

ON THE INCARNATION, Chapter 1

Writing to Macarius, Athanasius indicates that he has already written another book, on idols and the divinity of the Word of God. (**READING 1A** (p. 25).)

He goes on to say that now they'll be taking a further step, "and consider also the Word's becoming Man and his divine appearing in our midst." (**READING 1B** (p. 25): note how deeply biblical, how familiar this is for us. It could be a paraphrase of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians. Point: Athanasius was biblical. In the early church at least, the orthodox party was the one that was zealously, ardently biblical.)

Athanasius grasped the key problem with Arian theology (as also with that of their opposites, the Gnostics) was that they placed a wedge between the Word and Creation. Creation for the Gnostics was the work of an evil Artificer (the God of the Old Testament), while for Arians it was the work of the good God of the Old Testament. But in each case, the Word was not part of that creation. For the Gnostics, the Word is like an emanation from the Source of Reality to save us from evil creation; for the Arians, the Word is but a part of creation. Athanasius' realization was that both sides missed the exalted role of the Word in creation! (**READING 1C** (p. 26).)

In **section 2**, he goes through the three main non-Christian philosophies of his day (Epicureanism, Platonism, and Gnosticism). It's significant that he didn't list Arianism, testifying to the early writing of this book.

In **section 3**, he sets forth the crucial foundation of his argument, which is "the divine teaching of the Christian faith. From it we know that, because there is Mind behind the universe, it did not originate itself; and 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." (Great quotes, but from Shepherd of Hermas and "Paul" (actually Hebrews)!)

READING 3A (p. 28). Points: *Creatio ex nihilo*; as animals, "essentially impermanent"; but by grace, bearing "the impress of his own Image."

READING 3B (p. 28). Points: Conditionality: "if they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence," paradise, and then heaven; if they went astray, "throwing away their birthright of beauty," then natural law of death and corruption.

In **section 4**, he explains the relevance of our created state to our redemption, in that "it was our sorry state that caused the Word to come down, our transgression called out his love for us, so that he made haste to help us and 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."

READING 4 (p. 29). Points: turning back to nature's impermanence, away from being, back to nonbeing, away from the only thing which kept us and sustained us – the light of his presence.

Continue into **section 5**. **READING 5A** (p. 30). Making the same point as the previous reading.

Finally, **READING 5B** (p. 30). Points: with this fall from grace, man fell even further than to natural impermanence, but his "corruption ran riot," causing him to hasten his descent into nonbeing by doing things that were "unnatural."

ON THE INCARNATION, Chapter 2

READING 6A (p. 31). A review of the preceding (noting the problem that Man, created in God's image, "was disappearing"), he now outlines the dilemma, as it were, between God's goodness and God's truth (that it was unworthy of God's goodness that "beings which had once shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence," yet at the same time "unthinkable that God should go back upon His world"). **READING 6B** (p. 32).

Again, Athanasius notes that God "could not falsify himself." But... why not? Read **READING 7A** (p. 32). Why couldn't God just determine that everything would be better if we repented, if we just said "sorry." What's so important about divine consistency, anyway, and what's so very bad about sin...?

Here, we get really deep: Athanasius has been confronting three false ideas: First, our false notion of our own permanence, or of the universe's permanence, aside from God: Athanasius has been demolishing this idea for some time now, reminding us that apart from God's ongoing sustenance, the universe (and we) would hasten to non-existence.

Second, our Gnostic notion of God's Word, by which we imagine that His Word is like our own words, very often spoken in vain, seemingly powerless, given to change from one moment to the next: Athanasius' whole point is that the universe was created by means of the Word, and that therefore its structures, its logos (it's underlying structural logic, its laws, its purpose and directional vectors) – its very fabric – was spoken into existence from sheer non-existence. For God thus to change his Word would be an act of uncreation – an act of erasure, as it were, an act with "real life," and disastrous, consequences for us. We tend to think of the universe as being that which is "really real," thick and tangible, and of God's Word as, well, as just "words," as something which can and ought to be changed and even reversed as the situation requires. But the opposite is the case: the universe is but a structure spoken into being by God's will, Word, and Wind (Spirit), utterly contingent on his sustenance; and it is that Word that is thick, "really real," and forever. There is a fundamental linkage between Being and Word; and to undo that Word is to undo Being.

Third, our Gnostic notion of sin, by which we imagine that sin is something done and easily forgiven and forgotten: but sin's effects are all too real. Sin is fundamentally "anti-Word," it is destructive of the fabric of God's Word-spoken creation; sin corrupts, pollutes, ruins. (Thus, we see how deception is the devil's favored tool, in his role of "Anti-Logos.") Like sickness in the body it must be contained. But how to deal with the contamination without killing the patient? This is where God's truth and God's goodness are fully shown forth in the Incarnation, by which the Word that created the world accomplishes an astonishing act of recreation, without erasing his Word and without killing the patient.

READING 7B (p. 33). Only by the Word which created the world could this act of redemptive re-creation be accomplished. Next, **READING 8A** (p. 33); then **READING 8B** (p. 34). Here, Athanasius introduces the amazing reality of our union with Christ in the Body of Christ. As he had earlier established the linkage between Being and Word, so now he shows the linkage between Word and his Body, the Body of Christ, in, through, and by whom alone we are drawn from death into life, and restored from corruption to incorruption.

READING 9A (p. 35); then **READING 9B** (p. 35). Building upon the importance of the Body in our redemption from the power of death and corruption to new (resurrection) life, Athanasius points out that "the solidarity of mankind is such that, by the Word's indwelling a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all" who become united to it, and "through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection." **READING 10** (p. 37).