In the previous chapter I argued that the Heteroousians’ theory of names had only superficial parallels with both Platonist theories and the Platonist-inspired theories of Philo and Eusebius, making it highly unlikely that any of them had a determinative influence upon the Heteroousian theory in its initial formulation. To counterbalance that denial, in this chapter I offer a positive account of their sources. I argue that the development of Heteroousians’ initial theory of names is best explained by situating it within its proximate Christian context.

In Chapter One I suggested that Heteroousian reflections on names began with trying to make sense of one of the traditional names for God, ‘unbegotten’, and described how this term was central to their initial theory of names. Accordingly, here I contextualize the Heteroousian emphasis upon this name within preceding Christian usage, arguing that the Heteroousians were deeply embedded within this tradition. In particular, I focus upon the early fourth-century debate over ‘unbegotten’ in order to show that the Heteroousians were theological heirs of the Eusebian participants in this debate and that they were trying to make sense of the term in the light of it, while at the same time addressing the pressing theological issues of the 350s.

But previous Eusebian reflection on ‘unbegotten’ cannot on its own account for Eunomius’s initial theory of names in all its features. For the doctrine of divine simplicity played no role in Eusebian accounts of ‘unbegotten’. But this doctrine does play a central role in one of Athanasius’s critiques of how his “Arian” opponents understood the application of names to God. He argued against them all the names by which God is called must refer to God’s substance because of divine simplicity. Therefore I will argue that the centrality of the doctrine of divine simplicity in Eunomius’s theory of names represents not only a borrowing from Athanasius but also a clever deployment of the Alexandrian bishop’s own argument against him.
I. The Christian tradition on ‘unbegotten’ as a name for God

The Heterousians maintained that the name ἀγέννητος was uniquely revelatory of the divine substance. This emphasis owes a great deal to previous Christian use of both this term and another term, ἀγένητος. While ἀγέννητος is the privative passive adjective based on γεννάω, “I beget, give birth,” ἀγένητος is the privative passive adjective derived from γίγνομαι, “I come into being, am generated.” Though etymologically distinct, in both philosophical and Christian literature these two words were often regarded as synonymous.1 Ἀγέν(ν)ητος was used to describe that which exists eternally, that which was never created or made, that which always is and lacks a beginning or a coming to be, and was never subject to an act of generation or begetting. Often it also implied that which is without an end and so incorruptible and indestructible.

From the second century onward, Christians applied ἀγέν(ν)ητος to God. It was only after ca. 350 that two senses of term began to be distinguished in theological contexts, though much of the same connotations were retained in each sense as when the two terms were used synonymously. Generally speaking, the two senses corresponded to denials of distinct kinds of contingency. One sense of ἀγέν(ν)ητος was “not created” or “not made,” meaning that that which was ἀγέν(ν)ητος occupied one side of a fundamental ontological divide between itself and created beings. The other sense of ἀγέν(ν)ητος that came to be recognized was “not begotten” or “not born,” implying that that which was ἀγέν(ν)ητος was not subject to begetting (viewed as somehow analogous to the act or process by which animals, including humans, give birth, wherein one being is derived internally from another).2 In time ἀγέννητος came to be used for the latter sense, and ἀγένητος for the former. There are hints of this distinction in some early fourth-

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1 R. P. C. Hanson, The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381 AD (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 202–6, has a nice survey of the literature on ἀγέν(ν)ητος. But I find his assessment that ancient writers “confused” the two terms anachronistic. Note that what is said in the following paragraphs about ἀγέν(ν)ητος equally applies mutatis mutandis to the related positive terms, γεν(ν)ητος and γέν(ν)ησις.
2 Athanasius, Syn. 46, is one of the earliest passages to recognize two distinct senses of ἀγέν(ν)ητος.