An Examination of *On the Incarnation of the Word* by Athanasius of Alexandria

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Abstract:

In Athanasius of Alexandria's *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the Word of God's incarnation is defined as the means of salvation which establishes the necessity of the restoration, renewal and redemption of humanity through both the person and work of Jesus Christ. This said, the first section of the article will seek to provide a synthesis of Athanasius' reasoning within the treatise through examine the development of the work's main themes in light of the intrinsic center of Athanasius' theology. Proceeding forward, the second section will further inquire into the context and inner logic of the work by addressing key terms/concepts employed by Athanasius and utilizing guiding questions which highlight the undergirding soteriological principles of Athanasius' treatise. Showing in conclusion the validity of Athanasius' argument for the incarnation of the Word of God as the means for salvation and the redemption of humanity and thus its restoration and renewal.

Keywords: Word, doctrine of incarnation, person of Christ (christology), work of Christ (soteriology), salvation, mystery of Christ, hypostatic union, divinization, humanity, restoration, renewal, redemption

Introduction

One of the greatest figures in Christian history and the resulting doctrinal developments is Athanasius of Alexandria.[1] While not an author nor a theologian by choice, Athanasius wrote numerous texts which arose out of necessity during his work for the church, the bulk of which were in response to the theological controversy of Arianism.[2] An example of one such work is Athanasius' *On the*

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[1] Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation,* 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), p. 204; Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), p. 1, ProQuest ebook, accessed November 10 2020, https://ebookcentral-proquestcom.ezproxy .regent.edu/lib/regent-ebooks/detail.action?docID=169683.

[2] Ferguson, pp. 204-205; cf. 199-210. Athanasius was a deacon under Bishop Alexander, served as bishop Alexander's secretary at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and became his successor in 328 CE.

Incarnation of the Word[3] which addresses the mystery of Christ through identifying the Incarnation as the means of salvation wherein it is understood in terms of divinization and the inclusion of the death and resurrection of Christ. In presenting and defining the doctrine of incarnation, Athanasius views the incarnation of the Word of God as that which serves to demonstrate the means for and necessity of the restoration, renewal and redemption of humanity via the person and work of Jesus Christ - God's Son and the Word made flesh.

This said, in the proceeding pages one will be presented with a review of Athanasius' understanding of the mystery of Christ as documented within *On the Incarnation of the Word.* The first section will seek to identify the main themes within the treatise. This will then be followed by an inquiry into the context and inner logic of the work as it pertains to key terms/concepts and guiding questions. Showing in conclusion the validity of Athanasius' argument for the incarnation of the Word wherein it is to be perceived/comprehended as the means of salvation which demonstrates the need and avenue for the restoration, renewal and redemption of humanity through Jesus Christ.

Synthesis

Upon examining Athanasius' treatise, one is presented with a multifaceted argument which effectively denotes the purpose(s) of the incarnation and the means by which it was achieved (see Appendix); however, due to the complexity and depth of the argument along with spatial limitations, the treatise is unable to be explored in detail. Hence, an attempt will be made to distill Athanasius' reasoning and assertions through acknowledging the overarching and interrelated primary themes/concepts of the text as they pertain to what may qualify as the intrinsic center of Athanasius' theology – the distinct and yet simultaneous relation between the world and God.[4]

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[3] Athanasius of Alexandria, *'The Incarnation of the Word,'* ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, (Christian Classics Etheral Library, n.d.)*,* ch. 1-57, accessed November 10 2020, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf204/cache/n pnf204.pdf, Downloaded Adobe eBook.

[4] Athanasius, ch. 1-57; cf. Anatolios, p. 3. The proposed intrinsic center of Athanasius' theology may be recognized to include the concept of divine transcendence and immanence as these elements pertain to God's involvement in the world. The noted elements may be acknowledged as a central theme within Athanasius' treatise; however, due to the following reasons it is not identified as a primary concept: 1) the elements are present in one form or another within the identified primary concepts and thus may be perceived as contributing to the basis of said concepts, 2) the elements may be viewed as a part of the threads

Restoration and Renewal

The first prominent theme from Athanasius' treatise is the concept of the restoration and renewal.[5] According to Athanasius' view this concept is rooted in the recognition of the incarnation as the indicative factor which functions as the instrument which begins the process of: 1) renewing and re-establishing God's powerful and beneficent involvement in the world and 2) humanity's saving, healing, restoration and recreation.[6] The necessity for such to occur within humanity is associated with the two reasons for the incarnation identified by Athanasius - humans losing the Principle of Life and the Principle of Reason (see Appendix A) - as it is only by the incarnation that an avenue is provided for remedying corrupt human nature.[7] Central to this concept is the consistent interaction between the intervention of the Word in the incarnation and the divine involvement in the cosmos as demonstrated throughout Athanasius' treatise.[8] As indicated by Athanasius, 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.'[9]

Redemption and the Redeemer

Taking the above into consideration, Athanasius' grasp of the soteriological principles becomes evident as they provide the basis for his argument.[10] This said, one may recognize that the role of the person and work of Christ is distinctly emphasized as the one of the primary focuses of the work as it also pertains to the necessity of the Incarnation – the state of humanity and presence of transgression – and its implications/result of restoration, renewal, and

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connecting the primary concepts (e.g. the simultaneous, yet distinct relation between the world and God and Athanasius' grasp of soteriological principles) and 3) the elements are unable to be adequately described due to their complexity and the spatial limitations of the paper.

[5] Athanasius, ch. 1, 8.3, 13.9, 44; cf. 9.

[6] Athanasius, ch. 1, 8.3, 13.9, 44; cf. 9; Anatolios, p. 68.

[7] Athanasius, ch. 4-18. Athanasius' reasons for the incarnation may be recognized as derived from and/or encompassing the purposes of the incarnation as expressed by the proceeding Scriptures: John 1:18, 14:7-11; Heb 4:14-16, 10:1-10; 1 Pet 2:21; 1 John 2:6, 3:8, NASB.

[8] Athanasius, ch. 1, 4, 42; cf. 54. Chapter 44 may be perceived as functioning to present the organization and approach employed by Athanasius in his argument.

[9] Athanasius, ch 1.4.

[10] Athanasius, ch. 1, 7-10, 15-18, 54.

recreation.[11] Without the person and work of the Redeemer, humanity (the world) would be subject to the implications associated with transgression and thus would return to their natural state wherein originating out of nothing they would become nothing once more as they waste way/decay.[12] As stated by Athanasius of Alexandria, the 'transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time'[13] as the 'rational man made in God's image was disappearing'[14]. Therefore, it is only by the person and work of the Redeemer that the state of humanity (the world/creation) is 'restored' through the saving grace of God (and the believing faith of individuals)[15] for 'being 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'[16]. In refuting the disbelief of the Jews and the scoffing of the Gentiles, Athanasius draws support for his argument through appealing to Scripture and philosophical reasoning concerning the concepts of the universe and creation as they reflect the basis for the incarnation of the Word (Jesus Christ), its necessity and the impact/results of its occurrence.[17] Moreover, additional support may also be acknowledged through Athanasius employing the history of idolatry to denote a correlation between the decline in idolatry and the presence/work of the incarnation of the Word made flesh.[18]

Analysis

In light of the identified primary concepts, one may begin to comprehend Athanasius' position concerning the incarnation of the Word and its relation to God, the world, human nature and sin. This said, to attain a better

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[11] Athanasius, ch. 4-18; cf. Anatolios, pp. 30-31, 67-74.

[12] Athanasius, ch. 4.4-5.

[13] Athanasius, ch. 4.4; cf. 5:1.

[14] Athanasius, ch. 6.1.

[15] Athanasius, ch. 7.5, 16; cf. 8, 21-32, 43.5.

[16] Athanasius, ch. 7.5.

[17] Athanasius, ch. 32-55; cf. 40.8, 4. From Athanasius' refutation of the Jews and Gentiles, one is able to observe his educational background as demonstrated by his use of philosophical and scriptural knowledge which highlights his unique training in the Alexandrian School which combined scriptural study and Greek/liberal instruction.

[18] Athanasius, ch. 1, 30-32, 53, 55; cf. 11, 14, 20.

understanding of Athanasius' argument/treatise, it is necessary to observe the inner logic of his work.

Key Terms and/or Concepts

Foundational to Athanasius' argument is the utilization of specific terms and/or a group of related terms to communicate a distinct point. An example of this may be seen in Athanasius' use of the terms listed in Appendix B which when viewed in the context of the entire treatise, may be *primarily* defined in relation to the person of Jesus Christ as (1) a 'form' of God which (2) has assumed a human appearance/body while (3) maintaining His divine nature (theandric/hypostatic union) which (4) enables Him to perform the work necessary for the salvation of humanity.[19] Thus, Athanasius summarizes the person and work of Jesus Christ through employing the terms 'Incarnate,' 'and 'our Lord'/'Lord' which denotes the co-inherence of the Father and Word.[20] Moreover, it must also be noted that the terms 'He'/'Him'/'His' (along with several others) may also possess other meanings throughout the treatise and therefore are to be comprehended/defined within the specific context of use as they may be understood to refer to either Jesus Christ, God or the Father.[21]

In addition to the noted key terms, Athanasius also implements what may be identified as 'remaining' terminology and/or the concept of 'remaining' throughout his argument/treatise.[22] In doing so, Athanasius indicates the connection between history and ontology as well as the original and subsequently modified structure of the relation between humanity and God.[23] In this way Athanasius highlights the interaction between humanity and God as that which will either secure one's communion with God for eternity ('abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise'[24]) or confirm one's drift into corruption/non-being ('but that if they transgressed and

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[19] Athanasius, ch. 1, 15.2, 52-54; cf. Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology,* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), pp. 224, 302, 253. The terms 'Word' and 'Son' may also be viewed as principle titles which serve to ascribe the pretemporal existence of the One who became flesh in Jesus Christ (e.g. the one 'person' of the Godhead which became Incarnate).

[20] Athanasius, ch. 1.5, 3.3, 4.1-3, 9; cf. 8, 54.1-3.

[21] Athanasius, ch. 1-57.

[22] Athanasius, ch. 3-11, 14-15, 19-21, 43-44; cf. Anatolios, pp. 35-36.

[23] Athanasius, ch. 3-11, 14-15, 19-21, 43-44; cf. Anatolios, pp. 35-36.

[24] Athanasius, ch. 3.3.

turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death . . . no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it . . . to die and to abide in death and in corruption'[25]) thus denoting the ontological terms/polarities of the God-human relationship and the pressure placed on humans to stay in one of the noted states of relating.[26]

Guiding Questions for Understanding Athanasius' Treatise

In seeking to understand Athanasius' treatise, one may utilize guiding questions to assist in their comprehension of the main concepts of the argument. This may be seen in that the proceeding questions provide further context to and/or definement of the soteriological principles which undergird Athanasius' treatise.

Why was it necessary for the Word of God to come? What is the problem with humanity that only the Son could remedy?

This said, to fully grasp the reason/necessity for the incarnation, one must first identify/recognize that which required its presence. From Athanasius' argument, one may acknowledge that this reason pertains to the state of the world/humanity as individuals transgressed, incurred corruption and involved themselves in the sentence of death thereby causing the need for restoration, renewal and re-creation - something which can only be accomplished by the Creator.[27] This said, the Word of God became Incarnate (Jesus Christ – God in human form) 'for our salvation'[28] so that He could 'renew man once made in His likeness,'[29] make known the Father[30] and conquer death as it had become ingrained in the human nature of individuals via transgressions which functioned to separate the Creator from the creation[31]. Consequently, central to the necessity and results of the incarnation is the concept and/or initiative of

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[25] Athanasius, ch. 3.4.

[26] Athanasius, ch. 3-4; cf. 3-11, 14-15, 19-21, 43-44; Anatolios, pp. 35-36.

[27] Athanasius, ch. 7, 20, 31-34; cf. 4.2-3.

[28] Athanasius, ch. 1.3; cf. 37.7.

[29] Athanasius, ch. 14.2.

[30] Athanasius, ch. 16.

[31] Athanasius, ch. 1-2, 14.2, 16, 44; cf. 7.5, 45; Anatolios, p. 72.

grace as it begins the process of restoring the paradoxical relationship between the world and God.

How did the Word achieve victory through His death?

From Athanasius' treatise, one may the proceed to make three observations which are critical in understanding how the Word achieved victory over death through 'the offering of an equivalent.'[32] First, the death that the Word came to accomplish was not His own, but rather was that of a human's death.[33] Second, for this 'human death' to occur it required the (divine) Word to assume a form which could suffer death.[34] For this reason, the Word 'takes a body of His own . . . and makes it His very own as an instrument, in it manifesting, and in it dwelling'[35] so that it 'might be worthy to die in the stead of all'[36]. Third, to bear the curse of death which was associated to human transgression, it required Him to receive 'the death set for a curse . . . and that is the Cross.'[37] Thereby, demonstrating how the Word mediated the relationship between God and the world/humanity as He presented 'unto death the body He himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all his peers.'[38]

How does Athanasius use the parallel between the Word in creation and the Word in salvation to make his point?

In presenting his argument for the incarnation of the Word, Athanasius notes a connection between the Word in creation and the Word in salvation in an attempt to demonstrate that it is the same Word working and/or manifested within each sphere/concept. Through acknowledging God's relationship to creation as not only its source, but also its substance/means of existence, a parallel is established with God's relationship to humanity as the He (in the form

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[32] Athanasius, ch. 9.1.

[33] Athanasius, ch. 8.

[34] Athanasius, ch. 9.

[35] Athanasius, ch. 8.3.

[36] Athanasius, ch. 9.1.

[37] Athanasius, ch. 25.2; cf. 26, 47; Deut 21:23; Gal 3:14, NASB.

[38] Athanasius, ch. 9.1; cf. 8.2-3; Oden, pp. 278, 377-378, 393-396; Anatolios, p. 72; 2 Cor 5:14; Heb 2:9, 14, NASB.

of the Word/Jesus) is the ultimate source of their salvation and thus existence.[39] This is evidenced by Athanasius' observations that the restoration and 'renewal of Creation has been the work of the self-same Word that made it as the beginning.'[40] It is the from this perspective that Athanasius describes how humans are to respond to the work of the Word wherein individuals are 'to worship Christ alone, and through Him come rightly to know the Father.'[41] This behavior is later expanded upon in Athanasius' appeal to Scripture in support of his argument for the incarnation as he proposes that individuals will 'learn from them more completely and clearly the exact detail of what [they] have said'[42] when they: 1) genuinely apply their mind, 2) live an honorable life modeled after the saints, 3) cultivate/possess a pure mind and soul and 4) possess true faith in Christ[43].

Conclusion

In light of the above, one may perceive how the incarnation functions as the foundational basis for the Christian teaching of salvation.[44] By demonstrating how and why the Word of God came in the flesh, Athanasius not only highlighted humanity's need for restoration, renewal and redemption, but also demonstrated the means by which it may be accomplished through the person and work of Christ as only He possess the qualifications for mediating between the Father (God) and humanity (the world).

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[39] Athanasius, ch. 1, 4, 45.

[40] Athanasius, ch. 1.4.

[41] Athanasius, ch. 45.5.

[42] Athanasius, ch. 56.1; cf. 56.2.

[43] Athanasius, ch. 56.1, 57.1-2.

[44] Athanasius, ch. 31.3, 37.7.

Appendix A: Thematic/Conceptual Outline of *On the Incarnate Word*

Source: Athanasius of Alexandria, 'The Incarnation of the Word,' ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, (Christian Classics Etheral Library, n.d.), ch. 1-57, accessed November 10 2020, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf204/cache/npnf204.pdf, Downloaded Adobe eBook.

Appendix B: Select Key Terms

Term/Concept	Location within *On the Incarnation of the Word**
Word of the Father	1.1; 1.3
Word becoming Man	1.1
Word of God	15.1; 18.3; 21.5
Word	17, 18
God the Word	18.1
His divine appearing	1.1
His own Godhead	1.2
His Godhead	19.1; 21.4
Godhead of Christ	32.2
Son of God	18.2
Son	19.2
Son of the Father	20.1

Source: Athanasius of Alexandria, 'The Incarnation of the Word,' ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, (Christian Classics Etheral Library, n.d.), ch. 1-57, accessed November 10 2020, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf204/cache/npnf204.pdf, Downloaded Adobe eBook.

Note: *All uses of specified terms/concepts are not included. Those noted are for general reference/context only, specifically as it pertains to defining the meaning and/or implications of a term/concept.

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