

Athanasius - On the Incarnation of the Word

Section 1: Introduction — what this treatise is about

In what we've written before, we covered — choosing just a few points from among many — a solid enough account of where the pagans went wrong about idols: what idol worship is, how it originally got started, and how human beings, out of wickedness, invented it for themselves. By God's grace we also touched on the divine nature of the Word of the Father, and on his universal care and power over everything — how the good Father governs all things through him, how all things are set in motion by him, and how all things are given life in him.

Now, come along, Macarius — a name that suits you well — you who truly love Christ. Let us press further into the faith of our religion and set out what concerns the Word becoming a human being, and his divine appearing among us. This is something that Jews mock and Greeks laugh at — but which we worship. Our aim is that, precisely because the Word appears to have stooped so low, your devotion to him may grow and deepen all the more.

For the more he is mocked by unbelievers, the more he actually demonstrates his own divine nature. Because he not only shows that what people think impossible is in fact possible — he also takes what people consider undignified and, through his own goodness, clothes it with a dignity of its own. And what people, in their supposed wisdom, dismiss as merely human, he demonstrates through his own power to be divine. He overthrows the pretensions of idols through what looks like his humiliation — through the Cross. And those who mock and refuse to believe, he quietly and invisibly wins over to recognise his divinity and power.

But to deal with this subject properly, we need to go back over what has been said before. This is so that you will understand the reason why the Word of the Father — so high and so great — appeared in a physical body. You should not think it was somehow natural or inevitable for the Saviour to take on a body, as though he had no choice in the matter. He is by nature without a body. He is the Word from the beginning. And yet, out of the loving kindness and goodness of his own Father, he made himself known to us in a human body — for our salvation.

It is right, then, for us to begin by talking about the creation of the universe and God its maker — so that it can be properly understood that the renewal of creation is the work of the very same Word who made it in the first place. Because it will become clear that it

is entirely fitting for the Father to have accomplished its salvation through the one by whom he made it.

Section 2: Wrong views about creation — and why they fail

Many different people have held many different views about how the universe came into being, and each one has simply laid down whatever theory they liked.

Some say that everything came into existence by itself, through chance — for instance, the Epicureans, who in their dismissiveness tell us that there is no such thing as universal providence. They say this right in the face of what is plainly obvious to anyone who looks.

Because if, as they claim, everything began by itself with no guiding purpose behind it, then everything would have come out the same — undifferentiated, all alike. If everything arose from one undirected process, you would expect the whole universe to be nothing but sun, or nothing but moon. And in the case of human beings, the whole body would be nothing but a hand, or nothing but an eye, or nothing but a foot. But that is clearly not how things are.

What we actually see is a clear distinction between the sun, the moon, and the earth. And in human bodies, there is clearly a foot, a hand, and a head — each different and distinct. This kind of ordered differentiation doesn't point to things arising by themselves. It points to a cause that came before them — and from that cause we can recognise God as the maker and organiser of everything.

Others, however — including Plato, who is held in such high regard among the Greeks — argue that God made the world out of matter that already existed and had no beginning. On this view, God could not have made anything without pre-existing material to work with — just as a carpenter needs wood already available before he can do any work at all.

But in saying this, they don't realise they are actually making God out to be weak. Because if God is not himself the source of the material — if he only ever shapes things out of material that was already there — then he is limited, because he cannot produce anything without that material. That is exactly the kind of limitation a carpenter has — he cannot make what is needed without his timber. On this theory, if the material hadn't existed, God would have made nothing at all.

And in that case, how could he really be called Maker and Creator? He would owe his ability to make things to something else entirely — to the material. That would make God, on their theory, nothing more than a craftsman working with someone else's supplies — not a true Creator who brings things into being out of nothing. Because you

cannot properly be called Creator unless you are also the creator of the very material out of which the created things are made.

The heretical sects, meanwhile, imagine an entirely different maker of all things — someone other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are deeply blind, even about the words they themselves use.

Because the Lord says to the Jews: *Have you not read that from the beginning, he who created them made them male and female — and said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?* And then, referring to the Creator, he says: *What therefore God has joined together, let no one separate.* So how can these people claim that creation has nothing to do with the Father?

And furthermore, John says — with no exceptions — *All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.* So how could the maker of all things be someone other than, and separate from, the Father of Christ?

Section 3: The true teaching — creation out of nothing, and the special gift given to humanity

All their speculations are empty. But the true teaching of our faith, the faith that belongs to Christ, exposes their foolish words as godlessness.

For the true teaching knows this: creation did not happen by itself — because God's purposeful care is never absent. It was not made out of pre-existing material — because God is not weak. Rather, out of nothing, with no prior existence of anything at all, God made the universe to exist through his Word. As he says first through Moses: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* And secondly, in the deeply instructive book of the Shepherd: *First of all, believe that God is one — who created and framed all things and made them to exist out of nothing.*

Paul refers to this too when he says: *By faith we understand that the universe was formed by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*

For God is good — or rather, he is himself the very source of goodness. And one who is truly good cannot be stingy with anything. So, grudging existence to no one, he made all things out of nothing through his own Word — Jesus Christ our Lord.

And among everything he made, he took special pity — above everything else on earth — on the human race. He saw that human beings, because of the conditions of their origin, were unable by themselves to remain stable and persevere in goodness. So he gave them an additional gift. He didn't create human beings the bare, plain way he created the other creatures of the earth. Instead, he made them in his own image —

giving them a share in the very power of his own Word. Through this — having in themselves a kind of reflection of the Word, and being thereby made rational — they would be able to remain forever in blessedness, living the true life that belongs to the saints in paradise.

But God also knew that the human will could go either way. So, in anticipation of this, he safeguarded the gift he had given them through a law and through the place where he set them. He brought them into his own garden and gave them a law. The arrangement was this: if they kept the gift, remained good, and held to it — they would continue in the life of paradise, free from sorrow, pain, and anxiety, with the promise of incorruption in heaven ahead of them. But if they broke the law, turned away, and chose evil — they would find out that they were bringing on themselves the corruption and death that was theirs by nature. They would no longer live in paradise but would be cast out of it, and from that point on they would die and remain in death and corruption.

This is exactly what Holy Scripture warns about, speaking in the voice of God: *Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat — but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. For on the day that you eat of it, dying you shall die.* And what could the phrase *dying you shall die* mean, other than not merely dying once, but remaining permanently in the corruption of death?

Section 4: Our creation and God's becoming human are most deeply connected

You may be wondering — given that we said we were going to discuss the Incarnation of the Word — why we have spent all this time on the origin of humanity. But this too belongs directly to the purpose of this treatise.

Because when we speak of the Saviour's appearing among us, we must also speak of where human beings came from — so that you can understand that the reason he came down was because of us. It was our transgression that drew out the loving kindness of the Word, so that the Lord would hurry to help us and appear among human beings.

It was for us that he became Incarnate. It was for our salvation that he acted with such love — appearing and being born in a human body.

So then: God made human beings and willed that they should live in incorruption. But human beings despised and turned away from the contemplation of God, devised evil for themselves — as was explained in the earlier treatise — and as a result received the sentence of death that had been threatened. And from that point on, they no longer remained as they had been made. They began to disintegrate according to their own devices. Death became master over them, ruling as a king.

Because breaking the commandment was sending them back to their natural condition. Just as they had come into existence out of nothing, so now — as might be expected — they could look forward to corruption back into nothing, in the course of time.

For if they had been called into being out of a former state of non-existence — brought there by the presence and loving kindness of the Word — then it followed naturally that when human beings lost their knowledge of God and turned back towards non-being, they would find themselves increasingly stripped of being as well. Because evil, in its very nature, is not — it has no real existence. But what is good, is. And since human beings draw their existence from God, who simply IS, turning away from him meant being progressively stripped of existence itself. In other words: they would fall apart and remain in death and corruption.

For human beings are by nature mortal — because they were made out of nothing. But through their likeness to the one who truly IS — and provided they maintained that likeness by keeping God in their knowledge — they were able to hold back their natural tendency towards corruption and remain incorrupt. As the book of Wisdom says: *Keeping his laws is the sure foundation of incorruption.* And being incorrupt, they would live from then on as God lives — which is, I believe, what Scripture means when it says: *I have said, you are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High — but you die like human beings, and fall like one of the princes.*