jabai nist g(u)þ bi lvana qaþ esaeias sai magapþ in kilþein ganimiþ jah gabairiþ sunu jah haitan<d> namo is inmanuel þatei ist gaskeiriþ miþ unsis g(u)þ** ‘If it is not God, of whom quoth Isaiah, ‘See, a maiden conceives in womb and bears a son; and they call his name Emmanuel, which is interpreted “God-with-us”?’

It may be suggested that all of the Fragments’ references to God should be held primarily to refer to the Second Person. After all, it is through Him that all things are made in both John’s Gospel and the Nicene Creed. Indeed, the statement in the deathbed creed of the greatest of Gothic churchmen, Wulfila, is stronger still: *Credo... in unigenitum filium eius dominum et deum nostrum, opificem et factorem uniuerse creature*⁸ ‘I believe ... in His only-begotten Son, our Lord and God, creator and maker of all things.’⁹ No doubt related to this is Wulfila’s further statement that the Father is the ‘God of our God’. God the Father is beyond all human or material doings; the Son creates and rules the world. Ironically, given Homoian resistance to philosophical terminology, this resembles the Platonic model of a Supreme God ruling distantly over a Demiurge, who in turn created and rules over the world.¹⁰

⁸ Gryson 1980: 250.

⁹ Translation by James Marchand. Another version is presented in Heather/Matthews 1991.

¹⁰ The resemblance is noted by Heather/Matthews 1991: 129.

This interpretation of the Bologna Fragment is not unproblematic, however. Consider 1r 11-13 **ufar þuk f(rauj)a nih airus nih agg[i]lus nih andbahts nih ahma ak silba f(rauj)a qam du nasjan unsis** ‘Above thee, O Lord, [is] neither messenger nor angel nor servant [i.e. prophet] nor spirit; but the Lord Himself came to save us.’ Evidently, this passage expands upon the Septuagint version of Isaiah 63:9 (οὐ πρέσβυς οὐδὲ ἄγγελος ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς κύριος ἔσωσεν αὐτούς, ‘not a messenger nor an angel but the Lord himself saved them’). To speak of the Lord Himself coming to save is, in a Christian context, to speak of the Incarnation, and therefore of the Second Person of the Trinity. Can this be reconciled to the **ufar þuk**? Is God the Father not spirit / **ahma** (cf. John 4:24, ‘God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’), which the author has added to the passage? In the context of a hierarchical Trinity, this complicates identification of the Son with all citations of God. Even if **ahma** was used in a sense that did not include the Father, such usage does not suggest a careful guarding against misinterpretation. Trinitarian theology seems to have been far from the author’s mind, which suggests distance from Homoian-Nicene disputes.

The first folio presents a final theme to note, drawn from Biblical sources but not particularly theological: that of ‘races’ or ‘peoples’. Consider the following passages:

Bologna Fragment 1r 1-2 (Psalm 105 (106):47)

nasei unsis f(rauj)a g(u)þ unsar ...u]s þiudom, in þaimei nu bauam

Save us, O Lord our God ... from the peoples among whom we now dwell.

1r 5-7 (Psalm 11 (12):7)

akei þu f(rauj)a baigais unsis jah gawitais unsis faura kunja þamm[a] du aiwa

But Thou, Lord, protectest us and defendest us from this generation/race¹¹ forever.

1r 26-27 (Matthew 1:21)

...ganasjþ managein seinā af frawaurhtim ize

¹¹ Although Gothic *kuni* is usually ‘generation’, its more fundamental meaning ‘community of descent’ (cf. English ‘kin’) was clearly still present in Biblical Gothic as at Luke 2:36. In the midst of a catena on ‘peoples’, this is the sense that must have been first in a Gothic audience’s mind.

...He saves His people from their sins.

1v 19-20 (Psalm 3:8(9))

f(rauj)ins is[t] naseins jah ana managein þeina [þi]uþeins þeina'

Salvation is of the Lord and on Thy people is Thy blessing.

To see the potential relevance of such passages to a population religiously and ethnically different from a much larger, surrounding host culture does not require much imagination. It is recorded that there were Goths who worried about assimilation.¹² Also noteworthy is the extent to which race was a *topos* in Ostrogothic Italy, where the warlikeness of the Goths was singled out for official praise,¹³ turned as it now was to the protection of Roman culture.¹⁴

In the same catena, at 1r 24-25, we also read: **...þair<h> i(es)u x(rist)u saei ist [n]asjands allaiz[e] manne ...** '...through Jesus Christ, who is the saviour of all men...' (a modification of 1 Timothy 4:10). This may be compared with the inscription under the apse pantocrator of the non-Nicene Germanic church in Rome of *circa* 460: *Salus totius humani generis*, 'the salvation of all of mankind'.¹⁵ Dating as it does to before the Ostrogothic dominion, when Germanic heretics felt less secure, the inscription's differing emphasis (one might say, on the common humanity of Goths and Romans, and their common Saviour) does not surprise. In the Bologna Fragments, however, the paraphrase of 1 Timothy continues, **þishun þize ga[l]aubjandane'** 'especially of those who believe', allowing the citation to

¹² Procopius, *The Wars*, Book V, Section 2.

¹³ Cassiodorus, *Variae* 1.24 (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica* XII): *Innotescenda sunt magis Gothis quam suadenda certamina, quia bellicosae stirpi est gaudium comprobare*. 'To the Goths a hint of war rather than persuasion to the strife is needed, since a warlike race such as ours delights to prove its courage.' (Translation by Hodgkin 1886: 161f.).

¹⁴ Ennodius, Panegyric to Theoderic, 83-6 (*Patrologia Latina* 63, 181) *...Getici instrumenta roboris, dum provides ne interpellentur otia nostra, custodis; et pubem indomitam sub oculis tuis inter bona tranquillitatis facis bella proludere[.]* 'You guard the instruments of Gothic resolve, while you take care lest our *otium* be interrupted, and the untamed young men beneath your eyes among the blessings of tranquillity you make practise for war.' Note that *otium* 'leisure', is the necessary precondition for civilization in Roman thought.

¹⁵Cf. Mathisen 2009: 307–326 who notes (p. 317) "[a]lthough the words "*totius generis humani*" recur in many ecclesiastical contexts, their use in a salvific context is much rarer and quite circumscribed, occurring primarily in northern Italy, between ca. 390 and 450."

align with the general focus of the catena on God having a special relationship with His own people.

Thus, definite Homoian theological indices are not likely to be found in the Bologna Fragments, though further attention may yield further clues. One important conclusion may be drawn, however: the author's inattention to the theology of the Trinity suggests distance from controversy on the subject. Such distance could arise in either a Homoian or a Nicene context, but is noteworthy to find in Gothic in either case. The Bologna Fragments may offer a window into Gothic Christianity as it was practised away from the headline disputes for which scholarship remembers it. If in this practice there were echoes of the Ostrogothic political use of ethnicity, given the Goths' situation as both an ethnic and religious minority, we should not be surprised.

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