

ON THE
Incarnation

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SAINT ATHANASIUS
OF ALEXANDRIA



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*A*thanasius (c. 297–373), Bishop of Alexandria and one of the most illustrious defenders of the Christian faith, was born at Alexandria around AD 297. He is known as a church father, a noted Egyptian leader, a master theologian, and a staunch defender of Trinitarianism against the arguments of Arianism, which he began as a bishop's assistant at the First Council of Nicaea. He also struggled against several Roman emperors, which caused seventeen of his forty-five years as bishop to be spent in exile. His writings were cherished by church fathers, both in the West and the East. He is known for his devotion to the Word-become-man, his great pastoral concern, and a profound interest in monasticism. He is venerated by the Roman Catholic Church, Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches, the Lutheran Church, and the Anglican Communion.

A WORD ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF *ON* *THE INCARNATION*

*T*wo names stand above all others in the history of the early Christian church: Augustine and Athanasius. The former was from the West and contended for the doctrine of grace against Roman moralism, while the latter came from the East and became a champion of orthodoxy against Arian attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity. *On the Incarnation* was Athanasius' second apologetic work, and in it he defends the Christian

faith and tries to convince Jews and Greeks that Jesus was not a prophet or teacher but the Christ, the divine incarnation of God's Word.

You may find yourself reading Athanasius and thinking that the divine incarnation of Jesus is an obvious point, only to realize that, at some point, it wasn't so obvious. Three hundred years after Jesus ascended to heaven, the Council of Nicaea was still trying to figure out exactly who Jesus was. Through his presence at the Council of Nicaea as an assistant to Alexander and his work in this writing, Athanasius helped early Christianity—indeed all Christianity—to understand something more of the mystery of our faith: God was manifested in the flesh. All Christians, directly or indirectly, have been influenced by Athanasius because of his foundational insistence of who Jesus is.

At Whitaker House, we are committed to publishing great works that proclaim the Word of God. There is perhaps no other Christian writing in which the coming of our Savior is proclaimed so clearly as the way of victory over death. Thanks to Athanasius, and so many other early Christian thinkers, we have a firmer footing in our own exploration and understanding of who God is and how He works.

—*Whitaker House*

I

CREATION AND THE FALL

*I*n our former book (*Against the Heathen*), we dealt fully enough with a few of the chief points about the heathen worship of idols, and how those false fears originally arose. We also, by God's grace, briefly indicated that the Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things that are owe their being to His will and power, and that it is through Him that the Father gives order to creation, by Him that all things are moved, and through Him that they receive their being. Now, Macarius, true lover of Christ, we must take a step further in the faith of our

holy religion, and consider also the Word's becoming Man and His divine appearing in our midst. That mystery the Jews traduce, the Greeks deride, but we adore; and your own love and devotion to the Word also will be the greater, because in His manhood, He seems so little worth. For it is a fact that the more unbelievers pour scorn on Him, so much the more does He make His godhead evident. The things which they, as men, rule out as impossible, He plainly shows to be possible; that which they deride as unfitting, His goodness makes most fit; and things which these wiseacres laugh at as "human," He by His inherent might declares divine. Thus by what seems His utter poverty and weakness on the cross, He overturns the pomp and parade of idols, and quietly and hiddenly wins over the mockers and unbelievers to recognize Him as God.

Now in dealing with these matters it is necessary first to recall what has already been said. You must understand why it is that the Word of the Father, so great and so high, has been made manifest in bodily form. He has not assumed a body as proper to His own nature—far from it, for as the Word, He is without body. He has been manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of His Father, for the salvation of us men. We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the selfsame Word who made it in the beginning. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation, for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word who made it in the beginning.

In regard to the making of the universe and the creation of all things, there have been various opinions, and each person has propounded the theory that suited his own taste. For instance, some say that all things are self-originated and, so to

speak, haphazard. The Epicureans are among these; they deny that there is any Mind behind the universe at all. This view is contrary to all the facts of experience, their own existence included. For if all things had come into being in this automatic fashion, instead of being the outcome of Mind, though they existed, they would all be uniform and without distinction. In the universe, everything would be sun or moon or whatever it was, and in the human body the whole would be hand or eye or foot. But in point of fact, the sun and the moon and the earth are all different things, and even within the human body there are different members, such as foot and hand and head. This distinctness of things argues not a spontaneous generation but a prevenient Cause; and from that Cause we can apprehend God, the Designer and Maker of all.

Others take the view expressed by Plato, that giant among the Greeks. He said that God had made all things out of pre-existent and uncreated matter, just as the carpenter makes things only out of wood that already exists. But those who hold this view do not realize that to deny that God is Himself the Cause of matter is to impute limitation to Him, just as it is undoubtedly a limitation on the part of the carpenter that he can make nothing unless he has the wood. How could God be called Maker and Artificer if His ability to make depended on some other cause, namely on matter itself? If He only worked up existing matter and did not Himself bring matter into being, He would be not the Creator but only a craftsman.

Then, again, there is the theory of the Gnostics, who have invented for themselves an artificer of all things other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. These simply shut their eyes to the obvious meaning of Scripture. For instance, the Lord, having reminded the Jews of the statement in Genesis, "*He which made them at the beginning made them male and female...*" (Matthew 19:4), and having shown that for that reason a man should leave

his parents and cleave to his wife, goes on to say with reference to the Creator, “*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder*” (Matthew 19:6). How can they get a creation independent of the Father out of that? And, again, St. John, speaking all inclusively, says, “*All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made*” (John 1:3). How, then, could the Artificer be someone different, other than the Father of Christ?

Such are the notions which men put forward. But the impiety of their foolish talk is plainly declared by the divine teaching of the Christian faith. From it we know that, because there is Mind behind the universe, it did not originate itself; because God is infinite, not finite, it was not made from preexistent matter but out of nothing and out of nonexistence absolute and utter God brought it into being through the Word. He says as much in Genesis: “*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*” (Genesis 1:1); and again through that most helpful book *The Shepherd of Hermas*: “Believe thou first and foremost that there is One God who created and arranged all things and brought them out of nonexistence into being.”¹ The author of Hebrews also indicates the same thing when he says,

*Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed
by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not
made of things which do appear.* (Hebrews 11:3)

For God is good—or, rather, of all goodness He is Fountainhead, and it is impossible for one who is good to be mean or grudging about anything. Grudging existence to none therefore, He made all things out of nothing through His own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, and of all these His earthly creatures He reserved especial mercy for the race of men. Upon them, therefore, upon men who, as animals, were essentially

1. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, book 2.

impermanent, He bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked—namely, the impress of His own image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself—so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the mind of God even as He does, though in limited degree they might continue forever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise.

But since the will of man could turn either way, God secured this grace that He had given by making it conditional from the first upon two things—namely, a place and a law. He set them in His own Paradise and laid upon them a single prohibition. If they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence, then the life of Paradise should be theirs, without sorrow, pain, or care, and after it the assurance of immortality in heaven. But if they went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright of beauty, then they would come under the natural law of death and live no longer in Paradise, but, dying outside of it, continue in death and in corruption. This is what Holy Scripture tells us, proclaiming the command of God

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.
(Genesis 2:16–17)

“*Thou shalt surely die*”—not just die only but remain in the state of death and of corruption.

You may be wondering why we are discussing the origin of men when we set out to talk about the Word’s becoming man. The former subject is relevant to the latter for this reason: It was our sorry case that caused the Word to come down, our transgression that called out His love for us, so that He made haste to help us and to appear among us. It is we who were the

cause of His taking human form, and for our salvation that in His great love He was both born and manifested in a human body. For God had made man thus (that is, as an embodied spirit), and had willed that he should remain in incorruption. But men, having turned from the contemplation of God to evil of their own devising, had come inevitably under the law of death. Instead of remaining in the state in which God had created them, they were in process of becoming corrupted entirely, and death had them completely under its dominion. For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of nonexistence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to nonexistence again. The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore, when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it; for it is God alone who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the likeness of Him who is, and if he reserves that likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt. So is it affirmed in wisdom: *"The giving heed unto her laws is the assurance of incorruption"* (Wisdom of Solomon 6:18). And being incorrupt, he would be henceforth as God, as Holy Scripture says, *"I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes"* (Psalm 82:6–7).

This, then, was the plight of men. God had not only made them out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life by the grace of the Word. Then, turning from eternal things to things corruptible, by counsel of the devil, they had become the cause of their own corruption in death; for, as I said before, though they were by nature subject to corruption, the grace of their union with the Word made them capable

of escaping from the natural law, provided that they retained the beauty of innocence with which they were created. That is to say, the presence of the Word with them shielded them even from natural corruption, as also Wisdom says: “*God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world*” (Wisdom of Solomon 2:23–24). When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and raping filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and injustice, all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says:

Their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.
(Romans 1:26–27)