

Book Review #1

ON THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD¹

By St. Athanasius

Regarding the reading of old books as opposed to modern one's, C.S. Lewis in his Introduction to Athanasius' *On The Incarnation* wrote: "It is a good rule after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between."² He goes on to give many reasons for why he holds his view, but one very instructive reason is that:

*"Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books."*³

Lewis is right. We all have chronological and cultural blinders—old books can help remove them from our eyes. But we must listen. When it comes to the dual nature of Christ—fully human and fully divine, both non-believers and Christians are deeply confused. Nevertheless, if we will listen, this African pastor from Alexandria Egypt can be of tremendous help.

My encouragement for you the reader is after reading this review and assessment, go read the primary source document, *On the Incarnation of The Word*.

Arguably, St. Athanasius is one of the great champions of Christian orthodoxy. It has been said of Athanasius that, "He is, on the whole, one of the purest, most imposing, and most venerable personages in the history of the church..."⁴ In the treatise, *On The Incarnation of The Word*, Athanasius

¹ Taken from, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of The Christian Church, Second Series, Volume IV, Select Writings and Letters of St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria.* T & T Clark, Edinburgh, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Reprinted 1998

² Accessed (3/13/2015) <http://silouanthompson.net/library/early-church/on-the-incarnation/introduction/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Schaff, *History*, 3:889, taken from Dr. Gomes, Syllabus for *Patristic and Medieval Theology*, p.84, HT 505, Fall 2001. Talbot School of Theology/Biola University, © 1988, 2000 by Alan W. Gomes

lives up to his imposing reputation, and writes one of the great Christian apologetic classics on Christology.

In this letter, among other things, Athanasius grounds his apologetic of the incarnation on: The origin of the universe; the knowledge of God; the nature of God; the resurrection of Jesus Christ; fulfilled prophecies; and God's immanence.

The Origin of the Universe

Athanasius begins his apologetic of the incarnation and grounds it on the creation, or the origin of the universe. He does this by addressing fallacious views of creation, the first of which is *Epicureanism—fortuitous generation*. They contend that everything is its own cause and is independent of any purpose. However, Athanasius argues that the diversity of bodies and parts actually supports, not a purposeless Self-cause but an intelligent creating designer.⁵

Then Athanasius deals with the *Platonists (pre-existent matter)*, who purport that God created the world with already existing matter. That is, God is a mechanic of sorts, who uses the available material to construct the universe. Athanasius disagrees, and contends that this view actually weakens God, for He could not create the material needed to construct the universe. But then He could not be called Creator in any sense, unless He is Creator of the material with which all things have been made.⁶

Moreover, Athanasius affirms that the Word created *ex-nihilo* (i.e., out of nothing), the world and mankind (Gen. 1:1; Jn.1: 3; Heb.11: 3). But when Adam disobeyed, the promise of death had to be met out. Yet, God could not allow his image bearing rational creatures, to continue in a corrupt state. As Athanasius put it:

...neglect reveals weakness and not goodness on
God's part...It was then out of the question to leave

⁵ *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of The Christian Church, Second Series, Volume IV, Pgs.36-37*

⁶ *Ibid., Pg. 37*

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men to the current of corruption: because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God's goodness.⁷

Thus, God sent the incorporeal immaterial One who has always been, and through the incarnation, by a spotless virgin, takes a body of our *nature*, and reveals Himself, in order to conquer death and restore life back to us.⁸

The Knowledge of God

Athanasius also argues that the reason for the incarnation was to give man the knowledge of God Himself. For, to be destitute of the knowledge of God is equivalent to a purposeless existence. Hence, in the incarnation man can get a "front row seat" of sorts, and somewhat understand the Father and their Maker, resulting in a happy and blessed life.⁹

But man rejected the knowledge of God, which for Athanasius is irrational. Instead man replaced God's knowledge with idolatry, witchcraft, and astrology. This they did, even though the Creator gives evidence of Himself through the Law and the Prophets and in creation, to both Jew and Gentile alike. By rejecting God's knowledge, man was hindered from understanding the knowledge of God, and as such, only the Lord Jesus Christ could bring this knowledge of God to man. Thus, in his mercy, Jesus condescended to man for his redemption, and to restore back to its original state, the effaced image of God in man.¹⁰

The Nature of God Revealed in the Person and Deeds of Jesus

Athanasius further argues that the incarnation did not affect the ubiquity of Jesus. For, although he was in a body, Jesus never ceased being the sustainer of all things. Ontologically, He remained divine, one with the Father, while simultaneously being separate from the creation.¹¹ Hence, Christ's divine attribute of omnipresence is not compromised.

Jesus' miraculous deeds (e.g., healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead), his death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead,

⁷ Ibid., Pg. 39

⁸ Ibid., Pg. 40

⁹ Ibid., Pg. 42

¹⁰ Ibid., Pg. 42-43

¹¹ Ibid., Pg. 45

testified to his dominion over creation and as such, to his deity.¹² His public death among other things was not a display of weakness, but rather a sign of strength. For, it was the means by which he would destroy death, while simultaneously through the resurrection, manifest the monument of victory over death.¹³

Additionally, Christ's public death was also necessary for the doctrine of the resurrection to be believed as a historical event, instead of a mere fable. This fact affected both the disciples and those who would later believe. Christ's death on the cross, demonstrated his bearing the curse on our stead, for "Cursed is he that hangs on a tree."¹⁴

Athanasius held that the death and resurrection of Jesus, secures for the believer the joy of life, rather than the torment of death. For, just as Christ is the first fruits of life, through the resurrection, believers will follow in like manner. Hence, the fear of death to man is overthrown. Death is swallowed up in victory!¹⁵

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Athanasius continues his apologetic for the incarnation of the Word by pointing to the resurrection. He contends that the resurrection of Christ has many proofs to its veracity.

First of all, the fact that men from all cultures are turning to faith in Christ points to him being alive, not dead.

Second, being the source of life, it was impossible for him not to bring his body back to life.

Third, even if God is invisible, the fact that he casts out demons and overcomes idolatry through his people is proof for the resurrection. After all, demons would scarcely obey in the name of a dead man, but rather in the name of the One risen.¹⁶

Fulfilled Prophecy

Again, Athanasius continues his apologetic and focuses on the unbelieving Jews. He argues for the incarnation, not from general

¹² Ibid., Pg. 45-46

¹³ Ibid., P. 48

¹⁴ Ibid., P. 48-49, (Deut. 21:23; Gal.3:13)

¹⁵ Ibid., P. 50-52

¹⁶ Ibid., P. 52-53

revelation, but rather from the Scriptures. He starts off with textual proof for Christ's virgin birth (Mt.1: 23, cf; Is. 7:14), then moves on to Moses' prediction (Num.14: 5-17; Is. 8:4), his living place (Hos.9:1), his death (Is. 53:3), his birth and death on the cross (Jer.9:19; Ps.22:16; Is.9:10), his miracles (Is.65:1-2, Rom.10:20; Is.35:3) and more scripture. He then argues from the withdrawal of prophecy and the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt.11: 13; Lk.16: 16), and points to the fact that it was the Lord himself that would save us (Is.63: 9).¹⁷

God's Immanence

Finally, Athanasius does not use Scripture, but rather general revelation to address the unbelief of the Greeks, concerning the incarnation's absurdity. He points out that it is no problem for Christ to manifest in a body if in fact the Logos Manifests Himself in creation. Moreover, his manifestation in a body is grounded on his relation to Creation as a whole. Hence, because he wanted to reveal himself to man, he became man.¹⁸

Athanasius also employs another line of argument concerning the reason for the incarnation. He points out that man is the only creature that sinned, which prevents him from recognizing the Creator through his works. Hence, through the incarnation God manifested his works among them. He continues with many other proofs to counter their scoffing, but ends his letter with an exhortation for those who love knowledge to find it where it only resides: in Christ, where it's attained through virtuous living that is grounded in loving the Logos who is blessed forever more.¹⁹

ASSESSING ATHANASIUS' WORK ON THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD

He is a man of his times who deals with the pressing theological needs of the day. Athanasius seems to model Paul's aim for making disciples, "I have become all things to all men that by all means I might save

¹⁷ Ibid., P. 54-58

¹⁸ Ibid., P. 58-59

¹⁹ Ibid., P. 67

some.” This treatise has illumined and clarified much of what I have pondered concerning the apologetic enterprise.

Athanasius Primarily Buttresses His Apologetic on Divine Revelation

Too often, contemporary apologists seem to primarily focus their apologetic from general revelation, instead of divine revelation. While I am not opposed to the former approach and employ it when appropriate,²⁰ the latter certainly seems preferable for making disciples. After all, as Christians we are not commanded to make theists, but to make disciples of all the nations.²¹ Although through general revelation, one can come to understand that there is a God, it is only via special revelation that salvific knowledge is attained.

Athanasius seems to model in his apologetic, the approach our Professor Ken Samples encouraged the class to use, “Our apologetic is to be informed and buttressed by our biblical theology... We ought not to do our theology in the back door.”²² In other words, we need to be crystal clear on what we are and are not saying scripturally.

Athanasius Discerns His Audience’s Worldview

To have and understand the facts is one thing, but to understand the audience and allowing their “hot buttons” to dictate the apologetic approach is another. Athanasius discerns his audience’s worldview and capitalizes.

When addressing the Epicureans and Platonists, Athanasius displays an understanding of their worldview that provides common ground for dialogue. He challenges their understanding of origins, considers the coherence of their view, and then argues from natural revelation, to show the necessity of a creating Designer.

Moreover, by using the Greek understanding of the Logos, Athanasius argues that the incarnation is not at all absurd. Because he understands their worldview, Athanasius’ argument for the incarnation is more robust, and sufficiently persuasive.

²⁰ E.g., the Apostle Paul seems to be using natural revelation to address the Athenians at the Areopagus (Acts 17), as an apologetic strategy. Yet, it is clearly not the only approach he used

²¹ Mathew 28:18-20.

²² Biola University Class on *The History of Apologetics*, Prof. Kenneth Samples, Spring 2002

Additionally, when Athanasius deals with the Jews, he uses the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. Again, as with the Greeks, so also with the Jews, he argues from the Jewish worldview (i.e., their authority) for the incarnation.

Athanasius displays the ability to use general and special revelation depending on the audience. This is a difficult task and one that does not come easy to me. However, it is my goal and should be the goal for every apologist who desires to “be all things to all men, that by all means, I might save some.”

Athanasius’ Apologetic Method

Athanasius seems to employ a mixture of the *classical* and *evidentialist*²³ apologetic approach. When addressing the philosophers and the Greeks, he uses somewhat of a design argument (classical/evidential model) concerning origins and the logos to argue for the incarnation.

But when he addresses the Jews and others, he employs arguments from the resurrection, fulfilled prophecy, and miracles to prove the claims of Christ and his Lordship (evidential model). The key here is Athanasius’ sensitivity when addressing people—we must know our audience well in order to persuade more cogently.

Certain Weaknesses and Strengths of Athanasius’ Treatise

To critique such a giant of the Church can be seen by many as “blasphemous” and I in no way intend to do that, he was and is an amazing man of God. Nevertheless, there appears to be at least two areas of deficiency in this treatise.

One deficiency is Athanasius’ wordiness. It seems he could have communicated the necessary information for the incarnation of the Word with fewer illustrations and fewer scripture texts. However, that may be my own personnel bias, which prefers theological treatises that are cogent and succinct in their literary style rather than drawn out minutiae.

²³ **Classical apologist’s** stress many things, among which are rational arguments for the existence of God (Norm Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, p.154. 1999 by Norman L. Geisler)

Evidential apologist’s put a lot of emphasis on facts (Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has It’s Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending the Faith*, NavPress, © 2001 by Kenneth Boa)

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Another deficiency is Athanasius' use of sociological phenomenon. To argue that because all cultures are converting to Christ proves Christ's resurrection seems weak to me. Just because men from every culture are converting to Christianity does not necessarily mean that the resurrection is true. They actually could be mistaken, have faulty information, etc. The argument is not necessarily "bad", but in our pluralistic society I am not sure how effective this form of reasoning would be.

On the other hand, this treatise in its strengths, far outweighs the weaknesses. Athanasius demonstrates his understanding of biblical theology concerning the ontological status of Christ's two natures. He also displays how to argue from general and special revelation (e.g., when addressing Greeks vs. the Jews).

Furthermore, this treatise provides a model for using classical and evidential approaches in our apologetics (i.e., allowing the audience to dictate the apologetic approach). Again, the treatise is theologically robust (e.g., dealing with God's ontological status, his attributes "immanence, omnipresence,"), and pastoral in its scope (i.e., if you love knowledge and want to find it, it is realized by living a virtuous life and loving the Logos).

But most importantly, the treatise seems to be motivated by Athanasius' deep devotion to Christ and his kingdom. In *The Incarnation of the Word*, Athanasius models for us what an honorable pastor/theologian/apologist looks like. He demonstrates what can be accomplished for the cause of Christ, when the intellect and the passions fuse as one in order to serve for the Master's honor and glory.