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On the Incarnation

SAINT ATHANASIUS

with an Introduction by C. S. Lewis

ST ATHANASIUS THE GREAT OF ALEXANDRIA

On the Incarnation

ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS
Popular Patristics Series
Number 44b

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ST ATHANASIUS THE GREAT
OF ALEXANDRIA

On the Incarnation

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ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS
YONKERS, NEW YORK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Athanasius, Saint, Patriarch of Alexandria, d. 373, author.
[De incarnatione. English]
On the incarnation : English translation / St. Athanasius the Great of Alexandria ; preface by C.S. Lewis ; translation and introduction by John Behr.
p. cm. — (Popular patristics series ; no. 44b)
ISBN 978-0-88141-427-1
1. Incarnation—Early works to 1800. I. Behr, John, translator, writer of added commentary. II. Title.

BR65.A443D413 2011b
232'.1—dc23

2011049324

ST VLADIMIR'S SEMINARY PRESS
575 Scarsdale Road, Yonkers, NY 10707
1-800-204-2665
www.svspress.com

ISBN 978-088141-427-1
ISSN 1555-5755

For His Eminence
Archbishop Demetrios

Πιστὸς ὁδηγός,
ἀληθινὸς διδάσκαλος,
γνήσιος φιλόλογος

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Preface

from the First Edition

There is a strange idea abroad that in every subject the ancient books should be read only by the professionals, and that the amateur should content himself with the modern books. Thus I have found as a tutor in English Literature that if the average student wants to find out something about Platonism, the very last thing he thinks of doing is to take a translation of Plato off the library shelf and read the *Symposium*. He would rather read some dreary modern book ten times as long, all about "isms" and influences and only once in twelve pages telling him what Plato actually said. The error is rather an amiable one, for it springs from humility. The student is half afraid to meet one of the great philosophers face to face. He feels himself inadequate and thinks he will not understand him. But if he only knew, the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator. The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism. It has always therefore been one of my main endeavours as a teacher to persuade the young that firsthand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than secondhand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire.

This mistaken preference for the modern books and this shyness of the old ones is nowhere more rampant than in theology. Wherever you find a little study circle of Christian laity you can be almost certain that they are studying not St. Luke or St. Paul or St. Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Hooker or Butler, but M. Berdyaev or M. Maritain or M. Niebuhr or Miss Sayers or even myself.

Now this seems to me topsy-turvy. Naturally, since I myself am a writer, I do not wish the ordinary reader to read no modern books. But if he must read only the new or only the old, I would advise him to read the old. And I would give him this advice precisely because he is an amateur and therefore much less protected than the expert against the dangers of an exclusive contemporary diet. A new book is still on its trial and the amateur is not in a position to judge it. It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light. Often it cannot be fully understood without the knowledge of a good many other modern books. If you join at eleven o'clock a conversation which began at eight you will often not see the real bearing of what is said. Remarks which seem to you very ordinary will produce laughter or irritation and you will not see why—the reason, of course, being that the earlier stages of the conversation have given them a special point. In the same way sentences in a modern book which look quite ordinary may be directed *at* some other book; in this way you may be led to accept what you would have indignantly rejected if you knew its real significance. The only safety is to have a standard of plain, central Christianity ("mere Christianity" as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective. Such a standard can be acquired only from the old books. 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. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.

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. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal

which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united—united with each other and against earlier and later ages—by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how could they have thought that?"—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr. H.G. Wells and Karl Barth. None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.

I myself was first led into reading the Christian classics, almost accidentally, as a result of my English studies. Some, such as Hooker, Herbert, Traherne, Taylor and Bunyan, I read because they are themselves great English writers; others, such as Boethius, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Dante, because they were "influences." George Macdonald I had found for myself at the age of sixteen and never wavered in my allegiance, though I tried for a long time to ignore his Christianity. They are, you will note, a mixed bag, representative of many Churches, climates and ages. And that brings me to yet another

reason for reading them. The divisions of Christendom are undeniable and are by some of these writers most fiercely expressed. But if any man is tempted to think—as one might be tempted who read only contemporaries—that "Christianity" is a word of so many meanings that it means nothing at all, he can learn beyond all doubt, by stepping out of his own century, that this is not so. Measured against the ages "mere Christianity" turns out to be no insipid interdenominational transparency, but something positive, self-consistent, and inexhaustible. I know it, indeed, to my cost. In the days when I still hated Christianity, I learned to recognise, like some all too familiar smell, that almost unvarying something which met me, now in Puritan Bunyan, now in Anglican Hooker, now in Thomist Dante. It was there (honeyed and floral) in Francois de Sales; it was there (grave and homely) in Spenser and Walton; it was there (grim but manful) in Pascal and Johnson; there again, with a mild, frightening, Paradisial flavour, in Vaughan and Boehme and Traherne. In the urban sobriety of the eighteenth century one was not safe—Law and Butler were two lions in the path. The supposed "Paganism" of the Elizabethans could not keep it out; it lay in wait where a man might have supposed himself safest, in the very centre of *The Faerie Queene* and the *Arcadia*. It was, of course, varied; and yet—after all—so unmistakably the same; recognisable, not to be evaded, the odour which is death to us until we allow it to become life:

> an air that kills
> From yon far country blows.

We are all rightly distressed, and ashamed also, at the divisions of Christendom. But those who have always lived within the Christian fold may be too easily dispirited by them. They are bad, but such people do not know what it looks like from without. Seen from there, what is left intact despite all the divisions, still appears (as it truly is) an immensely formidable unity. I know, for I saw it; and well our enemies know it. That unity any of us can find by going out of his

own age. It is not enough, but it is more than you had thought till then. Once you are well soaked in it, if you then venture to speak, you will have an amusing experience. You will be thought a Papist when you are actually reproducing Bunyan, a Pantheist when you are quoting Aquinas, and so forth. For you have now got on to the great level viaduct which crosses the ages and which looks so high from the valleys, so low from the mountains, so narrow compared with the swamps, and so broad compared with the sheep-tracks.

The present book is something of an experiment. The translation is intended for the world at large, not only for theological students. If it succeeds, other translations of other great Christian books will presumably follow. In one sense, of course, it is not the first in the field. Translations of the *Theologia Germanica*, the *Imitation*, the *Scale of Perfection*, and the *Revelations* of Lady Julian of Norwich, are already on the market, and are very valuable, though some of them are not very scholarly. But it will be noticed that these are all books of devotion rather than of doctrine. Now the layman or amateur needs to be instructed as well as to be exhorted. In this age his need for knowledge is particularly pressing. Nor would I admit any sharp division between the two kinds of book. For my own part I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that "nothing happens" when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.

This is a good translation of a very great book.[1] St. Athanasius has suffered in popular estimation from a certain sentence in the "Athanasian Creed." I will not labour the point that that work is not exactly a creed and was not by St. Athanasius, for I think it is a very fine piece of writing. The words "Which Faith except every one do keep whole

[1]Lewis refers here to an earlier translation of the work, but the remark may be applied equally to the present version.

and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly" are the offence. They are commonly misunderstood. The operative word is keep; not acquire, or even believe, but keep. The author, in fact, is not talking about unbelievers, but about deserters, not about those who have never heard of Christ, nor even those who have misunderstood and refused to accept Him, but of those who having really understood and really believed, then allow themselves, under the sway of sloth or of fashion or any other invited confusion to be drawn away into sub-Christian modes of thought. They are a warning against the curious modern assumption that all changes of belief, however brought about, are necessarily exempt from blame. But this is not my immediate concern. I mention "the creed (commonly called) of St. Athanasius" only to get out of the reader's way what may have been a bogey and to put the true Athanasius in its place. His epitaph is Athanasius *contra mundum*, "Athanasius against the world." We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same. He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, "whole and undefiled," when it looked as if all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius—into one of those "sensible" synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.

When I first opened his *De Incarnatione* I soon discovered by a very simple test that I was reading a masterpiece. I knew very little Christian Greek except that of the New Testament and I had expected difficulties. To my astonishment I found it almost as easy as Xenophon; and only a master mind could, in the fourth century, have written so deeply on such a subject with such classical simplicity. Every page I read confirmed this impression. His approach to the Miracles is badly needed today, for it is the final answer to those who object to them as "arbitrary and meaningless violations of the laws of Nature." They are here shown to be rather the re-telling in capital

letters of the same message which Nature writes in her crabbed cursive hand; the very operations one would expect of Him who was so full of life that when He wished to die He had to "borrow death from others." The whole book, indeed, is a picture of the Tree of Life—a sappy and golden book, full of buoyancy and confidence. We cannot, I admit, appropriate all its confidence today. We cannot point to the high virtue of Christian living and the gay, almost mocking courage of Christian martyrdom, as a proof of our doctrines with quite that assurance which Athanasius takes as a matter of course. But whoever may be to blame for that it is not Athanasius.

The translator knows so much more Christian Greek than I that it would be out of place for me to praise her version. But it seems to me to be in the right tradition of English translation. I do not think the reader will find here any of that sawdusty quality which is so common in modern renderings from the ancient languages. That is as much as the English reader will notice; those who compare the version with the original will be able to estimate how much wit and talent is presupposed in such a choice, for example, as "these wiseacres" on the very first page.

C.S. Lewis

Introduction

St Athanasius the Great of Alexandria

Already during his own lifetime, St Athanasius had become a legendary figure.[1] He was probably born in the latter half of 299, for soon after he was consecrated as bishop of Alexandria, on 8 June 328, succeeding Alexander, whom he had accompanied as a young deacon to the Council of Nicaea, his election was contested on various grounds, amongst which was that he was too young. By the time of his death, on 2 May 373, Athanasius had been bishop of Alexandria for forty-six years, during which he had been exiled five times, for a total of some seventeen years.[2] These lengthy periods of exile proved felicitous for Athanasius. His time in the West gave him the opportunity to forge strong links with those he encountered there, especially with Julius of Rome and his fellow exile Marcellus of Ancyra. The time he spent in the Egyptian desert provided occasion to develop close relationships with the ascetics living in the desert, a bond which was to be mutually beneficial. Antony himself made an appearance in Alexandria in a show of support for Athanasius, and thereafter the monks of Egypt were amongst the most loyal support-

[1]For a more comprehensive introduction to Athanasius and his theology, see John Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2004), 163–259, and the further studies cited therein, from which much of this introduction has been drawn. For further treatment of his theology, see K. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998); for his life and the politics of the empire, see T.D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[2]Following Barnes (*Athanasius*, xi–xii) Athanasius was in exile: 1) 7 November 335 to June 337; 2) 16 April 339 to summer 345, though he returned to Alexandria only on 21 October 346; 3) February 356 to 26 February 362; 4) October 362 to 14 February 364; 5) 5 October 365 to February 366.

ers of the bishops of Alexandria. And, in return, through such works as the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius contributed significantly to ascetic theology, so making his own contribution to the development of monasticism, as well as popularizing its ideals and propagating them far beyond the borders of Egypt. Even more important was the theology that Athanasius expounded during the stormy course of his life, developing the central intuitions of his predecessor, Alexander, into a full exposition of Nicene theology.

These factors and others projected a *persona* that commanded universal respect. A few years before his death, Athanasius received a series of very flattering letters from St Basil the Great (who was born after Athanasius had become bishop), requesting that he support his plans to reconcile the splintered supporters of Nicaea. But, by this time, Athanasius was no longer engaged in affairs outside Egypt and declined even to respond. Then seven years after his death, on 2 May 380, St Gregory the Theologian delivered a eulogy on "The Great Athanasius," to demonstrate, with an eye to the Egyptians who had arrived in the capital, his alignment with the renowned bishop of Alexandria. Thus, on the eve of the Council of Constantinople, Athanasius was canonized and an image of him enshrined that portrayed him as a steadfast saint, a model pastor and an unerring theologian, whose very name was synonymous with orthodoxy.

Scholarship over the past century has tended to be more critical of Athanasius' character, highlighting the various charges brought up against him, those for which he was exiled by various councils and regarding which papyrological evidence has newly been brought to light. However, despite all this new work, the older assessment of Harnack, who was not predisposed at all towards Athanasius, remains the most just: "If we measure him by the standard of his time, we can discover nothing ignoble or mean about him."[3] He certainly displayed courage and tenacity of purpose. In addition he was also capable of being extremely congenial when needed, so that he was able,

[3]A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. N. Buchanan from the 3rd German ed. (London and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1894–8), vol. 4, 62.

through personal meetings, to win over the emperors Constantine and Constantius. The standards of his time may have tolerated more violence in the exercise of his purpose than we might do, yet there is no indication of vindictiveness, but rather a desire to make peace, so that by the time of his death he had become reconciled with most of his earlier enemies. The shadow side to the legendary figure by no means reduces his significance for Christian history and theology: Nicene Christianity exists by virtue of his constancy and vision.

Against the Gentiles

The work translated here, *On the Incarnation*, is one of the classic texts of early Christianity. Its influence on all later theology cannot be overstated. It could be described as the defining exposition of Nicene theology, certainly as understood by the later Byzantine tradition. And for this reason it requires to be read very carefully and sensitively. In a comprehensive and compelling manner, Athanasius expounds the central mystery of Christian theology, the incarnation, but in a manner that embraces all aspects of God's work, from creation to recreation. The works themselves are almost catechetical pieces. Towards the end of *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius claims to have provided "an elementary instruction and an outline of the faith in Christ and his divine manifestation to us" (*Inc.* 56). And, indeed, the work is not a treatise on disputed points of abstract theology, but presents, in simple yet elegant prose, a clear exposition of Athanasius' theological vision, one which is based on key intuitions that he had learnt from the earlier Alexandrian tradition that had been upheld at Nicaea, and which continued thereafter to drive his struggle to give fuller expression to Nicene theology. Here, if anywhere, is the "real" Nicene theology, the "notional' presented, in Newman's terms, in images that are capable of inspiring "Real Assent" in real men and women, so giving flesh, as it were, to the words of doctrine.[4]

[4]J.H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I.T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 63–8 (=89–97).

As the opening words of *On the Incarnation*—"In what preceded we have sufficiently treated . . ."—clearly indicate, it was written as the second part of a double treatise, following on from his work *Against the Gentiles*. Both need to be considered together, for the first work sets up the problem that the second resolves. The first task of understanding an author, especially an ancient one, whose perspectives and presuppositions may differ even more considerably from our own than a contemporary, is to pay attention to what he himself says about his text. *Against the Gentiles* opens with Athanasius affirming that although "the knowledge of religion and of the truth of things" can be learnt without human teachers, since it is revealed every day, shining more brightly than the sun through the teaching of Christ, yet as he has been asked to expound a little of the Christian faith he will do so. Moreover, while it can be discovered from the words of Holy Scripture, "for the sacred and divinely inspired Scriptures are sufficient for the exposition of the truth," there are also many treatises of blessed teachers, which "if one happens upon them he will gain some notion of the interpretation of the Scriptures and will be able to attain the knowledge he desires." This setting of the learning of the knowledge of God in the context of the interpretation of the Scriptures is picked up again at the end of *On the Incarnation*, when Athanasius directs his readers back to Scripture so that they "can learn from them more completely and more clearly the accuracy of what has been said" (*Inc.* 56).

Athanasius then continues, in *Against the Gentiles*, by stating his aim:

> But since we do not have the works of these teachers to hand, we must expound for you in writing what we have learnt from them—I mean the faith in Christ the Savior—that no one may regard the teaching of our doctrine (*logos*) as worthless, or suppose faith in Christ to be irrational (*alogos*). Such things the pagans misrepresent and scorn, greatly mocking us, though they have nothing other than the cross

> of Christ to cite in objection. It is particularly in this respect that one must pity their insensitivity, because in slandering the cross they do not see that its power has filled the whole world, and that through it the effects of the knowledge of God have been revealed to all. For if they had really applied their minds to his divinity they would not have mocked at so great a thing, but would rather have recognized that he was the Savior of the universe and that the cross was not the ruin but the healing of creation. For if, after the cross, all idolatry has been overthrown, and all demonic activity is put to flight by this sign, and Christ alone is worshipped, and through him the Father is known, and opponents are put to shame while he every day invisibly converts their souls—how then, one might reasonably ask them, is this matter still to be considered in human terms, and should one not rather confess that he who ascended the cross is the Word of God and the Savior of the universe? (*Gent.* 1)

On the Incarnation, as we will see, opens with a similar statement. These works are clearly, first and foremost, understood by their author to be an apology for the cross: they will show that "he who ascended the cross is the Word of God" and that therefore the Christian faith is not "without its word," "irrational" (*alogos*). The order of identification in this sentence, and elsewhere in Athanasius' works, is vitally important: the starting point is the one who ascended the cross, and the account then is given from this perspective. It is through this that the knowledge of God, and all that this effects, has been revealed.

Of greatest importance here, for Athanasius, is that the demonic activity of idolatry which formerly prevailed everywhere has been vanquished by the cross, so that now Christ alone is worshipped. Idolatry, especially that of the body, is for Athanasius a kind of barometer, measuring the perversity into which humans have fallen, the degree to which their knowledge of God has been lost, and the

extent to which the image of God in them obscured, the consequence of which is corruption and death. The bulk of *Against the Gentiles* describes the prevalence of idolatry prior to the coming of Christ, a situation which demands the drastic solution presented in *On the Incarnation*. The death of idolatry since the advent of Christ demonstrates the power of Christ and his cross, a power which has filled the whole world, overcoming whatever has separated human beings from God, recreating them and restoring them to communion with God. The Christian faith therefore does indeed have its own *Logos*, the teaching of which requires the application of the mind, even if the divinity of Christ cannot be perceived when understood in merely human terms.

With this in mind, we are perhaps able to date the works. This has been a matter of some debate. His words, quoted above, that speak of not having the work of his teachers to hand, has been taken as an indication that they were written while in exile, most plausibly his first, in Trier from 335 to 337. As it is only in the following decade that he began to write against the Arians, such a date for these works would also explain the absence of any mention of the Arians in them. However, it is also possible that these words could be a literary affectation, explaining why he is himself now writing a treatise when many other works already exist, and perhaps wishing to correct what may be found in them. The absence of any reference to Arius in *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation* has been taken by others to indicate a date for the works prior to the outbreak of the controversy, though this would mean that they were written at an exceptionally young age. Most likely, as has recently been argued, given what we have seen of their character and intended purpose, these works should be placed in the period after the conversion of Constantine and after the Council of Nicaea, when the various controversies had apparently at least been settled and Athanasius was elevated to the episcopate. Even more specifically, one could see them as a reaction to the praise of the Emperor effusively given by Eusebius of Caesarea, with Athanasius wanting to revise this imperi-

alist triumphalism, "by making sure that the triumph of Constantine is strictly attributed to Christ, to the point of not even mentioning the emperor."[5] The occasion for this final triumph may have come about through Constantine, but, Athanasius insists, the victory is Christ's alone.

In the course of recounting at great length the variety and perversity of pagan idolatry, *Against the Gentiles* also lays a number of structural elements that are of great importance for understanding *On the Incarnation*, the second part of the work, and that need to be discussed in some detail here to prepare for a proper reading for its sequel. Especially important is his treatment, in the opening chapters, of the origin of idolatry, and, towards the end of the work, the relationship between the Creator and creation. Athanasius begins his exposition of the Word of the Cross with the origin of idolatry, emphasizing that idolatry, and evil more generally, is not "from the beginning," that is, is not a proper characteristic of created existence, but is rather a deviation from the right relationship between God and creation:

> Evil has not existed from the beginning, nor even now is it found among the holy ones nor does it exist at all with them. But it was human beings who later began to conceive of it and imagine it in their own likeness. Hence they fashioned for themselves the notion of idols, reckoning what was not as though it were. For God, the creator of the universe and king of all, who is beyond all being and human thought, since he is good and exceedingly noble, has made the human race according to his own image through his own Word, our Savior Jesus Christ. He also fashioned the human being to be perceptive and understanding of reality through his similarity to himself, giving him also a conception and knowledge of his own eternity, so that preserving this identity he might

[5] Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 29. Cf. p. 216, n. 19: "Athanasius may be trying to transfer what Eusebius rendered to Caesar back to God."

> never abandon his concept of God or leave the company of the holy ones, but, retaining the grace of him who bestowed it, having also [God's] own power from the Paternal Word, he might rejoice and converse with the divine, living an idyllic and truly blessed and immortal life. For having no obstacle to the knowledge of the divine, he continuously contemplates by his purity the image of the Father, the God Word, after whose image he was made; he is awestruck when he grasps the providence which, through the Word, extends to the universe, being raised above the sensual and every bodily appearance, cleaving instead, by the power of his mind, to the divine and intelligible realities in heaven. For when the mind of human beings has no intercourse with bodies, nor has mingled with it, from outside, anything of their desires, but is entirely above them, as it was in the beginning, then, transcending the senses and all human things, it is raised up on high, and beholding the Word sees in him also the Father of the Word, taking pleasure in contemplating him and being renewed by its desire for him. Just as the Holy Scriptures say that the first created of human beings, who was called Adam in Hebrew, at the beginning had his mind fixed on God in unembarrassed boldness, and lived with the holy ones in the contemplation of intelligible reality, which he enjoyed in that place which the holy Moses figuratively called paradise; so purity of soul is sufficient to [reflect and] behold, through itself, God [cf. 2 Cor 3.18] as the Lord himself said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." (*Gent.* 2)

This passage introduces us to a number of important themes and terms at work in both treatises. Most important is the relationship between creation and Jesus Christ. God is transcendent to all creation, "beyond all being and human thought." Yet this transcendence is not such that it makes his presence in creation, nor the creatures knowledge of God, impossible. As God is good, Athanasius affirms,

he created all things "by his Word our Savior Jesus Christ," so that through likeness to him knowledge of their Creator might be granted to human beings; had they preserved this grace, receiving also thereby God's "own power from the Paternal Word," they might contemplate the Word and in him behold the Father. Ignorance, evil, and death, are therefore not part of God's creation, but are brought into some kind of phantasmagorical existence when human beings turn from what is truly real to that which is not, that which has no real existence but is conjured up by our own invention.

It is very striking that Athanasius speaks here, and throughout the work, of "our Savior Jesus Christ" as the one by whom God has made the human race, fashioning it into his own image. Athanasius, it must be remembered, is expounding the Word of the Cross, and, as a preliminary aspect of this task, describes the proper character of human existence, as a contrast to the idolatrous state which had predominated prior to the cross. Athanasius characterizes the proper state of human existence from the point of view of what has been revealed by Christ in his work of salvation: human beings were created for communion with God through contemplation of his Word and Image, the Savior Jesus Christ. That is, Athanasius' analysis is more concerned to determine, in the light of Christ, what is the proper characteristic or state of human existence, in contrast to what we have actually seen throughout history, rather than to speculate about primordial beginnings. In fact, it is only after such reflection that Athanasius then brings in "the first created of human beings" *as an example* of what he has outlined: the case of Adam is brought in to exemplify the theological point being made. Moreover, the place in which Adam enjoyed this contemplation is specifically said to be "figuratively called paradise," for, as Athanasius makes clear, contemplation of God is not found in any geographical location, either in heaven or on earth, but in and through similarity with the Savior Jesus Christ.

This point also qualifies what it is to be in the image of God. In the passage above, Athanasius describes God as creating human

beings in his own image through "his own Word (*Logos*), our Savior Jesus Christ". To be in the image of God is to be *logikos*, a term which can only be translated into English, but very unsatisfactorily, as "rational." For while the term "rational" brings to mind notions of rationality, and often gets cast into an opposition between body and mind, the term *logikos* must be understood in terms of its relation to the *Logos*, in whose image human beings have been created and after whose pattern of life they should live if they wish to live "rationally."[6]

Another important term and tension alluded to in the passage above is the contrast between what is "proper," what belongs to something as its "own" (*idios*), and what is "outside." Christ is the "proper" Son and Word of God, in contrast to those who, from "outside" God, are adopted as sons, who, by participation in his "own" Word share in the property of being "rational." It is "proper" to human beings, in turn, to be in the image of God—"rational"—contemplating the Word of God and through him knowing the Father. It is "proper" to human beings, Athanasius says in the above passage, that their minds should be directed in this way rather than be directed towards things "outside," to the body and its desires. The human condition depends on the orientation of the mind, whether it is pursuing the contemplation of the things which transcend the senses and are "proper" to it or whether it is turned to the body, receiving impressions "from outside." It is very important to note that although Athanasius affirms quite clearly that living, as Adam, in an "unembarrassed boldness," the human mind would have transcended the senses, contemplating the Word, there is, nevertheless, no indication at all that the human being would have been in any kind of disembodied state. In this condition, human beings would not live by or for the body, and their minds would not have been driven by what comes from outside the mind, sensual impressions and bodily desires. That this ascetic thrust is not aimed at the body

[6]Cf. Origen, *Commentary on John*, 2.114: "We could say that the saint alone is rational."

itself, but at the image of the body which is forced upon the mind from outside itself, is made clear in the following chapter, when Athanasius considers further what is involved when human beings change their orientation.

This, then, is the condition in which God created the human race, and, in the language of the Gospel of John, it is in this condition that he wished them "to remain" or "to abide." However, human beings chose otherwise, and so now "remain" caught in corruption and death, until, through the salvific work of Christ, they are enabled "to remain" in immortality. It is with this point that Athanasius begins the next chapter of *Against the Gentiles*:

> In this way then, as has been said, did the Creator fashion the human race, and such did he wish it to remain. But human beings, contemptuous of the better things and shrinking from their apprehension, sought rather what was closer to themselves—and what was closer to them was the body and its sensations. So they turned their minds away from intelligible reality and began to consider themselves. And by considering themselves and holding to the body and the other senses, and deceived as it were in their own things, they fell into desire for themselves, preferring their own things to the contemplation of divine things. Spending their time in these things, and being unwilling to turn away from things close at hand, they imprisoned in bodily pleasures their souls which had become disordered and mixed up with all kinds of desires, while they wholly forgot the power they received from God in the beginning.
>
> One could also see that this was so from the first created man, as the Holy Scriptures relate of him. For he also, as long as he fixed his mind on God and contemplation of him, kept away from the contemplation of the body. But when, by the counsel of the serpent, he abandoned his thinking of God and began to consider himself, then they fell into

> the desire of the body, and knew that they were naked, and knowing were ashamed. They knew that they were not so much naked of clothing, but that they had become naked of the contemplation of divine things, and that they had turned their minds in the opposite direction. For abandoning the consideration of and desire for the one and the real, I mean God, from then on they gave themselves up to various and separate desires of the body. (*Gent.* 3)

God wished human beings to remain in the state that he had created them, but they chose otherwise, preferring what is closer to themselves, and this, Athanasius specifies, is their body. Thus far from denigrating the bodily reality of human existence, the body, for Athanasius, is in fact "closer" to human beings, it is their "own" or what is "proper" to them. As we have seen, God intended human beings to transcend their bodies, with their minds set on high, in contemplation of the Word. If Athanasius does not speak of human beings transcending their minds or souls, it is not because these are somehow more divine, but rather that their mind or soul is the faculty whose orientation effects this transcendence. As human beings were to transcend themselves, not being concerned about "their own things," that is, the things of the body and this life, but rather occupying themselves with the Word of God, the body can even be said to be the locus of "the 'selfness' of being human."[7] However, human beings turned their attention towards themselves, to the body and its sense perception, receiving impressions from outside itself, and have consequently ended up being deceived even in "their own things." In this way, humans fell into the chaos of the fleshly desires of the body, forgetting what they had originally received from God. With their souls directed towards the body, in, by, and for itself, the body is now the very point of human separation from God, not because of its materiality, but because it has become an idol.

[7] Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 64.

After reflecting in this way on the origin of idolatry in human preference for their own, their body, Athanasius again brings in the Genesis account as an example of the truth that he has expounded in his demonstration of the Word of the Cross. Rather than coming to know, by eating of the tree, that they were already naked, Athanasius plays upon the image of a garment of contemplation, which they lost when they succumbed to their own desire, thus becoming truly naked. Athanasius also heightens the dramatic effect of this, by changing from the singular (he had his mind fixed on God, which he then abandoned) to the plural (they fell into the desire of the body, becoming naked). The plurality into which each human being has descended, given over to a multiplicity of desires, reverberates in the plurality of multiple conflicting voices, each asserting itself.

In the following thirty or so chapters of *Against the Gentiles*, the bulk of the work, Athanasius describes the history of idolatry and perversity into which the human race has fallen. Despite the prevalence of idolatry, Athanasius suggests that it was still possible for human beings to know God. If the soul were to turn back to God, casting off all desires and every accretion it has acquired from outside, so that it "keeps pure only what is in the image, then when this shines forth, it can truly contemplate as in a mirror the Word, the image of the Father, and in him meditate on the Father, of whom the Savior is the image" (*Gent.* 34). Yet such "teaching," Athanasius also acknowledges, may not be adequate, "because of the external influences which disturb the mind and prevent it from seeing the better course" (ibid.). Nevertheless, Athanasius continues, following Paul (quoting Rom 1.20), human beings could still have learnt about God through their sense perception, for "he so ordered creation that although he cannot be seen by nature, yet he can be known from his works" (*Gent.* 35). The order and harmony of creation demonstrate not only that there was a creator, but that there is one creator. More specifically, as his argument has refuted all idolatry, Athanasius claims that:

> . . . the pious religion must be ours, and the only true God, he whom we worship and preach, [must be] the Lord of all creation and demiurge of all existence. Who then is he, if not the all-holy Father of Christ, beyond all created being, who, as supreme steersman, through his own Wisdom and his own Word, our Lord and Savior Christ, guides and orders the universe for our salvation, and acts as seems best to him? . . . For if the movement of creation was meaningless (*alogos*) and the universe was carried about haphazardly, one could well disbelieve our statements. But if it was created with reason (*logos*), wisdom, and understanding, and has been arranged with complete order, then he who governs and ordered it can be none other than the Word (*Logos*) of God. (*Gent.* 40)

Athanasius again affirms that it is by "his own Word, our Lord and Savior Christ" that the Father acts to govern and order the universe. The creative and providential work of God cannot be separated from the salvific work of Christ. The Word he refers to is not, therefore, the word that is "involved and innate in every creature, which some are accustomed to call seminal," for such a word has no life of its own, but merely expresses the art of the Creator (*Gent.* 40). Nor does he mean "such a word as belongs to rational beings, consisting of syllables and expressed in the air" (ibid.). Rather he is speaking of "the living and powerful Word of the good God of the universe, the very Word that is God, who, while other than all created things and all creation, is the Father's own and only Word, who ordered all this universe and illuminates it by his providence" (ibid.).

Athanasius then continues by analyzing the constitution of this creation itself, both in relation to the Word by whom it was brought into being and who now governs and regulates it, and, equally importantly, in relation to the nothingness from which it was created. Athanasius is very clear that creation itself has been brought into being by the will of God. Creation is not derived from some preexisting matter, such that it would have its own independent sub-

sistence: "He, the power and wisdom of God, turns the heaven, has suspended the earth, and by his own will has set it resting on nothing" (*Gent.* 40). Created from nothing, creation rests upon nothing; it depends totally for its existence upon the will of God alone, by which it was called into being. Yet rather than allowing it to relapse into nothingness, God acts to ensure its stability:

> And the cause why the Word of God really came to created beings is truly wonderful, and shows that things should not have occurred otherwise than as they are. For the nature of created things, having come into being from nothing, is unstable, and is weak and mortal when considered by itself. But the God of all is good and excellent by nature; therefore he also loves humankind—for a good being would be envious of no one, so he envies nobody existence but rather wishes everyone to exist, in order to exercise his kindness. So, seeing that all created nature according to its own definition is in a state of flux and dissolution, therefore, lest it suffer this and the universe be dissolved back into non-being, making everything by his own eternal Word and giving substance to creation, he did not abandon it to be carried away and be tempest-tossed through its own nature, lest it run the risk of returning to nothing. But, being good, he governs and establishes the whole world through his Word, who is himself God, in order that creation, illumined by the leadership, providence and the ordering of the Word, may be able to remain firm, since it participates in the Word who is truly from the Father, and is aided by him to exist, and not thus suffer what would otherwise have happened, I mean a relapse into non-existence, were it not protected by the Word, "who is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for through him and in him all things subsist, things visible and invisible, and he is the head of the Church," as the servants of the truth teach in the holy writings. (*Gent.* 41; cf. Col 1:15–18)

The previously sketched pattern of the relationship between God and human beings, with God granting human beings a share in the power of his Word so that they might remain in communion with him, is now used by Athanasius to explain God's creation as a whole. That is, Athanasius reads back into the framework of creation as a whole the pattern established by the Savior Jesus Christ in his work of salvation. Coming into being from nothing, created nature, considered in itself, is inherently unstable, corruptible, tending to dissolve back into non-existence.[8] However, God, who loves humankind, envied no-one a share in existence, and so did not abandon his creation once it was made by his own Word, but instead governs and establishes this world through his Word, so that, guided and ordered by the Word, it is enabled to remain firm. This should not be thought of as two separate and sequentially distinct actions. Rather, as everything has been created by God through his Word, the order of the Word is, as it were, imprinted upon everything, so that every aspect of his creation manifests the creative work, the power, of the Word. Bearing the imprint of the Word, and so making the Word present, the cosmos is maintained in existence by the Word, and this creation Athanasius identifies, following Colossians, as the Church.

Finally, having explored the relationship between the Word of God and created reality, Athanasius can insist that the Word of God belongs to the divine realm: Jesus Christ is himself what it is to be God. Created beings, brought into being from non-existence, are intrinsically "from outside", external to God, though they can come

[8] In a very different context, S. Pétrement makes the interesting suggestion that it is, in fact, the cross that provides the stimulus for this teaching about creation: "In the Old Testament the world was so narrowly and directly dependent upon God that God himself . . . was in turn almost tied up with and chained to the world. . . . The image of the cross is an image that liberates. . . . *The cross separates God from the world.* If it does not separate him absolutely, at least it puts him at a very great distance. It puts him much further away than the distinction between Creator and creature could do. . . . It is indeed, as Paul sees, something that is profoundly new, 'a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Greeks.'" S. Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, trans. C. Harrison (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 37, emphasis in original.

to participate in God. The Son, on the other hand, is God's "own" Word, and so is divine, not by participation, but in himself:

> His holy disciples teach that everything was created through him and for him, and that being a good offspring of a good Father, and true Son, he is the Power of the Father and his Wisdom and Word; not so by participation, nor do these properties accrue to him from outside in the way of those who participate in him and are given wisdom by him, being strong and rational in him; but he is Wisdom-in-himself, Word-in-himself, himself the Father's own Power, Light-in-himself, Truth-in-himself, Righteousness-in-himself, Virtue-in-himself, yes, and the Stamp and Effulgence and Image. In short, he is the supremely perfect fruit of the Father, and is alone Son, the exact image of the Father. (*Gent.* 46)

All the attributes usually only applied to the one God—wisdom, truth, light, righteousness, virtue—the Son is, not as properties that he has acquired from "outside" himself nor as if he were himself merely an attribute of God, but he is these things in himself: He is what it is to be God, and so is the exact image of the Father, his perfect fruit. This is, in fact, the central affirmation of the Council of Nicaea, that the Son is himself true God of true God by being the Father's own Son. Finally, Athanasius concludes by returning to the main theme of *Against the Gentiles*, pointing out that "this being so, and nothing being outside him, but both heaven and earth and all that is in them is dependent upon him, nevertheless humans in their folly, setting aside the knowledge of and piety towards him, have honored things that are not instead of things that are" (*Gent.* 47). Their folly is shown specifically in that they do not recognize God and do not worship "his Word, the Savior of all, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the Father orders the universe and contains and provides for all things" (ibid.). Athanasius' account of the constitution of created being, the universe as a whole, has its starting point

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cover art & design: Amber Schley Iragui