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ATHANASIUS (c. 295–373)

LIFE

Alexandria has been called the crossroads of the ancient world. A cosmopolitan city, it was at the centre of ideas and commerce, the main centre for trade between the Roman Empire and Africa and Asia, with access to the Mediterranean and the Nile. By routing goods via the Nile to Thebes and then overland by road to the lower Red Sea, Arab middlemen could be avoided and direct access to India gained. If the Nile missed its annual overflow, there would be problems for crops. In this respect, Rome depended on Alexandria. In 355 Athanasius was accused of delaying shipment of corn to Constantinople, a serious charge in the terms of the time.

Intellectually, Alexandria was an important centre. The Jewish scholar Philo (c. 20 BC–c. 50 AD), and the Christian theologian Origen (c. 185–c. 254), were based there. Platonism was prevalent. Alexandria was the religious capital of Egypt. The bishop appointed all other Egyptian bishops and had absolute authority over them. Christianity was an urban religion at the time. By 300



approximately half of the Egyptian population was Christian. Inland, the threat to Christianity came from native Egyptian religion not from Hellenism. There was a lingering dispute over those who lapsed during the Diocletian persecution. Miletus, a rigorist, had not wanted them to be received back into the church. Monks in Upper Egypt had withdrawn from church life. The Coptic church was Coptic speaking, in contrast to the Greek speaking church in the coastal area. It was more simple and rigorist but at this point not a threat to the unity of the Egyptian church.

Athanasius was born in around 295 and had a restricted formal education. His life was packed full of action and intrigue. If it was made the subject of a movie it would be dismissed as too far-fetched. He came to the attention of the bishop, was made a deacon and accompanied bishop Alexander to Nicaea in 325, where the views of the presbyter Arius were condemned as heretical. On the death of Alexander, he was elected bishop in 328 in an election contested by the Arians. His episcopal authority was soon challenged by the large numbers of Melitian clergy. Melitus, on his own authority, ordained new clergy to replace those who had lapsed. Arius was still a presence lurking in the background. A senior clergyman in Alexandria, he had taught that Christ was not co-eternal with the Father, but was created, and had a beginning. He was deposed by an Egyptian synod in 323 and by the Council of Nicaea in 325. Melitian groups were adamant against receiving Arius back and showing any sign of weakness in that direction. The problem for Athanasius was the language used at Nicaea and currently available was ambiguous, incapable of expressing adequately how God is one and how he is three.¹

By 332 Arian bishops were being appointed elsewhere. Arius, in turn, signed a document that persuaded Constantine that he was

1 Alwyn Petterson, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 9.

orthodox, although it avoided the term *homoousios*, introduced at Nicaea to assert the Son's identity of being with the Father, to which Arius objected. Constantine requested Athanasius to receive Arius back into communion, but he refused to do so. Additionally, Nicaea required there to be a gradual reconciliation with the Melitians but Athanasius had not progressed towards that. Problems were knocking at the door.

In 334 charges were made against Athanasius. First, it was alleged that he had raised a tax on linen garments—a right belonging to the pagan priesthood. Second, his presbyter Macarius was charged with desecrating a Melitian church and breaking a chalice. Third, Athanasius was charged with organizing the kidnap and murder of a Melitian bishop and using his severed hand for magical purposes. On the last allegation, in a dramatic scene, Athanasius' supporters produced the bishop alive and well, his hand still connected to the rest of his body. However, the other charges proved more difficult to refute. Constantine summoned a council but Athanasius refused to attend it as he considered an impartial hearing unlikely. However, he did attend the Council of Tyre in 335 but left for Constantinople, as the council's membership was stacked heavily against him. He was deposed on disciplinary grounds. He tried to persuade the emperor to take his side but meanwhile new charges were brought against him of delaying corn shipments to Constantinople. So Athanasius was out of office and went into exile from 335–7. However, he was not replaced as bishop and the see remained vacant.

In 337 Constantine died and the empire split three ways. Constantine II recalled Athanasius and he returned to Alexandria in November 337. It was not a happy return. Opposition was at fever pitch. He was accused of embezzling corn, and the Council of Antioch reiterated his deposition early in 339. He withdrew in March to Rome, which was more sympathetic towards him. This second period of exile was longer, lasting seven years, till 346.

At Rome, Athanasius gained the support of Pope Julius (337–52). In 341 a Council at Rome cleared him of all charges and admitted him into communion as a lawful bishop. Rival theories of church authority were competing with one another and rival councils sprang up in both east and west. Eventually after his replacement in Alexandria died, the Emperor Constans (who supported Athanasius) persuaded his brother and joint Emperor Constantius to be reconciled to Athanasius and so he returned to Alexandria to a hero's welcome in October 346. What a difference this was to the previous return!

Nevertheless, from 350 the situation took another lurch downward. Constans was assassinated in that year and by 359 Constantius was the sole emperor with semi-Arians and Arians in the ascendancy supporting him. By then he had turned against Athanasius. On the night of 7–8 February, 356 troops surrounded Athanasius' church during a service and entered the building. Athanasius managed to escape out of a side door and fled to the monks of Upper Egypt. He was replaced by a pork salesman, George of Cappadocia. This third exile lasted six years, from 356–62.

George provoked opposition by favoring the Arians and was forced to withdraw in 358. However, Julian (known as the apostate as he favored paganism) became emperor in 361, and George returned to Alexandria, only to be murdered by the mob. Julian recalled Athanasius in February 362, only for him to flee to the desert again in October for a fourth period of exile.

Julian died in 363 and was replaced by Jovian, who recalled Athanasius. But Jovian died early the following year, to be replaced by Valentinian, a supporter of Nicaea but who appointed his brother Valens—an Arian—in control of the east. Valens tried to force Arian creeds on the eastern bishops. A brief fifth exile ensued for Athanasius from October 365 until February 366.

In February 366 Valens rescinded his pro-Arian edict and Athanasius returned. The last seven years of his life were

uneventful. Of 46 years as a bishop 17 were in exile, with enough twists and turns for a James Bond movie.

WRITINGS

The best known of Athanasius' works are his dogmatic and apologetic treatises, his *Oratio contra Gentes* and *De incarnatione*, possibly originally a two-volume work, and the *Orationes contra Arianos*, three extended discourses, a fourth being from another hand. Another work, *De incarnatione et contra Arianos*, is not to be confused with the two earlier mentioned works of similar name.

With someone of his stature, and given the practices of the time, it is no wonder that there are several documents that purport to be from Athanasius but are instead authored by some other unknown writer. Into this category are two volumes written against the Apollinarians, and the famous Athanasian creed.

Athanasius wrote some polemical books—the *Apologia contra Arianos* and a history of the Arians. There are a range of sermons, although most purporting to be by Athanasius are recognized as spurious. We have a few fragments of commentaries—on the Psalms, on Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, and a few isolated fragments on Genesis. He wrote some ascetic treatises—a life of St. Anthony, one on virginity and so on. Then there are his Letters—(i) Festal letters, especially number 39 (367AD) on the biblical canon providing a list that is identical with the Codex Vaticanus, stating that the deuterocanonical literature (the apocrypha) is useful for the edification of new converts but is not part of the biblical canon; (ii) synodical letters including *Ad Antiochenos*; (iii) encyclical letters; and (iv) dogmatic and pastoral letters, including *Ad Serapion* on the Holy Spirit—probably the first extended discussion of the Spirit, and *Ad Epictetus* concerning the relation between the historical Christ and the eternal Son.

THOUGHT

Incarnation

The treatise, *De incarnatione*, is a masterpiece. Some have thought Athanasius wrote it in his early twenties, around 318, when the Arian crisis erupted. However, the consensus suggests it came later, possibly in the 330s. It is a fourth century counterpart of Anselm's *Cur Deus homo?* (1098). In it Athanasius unfolds the purpose, necessity and truth of the incarnation. There are several English translations in print, including one in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers set and another by Sister Penelope Lawson, a nun who was a friend of C.S. Lewis.

A number of features stand out in Athanasius' presentation.

The first matter to note is the close link he makes between creation and redemption.

It is, then, proper for us to begin the treatment of this subject by speaking of the creation of the universe, and of God its artificer, that so it may be duly perceived that the renewal of creation has been the work of the self-same Word that made it at the beginning. For it will appear not inconsonant for the Father to have wrought its salvation in Him by whose means he made it.²

Note that Athanasius considers salvation in Christ to be the equivalent of the renewal of creation. This is a striking difference from conservative Protestantism, where the focus has been the deliverance of the individual from sin and where corporate elements have been present they have usually been restricted to the church.

He follows this up in a number of ways. He has *a trinitarian view of creation*, one in which the Word, Jesus Christ our Lord, was the agent in making all things out of nothing.³ This extends

2 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1; see also *Ibid.*, 14.

3 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 3.

to providence as well for the Father through the Word orders all things, and all things are moved by him, and in him are quickened.⁴ In turn, *man was created in Christ*. Since *Christ is the image of God*, and man was created *in the image of God*, man was made in Christ.

He did not barely create man...but made them after his own image, giving them a portion even of the power of his own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise.⁵

Athanasius goes on to say ‘he did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of himself’, for ‘he gives them a share in his own image’ so that they might be able to get an idea of the Father, by such grace perceiving the image—the Word of the Father—and knowing their maker, so living a happy and truly blessed life. God made us out of nothing but also ‘gave us freely, by the grace of the Word, a life in correspondence with God.’⁶ If the first humans had remained good they would ‘by the grace following from partaking of the Word...have escaped their natural state.’⁷ Note how Athanasius has brought together creation, providence, the trinity, man, Christ and salvation into an integrated whole.

That, of course, was not the whole story for sin entered and death gained a legal hold over us that is impossible to evade.⁸ We could not regain the former position by repentance alone, for that could not be sufficient to guard the just claim of God.⁹ The

4 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 1. Cf. *Ibid.*, 12 where he states that the Word by his own providence makes known the Father to all so that through him they might know God.

5 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 11.

6 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 11.

7 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 5.

8 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 6.

9 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 7.

problem was that corruption had gained a hold and man was deprived of the grace he had being in the image of God. What was required for such grace to be recalled was the Word of God who had also at the beginning made all out of nothing.

For him it was once more both to bring the corruptible to incorruption, and to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all. For being the Word of the Father, and above all, he alone of natural fitness was both able to recreate everything, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be ambassador for all with the Father.¹⁰

Again, salvation is the recreation of everything.

Athanasius moves on to explain the purpose of the incarnation.¹¹ The Word was not far from us before ‘for no part of creation is left void of him: he has filled all things everywhere, remaining present with his own Father.’ In becoming incarnate ‘he takes unto himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours.’

And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death he gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father...to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord’s body, and had no longer holding-ground against men, his peers) and that, secondly, whereas men had turned toward corruption, he might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of his body and by the grace of the resurrection, banishing death from them like straw from the fire.¹²

Calvin was to echo this in his *Institute* 2:12:3.

Since it was impossible for the Word as Word to suffer death ‘to this end he takes to himself a body capable of death.’ So, by

¹⁰ Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 7.

¹¹ Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 8.

¹² Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 8.

offering to death the body he had taken, he put away death from all his peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all the Word by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death and thus he, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption by the promise of his resurrection.¹³ So the renewal of what was in God's image was by the presence of the very image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The incarnate Christ was not circumscribed in the body nor, while present in the body was he absent elsewhere, nor while he moved the body was the universe left void of his working and providence

but, thing most marvellous, Word as he was, so far from being contained by anything, he rather contained all things himself... thus, even while present in a human body and himself quickening it, he was, without inconsistency, quickening the universe as well, and was in every process of nature, and was outside the whole, and while known from the body by his works, he was none the less manifest from the working of the universe as well.¹⁵

He was not bound to his body but himself wielded it so he was not only in it but also in everything and, while external to the universe, abode in his Father only.¹⁶ This is the Catholic teaching that the person of the incarnate Christ was and is not confined to the humanity he had assumed but remains transcendent. Later, in post-Reformation disputes Lutherans were to call it the extra-Calvinisticum.

¹³ Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 9.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 13.

¹⁵ Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 17.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 17.

The deity of Christ

This is the issue for which Athanasius is most noted in the popular imagination. For many years his was almost a lone voice in the battle against Arianism. Arius, a presbyter at Alexandria developed a large following popularizing his teaching with a range of catchy choruses. He argued that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father and was less than equal in being and status. In fact, he was the first of God's creatures, brought forth out of nothing and not from the same substance as the Father. It gave a simple, easy rational answer to complex questions. It attacked the whole of salvation, for Jesus could not be the true revelation of God if he was merely a creature, nor could he accomplish salvation for the human race. The Council of Nicaea, called by the emperor Constantine in 325, maintained that the Son was 'of one substance with the Father.'

In the decades that followed this was the main reason for Athanasius' turbulent life. Political intrigues behind the scenes were responsible for his precarious hold on office. His *Orationes contra Arianos* contain his most rigorous theological defense of the orthodox theology of the Council of Nicaea. He marshals a range of theological and biblical arguments against the 'Ariomaniacs' as he calls them. Additionally, the first two of his letters to Serapion focus on the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father.

The humanity of Christ

In the last century or so scholars have questioned whether Athanasius had a significant place for a human soul in Jesus. Aloys Grillmeier follows this line when he acknowledges that later, after 362, Athanasius accepted that Jesus had a human soul but gave it no theological significance.¹⁷ Johannes Quasten

¹⁷ Aloys Grillmeier S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition: Volume One: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (second, revised; John Bowden; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 308–28.

agrees with Grillmeier.¹⁸ R.P.C. Hanson wrote of his having a ‘space suit Christology’, in which the relationship of the Son to the humanity was only as close as an astronaut’s to his space suit.¹⁹ A number of factors appear to point in this direction. First, Athanasius’ pervasive terminology for the incarnate Christ is that of Logos taking into union a body. Second, while death was recognized at the time as involving a separation of the soul from the body, instead Athanasius talks of Christ as undergoing a separation of the Logos from the body. Third, one of his closest collaborators against the Arians was Apollinaris of Laodicea, who was condemned in 381 at the Council of Constantinople for his teaching that the Logos took the place of a human soul in Christ. This the church—both East and West—maintained was an incomplete humanity and jeopardized salvation. ‘Whatever is not assumed cannot be healed’ was the orthodox rejoinder, stemming from Gregory of Nazianzus. The picture looks grim. Was the great defender of the deity of Christ in reality a heretic? One point we should note—unlike Apollinaris, Athanasius never denied that Jesus had a human soul.

However, there is sufficient evidence to modify this assessment. Certainly, Athanasius does not devote much attention to the general area but that was not where the battle lines were drawn at the time. One of the passages relevant to the question is in his *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, written in 362.

For they confessed also that the savior had not *a body without a soul* [italics mine] nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that his body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.²⁰

18 Johannes Quasten, *Volume III: The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, in *Patrology* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc, 1992), 72–76.

19 R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988), 448.

20 Athanasius, *To the Antiochenes*, 7.

Grillmeier reads ‘lifeless body,’ but this will not do. The final clause in the sentence can only with difficulty be rendered ‘not of body only but of life also’ and additionally reflects back on the earlier phrase. Moreover, Athanasius is making a direct rebuttal of the Arian denial of a human soul in Jesus.

A second passage of concern is in the *Orationes contra Arianos*, 3, written between 356 and 360. Quasten omits any reference to sections where Athanasius teaches that Christ’s humanity was a whole one and points only to places where the death of Christ is said to involve only the Logos and the body.²¹ But the third oration has plenty of material that belies this argument. For instance, Athanasius, in considering Luke 2:52—where Jesus is said to have grown in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and man—Athanasius says the Word did not advance as Word but he advanced humanly, since this is something that belongs to man.²² So the humanity advanced in wisdom, becoming and appearing to all as the organ of wisdom for the operation and shining forth of the Godhead.²³ Thus, the advance is human but in the form of an appearing of the wisdom of the Word in human nature. The same factors apply at the time of Jesus’ death, when he was troubled and wept.²⁴ According to Athanasius, these affections were not proper to the nature of the Word, as far as he was Word but were so to the flesh.²⁵ Statements like ‘he wept’ are proper to the body.²⁶ Suffering, weeping, toiling are things proper to the body. It was not the Word as Word who wept and was troubled but the Word as flesh—‘and if too he besought that the cup might pass away, it was not the Godhead that was in terror, but this affection too was proper to the manhood.’

21 Quasten, *Patrology*, 72–76.

22 Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, 3:52.

23 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:53.

24 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:54.

25 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:55.

26 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:56.

Athanasius also mentions the cry of dereliction. For the sake of this flesh he combined his own will with human weakness so as to make man undaunted in the face of death.²⁷

A third passage is found in Athanasius' *Letter to Epictetus*, written before 372, which acquired almost canonical status and was quoted by the Council of Chalcedon (451) and throughout the Christological controversies. Quasten quotes from sections 5 and 6, concerning the descent into hell where Athanasius does not mention the departure of the soul from the body at all, but he does not refer at all to the important section 7.

Now this did not come to pass putatively, as some have supposed: far be the thought: but the savior having in very truth become man, the salvation of the whole man was brought about. For if the Word were in the body putatively, as they say, and by putative is meant imaginary, it follows that both the salvation and the resurrection of man is apparent only...But truly our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul alike, has truly obtained salvation in the Word himself. That then which was born of Mary was according to the divine Scriptures human by nature, and the body of the Lord was a true one; but it was this, because it was the same as our body, for Mary was our sister inasmuch as we are all from Adam.²⁸

Frequently Athanasius says that Christ took a human nature just like ours²⁹ and points to the common practice of Scripture to call man by the name of flesh.³⁰ Jesus' advance in wisdom occurred as the assumed humanity advanced in the divine wisdom.³¹ As a result, since Christ's advance was for the sake of all, people then advance. This growth in wisdom is humanity's deification—not

27 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:57.

28 Athanasius, *To Epictetus*, 7.

29 Athanasius, *To Epictetus*, 5; Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 34; Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 2:61.

30 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:30.

31 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:52–53.

becoming less human but more so. *According to the flesh* the Logos is ignorant—demonstrating that his humanity is genuine and that the Logos as Logos is not the unqualified subject.³² This is integrally connected to soteriology—Christ’s ignorance, fear, and thirst was so as to free people from these things by divinization. The Logos becomes man, and a man like all others, at once knowing and ignorant. Finally, Athanasius constantly reiterated the Nicene formula—the Logos having become flesh, became man—which was a rebuttal of the Arian denial of a human soul in Jesus. In the years since I gave this lecture, there has been an increasing dissent from the views of Grillmeier.³³

Exchange in the incarnation—and deification

Protestants are accustomed to think of an exchange occurring at the cross where Christ took our sins and we receive his righteousness. For Athanasius, an exchange of a different, although related, kind took place in the incarnation. In becoming man, Christ received and assumed what is ours and, in doing so, sanctified it making it fit for fellowship with God. In turn, he imparted to humanity the grace of being partakers of the divine nature.

The Word was not impaired in receiving a body, that he should seek to receive a grace, but rather he deified that which he put on, and more than that, gave it graciously to the race of man... For it is the Father’s glory that man, made and then lost, should be found again; and when dead, that he should be made alive... For whereas the powers in heaven, both angels and archangels, were ever worshipping the Lord, as they are now worshipping him in the name of Jesus, this is our grace and high exaltation,

32 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:46.

33 See Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 91–96; Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 117–46.

that even when he became man, the Son of God is worshipped and the heavenly powers will not be astonished at seeing all of us, who are of one body with him, introduced into their realms.³⁴

For so he is founded for our sakes, taking on him what is ours, that we, as incorporated and compacted, and bound together in him through the likeness of his flesh, may attain unto a perfect man, and abide immortal and incorruptible.³⁵

whatever he received he received humanly that for his sake men might have power against demons having become partakers of the divine nature and, in heaven, as delivered from corruption, might reign everlastingly.³⁶

This exchange in the incarnation is the basis for Athanasius' teaching on deification (*theōsis*); 'He was made man that we might be made God'.³⁷ At the back of this lies New Testament teaching such as 2 Peter 1:4 and much in the Johannine corpus. He no more means that we cease to be human and become God ontologically than he implies that the Word ceased to be God and changed into man. Rather, the idea is that of union and communion, just as the deity and humanity in Christ remain such but are in unbreakable personal union. Thus

For therefore did he assume the body originate and human, that having renewed it as its framer, he might deify it in himself, and thus might introduce it into the kingdom of heaven after his likeness. For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless he had been his natural and true Word who had put on the body.³⁸

34 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1:42.

35 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 2:74.

36 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:40.

37 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 54.

38 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 2:70.

Similarly he comments ‘he has become man that he might deify us in himself’³⁹ and ‘we are deified...by receiving the body of the Word himself’ in the eucharist.⁴⁰

The trinity

In his four letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit, Athanasius deals at length with the relations between the persons of the trinity, with a particular focus on the Holy Spirit. The Son is of the identical being as the Father. Whatever the Father has, the Son has.⁴¹ The trinity is indivisible, so wherever the Father is mentioned the Son should also be understood and—by the same token—where the Son is the Holy Spirit is in him.⁴² The Spirit is never apart from the Word, the Son, a point Athanasius repeats time and time again.⁴³

Moreover, as the Son has his particular property in relation to the Father, so does the Holy Spirit in relation to the Son.⁴⁴ The Son is the image of the Father, but so also the Holy Spirit is the image of the Son. Athanasius denies an obvious rejoinder that there are consequently two sons, maintaining the distinctiveness of the Holy Spirit in doing so, but the fact that he feels obliged to make such a point indicates how close he understands the relation of the Son and the Spirit to be. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has the same order and nature towards the Son as the Son has towards the Father. The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son and so also the Holy Spirit is in the Son and the Son is in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Spirit cannot be divided from the Word.⁴⁵ So also the Spirit is in God the Father and from the

39 Athanasius, *Letters*, 60:4.

40 Athanasius, *Letters*, 61:2.

41 Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, 2:5.

42 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 1:14.

43 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 1:14, 17, 20, 31, 3:5.

44 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 3:1.

45 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 1:20–21.

Father.⁴⁶ As the Son comes in the name of the Father, so the Holy Spirit comes in the name of the Son.⁴⁷ There is one efficacy and action of the holy trinity, for the Father makes all things through the Word by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

Similarly, the Spirit receives from the Word, while the Word gives to the Spirit and whatever the Spirit has he has from the Word.⁴⁹ The Spirit is given through [the saviour] to those who believe, while whatever the Word has by nature in the Father he wishes to be given us through the Spirit irrevocably.⁵⁰ Nothing could be clearer than the intimate, unbreakable relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit in Athanasius' thought. The three persons indwell one another, are in each other. This applies as much to the Son and the Spirit as to the Son and the Father or the Father and the Spirit.

The atonement

Hanson considered that Athanasius paid little attention to the atonement. In view of his focus on theōsis he considered salvation to consist primarily in the inner transformation brought about by the incarnation and the resulting transformation by the Holy Spirit. He categorized this as salvation by a kind of sacred blood transfusion that almost does away with a doctrine of the atonement, arguing that Athanasius could not provide coherent reasons as to why Christ had to die.⁵¹ However, as Leithart establishes, this is to miss the point that Athanasius has a great deal to say about the cross. He considers it in terms of liturgical categories, offering his body to the Father and so overcoming

46 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 1:25.

47 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 1:20.

48 Athanasius, *Serapion*, 1:20, 28, 30.

49 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:24.

50 Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:25. See also Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 3:44.

51 Hanson, *Search*, 450–51.

death, so seizing humanity and enticing it to heaven to the true worship of the Father. He also stresses the idea that Christ paid the debt which humans owed to God of death, thus releasing us from corruption and death itself.⁵²

EVALUATION

Overall, the matter for which Athanasius is most famous is the one in which his most lasting contribution was made. This was the defence of the faith of the church expressed at the Council of Nicaea against Arius. The doctrine of the trinity is foundational to the whole Christian faith and Athanasius was one of its most prominent exponents. He steadfastly defended the Son being of the identical being (*homoousios*) as the Father. He did not bring about the eventual resolution of the crisis of the fourth century; that was the task of the three Cappadocians—Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. However, his contribution to the end product expressed at the Council of Constantinople cannot be over estimated.

FOR FURTHER READING

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⁵² Leithart, *Athanasius*, 154–56.

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