

ON THE  
INCARNATION

Saint Athanasius

The text for this reprint edition comes from the 1891 publication by D. Nutt in London. Spelling, language, grammar, and punctuation have been gently updated for the modern reader.

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## INTRODUCTION

The tract *Against the Gentiles* by Athanasius leaves the reader face to face with the necessity of restoration by the Divine Word as the remedy for corrupt human nature. How this necessity is met in the Incarnation is shown in the pages which follow. The general design of the second tract by the Alexandrian bishop is to illustrate and confirm the doctrine of the Incarnation by showing (1) its necessity and end, (2) the congruity of its details, (3) its truth, as against the objections of Jews and Gentiles, (4) its result. He begins by a review (recapitulating *Against the Gentiles* §2-7) of the doctrine of creation and of man's place therein. The abuse by man of his special Privilege had resulted in its loss. By foregoing the Divine Life, man had entered upon a course of endless undoing, of progressive decay, from which none could rescue him but the original bestower of his life (§2-7). Then follows a description in glowing words of the Incarnation of the Divine Word and of its efficacy against the plague of corruption (§8-10).

With the *Divine Life*, man had also received, in the *knowledge of God*, the conscious reflex of the Divine Likeness, the faculty of reason in its highest exercise. This knowledge their moral fall dimmed and perverted. Heeding not even the means by which God sought to remind them of Himself, they fell deeper and deeper into materialism and superstition. To restore the effaced likeness the presence of the Original was requisite. Accordingly, condescending to man's sense-bound intelligence—lest men should have been created in vain in the Image of God—the Word took Flesh and became an object of Sense, that through the Seen He might reveal the Invisible (§11–16).

Having dwelt (§17–19) upon the meaning and purpose of the Incarnation, he proceeds to speak of the Death and Resurrection of the Incarnate Word. He, Who alone could renew the handiwork and restore the likeness and give afresh the knowledge of God, must needs, in order to pay the debt which all had incurred (τὸ πρὸς πάντων ὀφειλόμενον), die in our stead, offering the sacrifice on behalf of all, so as to rise again, as our first-fruits, from the grave (§20–32, note especially §20). After speaking of the especial fitness of the Cross, once the instrument of shame, now the trophy of victory, and after meeting some difficulties connected with the manner of the Lord's

Death, he passes to the Resurrection. He shows how Christ by His triumph over the grave changed (§27) the relative ascendancy of Death and Life: and how the Resurrection with its momentous train of consequences, follows of necessity (§31) from the Incarnation of Him in Whom was Life.

The two main divisions of contemporary unbelief are next combated. In either case the root of the difficulty is moral; with the Greeks it is a frivolous cynicism; with the Jews, inveterate obstinacy. The latter (§33–40) are confuted, first, by their own Scriptures, which predict both in general and in detail the coming of Jesus Christ. Also, the old Jewish polity, both civil and religious, has passed away, giving place to the Church of Christ.

Turning to the Greeks (§41–45), and assuming that they allow the existence of a pervading Spirit, whose presence is the sustaining principle of all things, he challenges them to reject, without inconsistency, the Union of that Spirit, the Logos (compare *St. Augustine Conf. VII. ix.*), with one in particular of the many constituents of that Universe wherein he already dwells. And since man alone (§43) of the creatures had departed from the order of his creation, it was man's nature that the Word united to Himself, thus repairing the breach

between the creature and the Creator at the very point where it had occurred.

God did not restore man by a mere fiat (§44) because, just as repentance on man's part (§7) could not eradicate his disease, so such a fiat on God's part would have amounted to the annihilation of human nature as it was, and the creation of a fresh race. Man's definite disorder God met with a specific remedy, overcoming death with life. Thus man has been enabled once more to show forth, in common with the rest of Creation, the handiwork and glory of his Maker.

Athanasius then confronts the Greeks, as he had the Jews, with facts. Since the coming of Christ, paganism, popular and philosophic, had been falling into discredit and decay. The impotence and rivalries of the philosophic teachers, the local and heterogeneous character, the low moral ideals of the old worships, are contrasted with the oneness and inspiring power of the religion of the Crucified. Such are the two, the dying and the living systems; it remains for him who will to taste and see what that life is which is the gift of Christ to them that follow Him (§46–end).

The purpose of the tract, in common with the *contra Gentes*,<sup>1</sup> being to commend the religion of Christ to acceptance, the argument is concerned more with the Incarnation as a living fact, and with its place in the scheme of God's dealing with man, than with its analysis as a theological doctrine. He does not enter upon the question, fruitful of controversy in the previous century at Alexandria, but soon to burst forth into furious debate, of the Sonship of the Word and of His relation to God the Father. Still less does he touch the Christological questions which arose with the decline of the Arian tempest, questions associated with the names of Apollinarius, Theodore, Cyril, Nestorius, Eutyches, Theodoret, and Dioscorus. But we feel already that firm grasp of soteriological principles which mark him out as the destined conqueror of Arianism, and which enabled him by a sure instinct to anticipate unconsciously the theological difficulties which troubled the Church for the century after his death. It is the broad comprehensive treatment of the subject in its relation to God, human nature, and sin that gives the work its interest to readers of the present day. In strong reaction from modern or medieval theories of Redemption, which to the thoughtful

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<sup>1</sup> Or, *Against the Gentiles*.

Christian of today seem arbitrary, or worse, it is with relief that men find that from the beginning it was not so; that the theology of the early Church interpreted the great Mystery of godliness in terms which, if short of the fullness of the Pauline conception, are yet so free from arbitrary assumptions, so true to human nature as the wisest of men know it, so true to the worthiest and grandest ideas of God. The *de Incarnatione*, then, is perhaps more appreciated in our day than at any date since the days of its writer.

It may therefore be worthwhile to devote a word or two to some peculiarities incidental to its aim and method. We observe first of all how completely the power of the writer is absorbed in the subject under discussion. It is therefore highly precarious to infer anything from his silence even on points which might seem to require explanation in the course of his argument. Not a word is said of the doctrine of the Trinity, nor of the Holy Spirit; this directly follows from the purpose of the work, in accordance with the general truth that while the Church preaches Christ to the World, the Office and Personality of the Spirit belongs to her inner life. The teaching of the tract with regard to the constitution of man is another case in point. It might appear (§3, cf. §11, 13) that Athanasius ascribed the reasonable soul of man, and his immortality after death, not to the constitution of human nature as

such, but to the grace superadded to it by the Creator (ἡ τοῦ κατ' εἰκόνα χάρις), a grace which constituted men λογικοί (§3) by virtue of the power of the Logos, and which, *if not forfeited by sin*, involved the privilege of immortality. We have, then, to carefully consider whether Athanasius held, or meant to suggest, that man is by nature, and apart from union with God, (1) rational, or (2) immortal. If we confine our view to the treatise before us, there would be some show of reason in answering both questions in the negative; and with regard to immortality this has been recently done by an able correspondent of *The Times* (April 9, 1890).

But that Athanasius held the essential rationality and immortality of the soul is absolutely clear, if only from *Against the Gentiles* sections 32 and 33.<sup>2</sup> We have, then, to find an explanation of his language in the present treatise. With regard to immortality, it should be observed (1) that the language employed (in §4, where κενωθῆναι τοῦ εἶναι ἀεὶ is explained by τὸ διαλυθέντας μένειν ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ καὶ τῇ φθορᾷ) suggests a *continued condition*, and therefore something short of annihilation, although not worthy of the name of existence or life; (2) that even in the worst of men the image of God is defaced, but not effaced (§14,

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1.

&c.); and that even when grace is lost (§7), man cannot be as though the contact with the divine had never taken place—(3) that in this work, as by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, the final destiny of the wicked is passed over (but for the general reference §56) in silence. It may be added (4) that Athanasius puts together *all* that separates man from irrational creatures without clearly drawing the line between what belongs to the natural man and what to the *κατ' εικόνα χάρις*. The subject of eschatology is nowhere dealt with in full by Athanasius; while it is quite certain (*c. Gent.* §33) that he did not share the inclination of some earlier writers (see D.C.B. ii. p. 192) toward the idea of conditional immortality, there is also no reason to think that he held with the universalism of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others (see Migne, *Patr. Gr.* xxvii. p. 1404 A, also 1384 C, where “the unfortunate Origen’s” opinions seem to be rejected, but with an implied deprecation of harsh judgment). As to his view of the essential rationality of man (see *c. Gent.* §32) the consideration (4) urged above once more applies (compare the discussion in Harnack, *Dg.* ii. 146 sqq.). Yet he says that man left to himself can have no idea of God at all (§11), and that this would deprive him of any claim to be considered a rational being. The apparent inconsistency is removed if we understand that man may be rational potentially (as all

men are) and yet not rational in the sense of exercising reason (which is the case with very many). In other words, grace gives not the faculty itself, but its integrity, the latter being the result not of the mere psychological existence of the faculty, but of the reaction upon it of its highest and adequate object. (The same is true to a great extent of the doctrine of πνεῦμα in the New Testament.)

A somewhat similar caution is necessary with regard to the analogy drawn out (§41, etc.) between the Incarnation and the Union of the Word with the Universe. The treatise itself (§17, ἐκτὸς κατ' οὐσίαν, and see notes on §41) supplies the necessary corrective in this case. It may be pointed out here that the real difference between Athanasius and the neo-Platonists was not so much upon the Union of the Word with any created Substance, which they were prepared to allow, as upon the *exclusive* Union of the Word with Man, in Contrast to His essential distinctness from the Universe. This difference goes back to the doctrine of Creation, which was fixed as a great gulf between the Christian and the Platonist view of the Universe. The relation of the latter to the Word is fully discussed in the third part of the *contra Gentes*, the teaching of which must be borne in mind while reading the forty-first and following sections of the present treatise.

Lastly, the close relation between the doctrine of creation and that of redemption marks off the soteriology of this treatise from that of the Middle Ages and of the Reformation. Athanasius does not leave out of sight the idea of satisfaction for a debt. To him also the Cross was the central purpose (§20, cf. §9, etc.) of His coming. But the idea of *restoration* is most prominent in his determination of the necessity of the Incarnation. God could have wiped out our guilt, had He so pleased, by a word (§44), but human nature required to be healed, restored, and recreated.

# CREATION AND THE FALL

## Section 1

In our former book<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> *Against the Gentiles.*

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 unassumingly 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 Self-same 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.

## Section 2

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 first 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 Who created them in the beginning made them male and female . . ." (Gen. 5:2; cf. Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6), 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 has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matt. 19:4–6). How can they get a creation independent of the Father out of that? And, again, St. John, speaking all inclusively, says, “All things became by Him and without Him came nothing into being” (John 1:3). How then could the Artificer be someone different, other than the Father of Christ?

### Section 3

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 pre-existent matter, but out of nothing and out of non-existence absolute and utter God brought it into being through the Word. He says as much in Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1); and again through that most helpful book *The Shepherd*, “Believe thou first and foremost that there is One God Who created and arranged all things and brought them out of non-existence into being.”<sup>2</sup> Paul also indicates the same thing when he says, “By faith we understand that

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<sup>2</sup> *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Book II.I.

the worlds were framed by the Word of God, so that the things which we see now did not come into being out of things which had previously appeared" (Heb. 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 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 law and a place. 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 that is in the garden thou shalt surely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, but in the day that you do eat, you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). “You shall surely die”—not just die only, but remain in the state of death and of corruption.

#### Section 4

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 non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence 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 preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt. So is it affirmed in Wisdom: "The keeping of His laws is the assurance of incorruption." (Wisd. 6:18). And being incorrupt, he would be henceforth as God, as Holy Scripture says, "I have said, You are gods and sons of the Highest all of you: but you die as men and fall as one of the princes" (Psa. 82:6).

## Section 5

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 for incorruption and as an image of His own eternity; but by envy of the devil death entered into the world” (Wisd. 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 individually 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 changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own persons the due recompense of their pervertedness (Rom. 1:26–27).

\*\*\* *End of Free Sample* \*\*\*