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THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

De Incarnatione

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Analyse the primary characteristics of Athanasius's Christology in *De Incarnatione*. To what extent, if at all, is it dependent on faith in the Triune God?

In *De Incarnatione* Athanasius's Christology is enunciated within a theological framework pivoted on his doctrines of creation and redemption and undergirded by faith in the Triune God, albeit faith emphasising the relations between Father and Son.¹ This assertion will be justified by identifying the primary characteristics of Athanasius's Christology and considering their dependence on faith in the Triune God.

Primary Characteristics

The bedrock of Athanasius's Christological reflections in *De Incarnatione* is the interconnection of his doctrines of creation, redemption, and God against the backdrop of the biblical narrative of the fall of humankind.

God and Creation

It is 'God alone Who exists'. All creation is 'made out of nothing.' Humankind come 'into being out of non-existence'.² 'The Word, our Lord Jesus Christ', who as 'the Word of the Father is Himself divine', is the 'agent' the Father employs for creation.³ As the 'Word of God' he 'moves all things in creation' and his 'ordering of the universe reveals the Father'.⁴ God gives humankind 'a share in His own Image, that is, in...Jesus

¹ All references to and quotations from *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, identified hereafter by the abbreviation *DI*- followed by the Chapter paragraph, are taken from St. Athanasius, "On the Incarnation", *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <<https://ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation/incarnation>> [accessed 20/02/2021].

² *DI*-3, *DI*-4.

³ *DI*-1, *DI*-2, *DI*-3.

⁴ *DI*-1, *DI*-14.

Christ'.⁵ This gift of 'Godlikeness', beyond being created incorrupt and immortal, enables humankind to 'perceive the Image Absolute...the Word Himself, and through Him apprehend the Father,' such knowledge of God being essential to a 'happy and blessed life'.⁶ The fall results in corruption, death and loss of knowledge of God, risking creation itself being undone. The resolution to the divine dilemma engendered by this scenario is the incarnation.⁷

Creation discloses Athanasius's faith in the Triune God. *Creatio ex nihilo* pertains to humankind not God, with Christ portrayed not as a creature but as the uncreated divine creator. Christ is appropriated a role in the divine economy to reveal the Father. Through Christ, humankind is created in God's likeness with Christ's image being equated to the Father's image. These demonstrate unity, deity and distinction in the relations between the Father and Son, all fundamental to Athanasius's Trinitarian faith.

Athanasius's cosmology has been designated purely religious, soteriological and Christocentric, and God's relation to creation the 'architectonic centre' of Athanasius's theology.⁸ These are fair designations given their foundation upon biblical exegesis, Christological focus and Athanasius's explicit confirmation of no inconsistency between creation and salvation as Christ effected both.⁹ The significance of *creatio ex nihilo* to

⁵ DI-11.

⁶ DI-3, DI-4, DI-11.

⁷ DI-3, DI-4, DI-5, DI-6, DI-7, DI-8, DI-9, DI-11, DI-13.

⁸ J Rebecca Lyman, 'Athanasius Transcendence and Transformation', in *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius*, Theological Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.2 and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, The Early Church Fathers (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.32.

⁹ DI-1.

Athanasius's Christology cannot be overstated.¹⁰ The ontological partition demarcating the uncreated God from humankind is foundational to Christ's soteriological role of resolving the divine dilemma caused by the fall. Ontological polarity leads to 'radical ontological instability' necessitating 'the "grace" (*charis*)" of divine assistance.'¹¹ Accordingly, only the incorporeal, incorruptible and immaterial Word of God descending to humankind's level, by taking a human body, dying and being resurrected, could bridge the ontological chasm and reverse the corruption consequential to the fall.¹²

Incarnation of the Word and Recreation

Athanasius conceives the incarnation as the Triune God manifesting his transcendent immanence in the divine economy to effect recreation and renewal. This occurs by the uncreated Son-Creator vanquishing death, recreating his image in humankind, and renewing epistemological awareness of his Father. Each are possible only in a Trinitarian context.

Christ's death, being a sacrifice and debt repayment, abolishes death, ends corruption, creates new life, and restores immortality.¹³ Christ's crucified body is a sacrifice for, and represents death for all human bodies.¹⁴ His bodily resurrection is 'the monument to his victory over death', and fulfils the 'supreme object' of his incarnation, bodily resurrection

¹⁰ 'Fundamental to Athanasius' entire theology is his conception of a complete ontological division between God and the world He created from nothing. The Godhead, eternal and immutable, is utterly separate by *ousia* (essence) and *physis* (nature) from the created order, brought into existence in time and mutable.', David M Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.66-67.

¹¹ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p34.

¹² *DI-7, DI-8*.

¹³ *DI-7, DI-8, DI-9, DI-10, DI-16, DI-20, DI-21, DI-22, DI-24*.

¹⁴ *DI-8, DI-9, DI-10, DI-20*.

for those who believe in him.¹⁵ All this is because Christ's divine nature achieves what human nature cannot. Only the Word of God, the Word of the Father, the Father's son who created humankind out of nothing, could offer a sufficient sacrifice, annul death and recreate and restore 'the whole nature of' humankind.¹⁶ Only the 'indwelling of the Word' in a human body could overcome its inherent corruption and make possible incorruptibility for all.¹⁷ Only the 'immortal Son of God' could 'give mortals immortality'.¹⁸ Whilst distinguishing the Son from the Father, Athanasius is unequivocal that the precondition for the salvific efficacy of Christ's death is his absolute deity with the Father. Having 'proved his Godhead by his works' in his human existence, his bodily death 'showed Christ on the cross was God', revealed Christ 'as God and Son of God' and 'as truly divine and worthy of His Godhead'.¹⁹

Christ's divinity within the Godhead is central to his incarnation in both renewing God's image in and knowledge of the Father among humankind. Incarnation is God's 'self-revealing to' humankind through his works in the body.²⁰ Only 'the very image, Himself, our Saviour Jesus Christ', who as Word of God is 'alone the image of the Father', can recreate humankind 'after the Image'.²¹ Equating the Son's image to that of the Father, affirms ontological unity between them. Through his embodiment, the uniqueness of his works eclipsing all other human deeds, and sense perception by humankind, Christ

¹⁵ *DI-21, DI-22.*

¹⁶ *DI-7, DI-9, DI-10, DI-20.*

¹⁷ *DI-9.*

¹⁸ *DI-9, DI-20.*

¹⁹ *DI-19, DI-20, DI-21.*

²⁰ *DI-8, DI-19.*

²¹ *DI-13.*

teaches humankind 'to know Himself, the Word of God and through him the Father'.²² The invisible and imperceptible Word of the Father, through Christ's human body, becomes visible and accessible so humankind may know and regain knowledge of the Father.²³ This economic co-activity of the Father and the Son is only possible because Christ is 'alone the Father's true and sole-begotten Son'.²⁴ Only Christ, the Word of the Father, can make known the Father of the Word in the divine economy and this is entirely due, in Athanasius's thinking, to their unity and distinction within the Triune Godhead.²⁵

Creatio ex nihilo necessitates divine incarnation to bridge the ontological divide between God and humankind. This together with the recreation and renewal of impaired humankind demands redemption is by the creator God alone, not via a created agent or created mediator, and demonstrates the interdependency of Athanasius's doctrines of creation, redemption, and the Triune God.

Divinization

From humankind's perspective, the intent of the incarnation was 'that we might become God'.²⁶ Immortality, God's image, and knowledge of God, bestowed on believing humankind by recreation and renewal, are divine qualities. Athanasius's theology

²² *DI-15*.

²³ *DI-15, DI-16, DI-19*.

²⁴ *DI-20*.

²⁵ Anatolios notes 'a pervasive emphasis on the co-inherence of the Word and the Father' and its presentation not being 'in primarily metaphysical terms, as an articulation of an intra-divine reality, but rather from the perspective of the "economic" Trinity.', Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*, Routledge Early Church Monographs (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.45.

²⁶ *DI-54*. An alternative translation is 'For he became man that we might become divine', Robert W. Thomson, ed., *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.269.

excludes divinization or deification in the sense of humankind sharing the same ontological essence with God.²⁷

Dependence on faith in the Triune God

In *De Incarnatione* a notable lacuna in Athanasius's doctrine of God is the Holy Spirit who is mentioned solely in a doxology.²⁸ Nowhere is the Spirit mentioned in terms of consubstantiality within the immanent Trinity or a role appropriated within the economic Trinity. Nonetheless, in Athanasius's Christology, emphasis on the Father and Son in their ontology and in the divine economy is wholly dependent on faith in the Triune God. The doxology which concludes *De Incarnatione* '...to the Father Himself, with the Son Himself, in the Holy Spirit...',²⁹ is consistent with historical evidence of Athanasius as the defender of Trinitarian faith. Discussing the ontological relations between Father and Son confirms *per se* the Trinity is in purview as Anathasius was no 'binitarian'. The binary focus of *De Incarnatione* arises from its apologetical intent to disprove '...faith in Christ...[is]...irrational',³⁰ especially in respect of the incarnation which 'Jews traduce...[and]...Greeks deride'.³¹ These form a secondary audience with a particular

²⁷ '...one cannot become like God who is truly unchangeable in essence, but only by progress in virtue imitate God', Lyman, *Christology*, p.15. 'By this he did not mean that humans could become gods in the same manner as God Himself. Only God is divine by nature. But through participation with the divine Word, made possible by the Incarnation, humanity could be made perfect and free from sin and preserve the knowledge and unity with God that was lost when men and women turned away into error'. Gwynn, *Athanasius*, pp.69-70.

²⁸ Inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures is ascribed to the Spirit in *Contra Gentes*, the first part of a double treatise of which *De Incarnatione* is the second part. '...the Spirit says somewhere in the Scriptures...' and '...as the Spirit says...', Thomson, *Athanasius*, pp.19 & 39.

²⁹ *DI*-57.

³⁰ This is stated in *Contra Gentes*, see Thomson, *Contra Gentes*, p.3. Chapter 1 of *De Incarnatione* continues in a similar vein.

³¹ *DI*-1.

objection to divine crucifixion.³² The primary addressees³³ of *De Incarnatione* are those who love Christ,³⁴ orthodox believers unlikely to dispute the Trinity. In an apology for the cross where the Son is centre stage, Athanasius may have viewed discussing the Spirit a distraction from the principal thrust of his theological enterprise. In later writings Athanasius synthesized the Spirit into his creation and redemption doctrines.³⁵

Further confirming Athanasius's Christology is dependent upon faith in the Triune God, is his theologizing on the paradox of incarnation revealing Christ 'as the Word of the Father' whilst simultaneously being 'the Ruler and King of the whole creation'.³⁶ Athanasius theologizes to avert accusations of subordinationism, the incarnated Son being inferior to the transcendent Father, which would undermine Trinitarian faith. He affirms, where the Word indwells the human body, there is neither compromise nor diminishment of the Word's divinity or humanity and no disruption of the Son and Father's constant union. Accordingly, there is no contradiction between such paradoxes as being present in the body and being present elsewhere or living as a man whilst sustaining the universe as the Word.³⁷ Such theologizing has been interpreted as an

³² *DI-33*.

³³ '...the double work was not addressed to a specified inquirer...but to an interested audience both inside and outside the church', Thomson, *Contra Gentes*, p.xxii.

³⁴ *DI-1, DI-56*.

³⁵ *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione* '...is considered by nearly all scholars to be Athanasius' first work...', Thomson, *Contra Gentes*, p.xxi. Anatolios notes 'the later writings tend to be more *theo*-logical, concerned in a sustained and focused way with the ontological status of the relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' and 'In contrast...[to *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatione*, the *Orations against the Arians*]...indicate an implicit acknowledgement of the full divinity of the Spirit and manifests a much more integrated conception of the Spirit's role in redemption.', Anatolios, *Athanasius*, pp.31-32 and 61.

³⁶ *DI-16*.

³⁷ *DI-17*.

essence-power distinction reflecting the paradox of the otherness and nearness of God.³⁸

Absent from *De Incarnatione*, in describing the ontological relations between the Father and Son, is the *ὁμοούσιος* language of the Nicene creed, favoured by Athanasius, and any mention of Arius.³⁹ Whilst *De Incarnatione* may pre-date the creed, certain scholars prefer a post-Nicene date, with, for example, the reason for omission being political expediency or wilful oversight as an apologetic strategy.⁴⁰ The pastoral objective of *De Incarnatione*, to encourage, among those who love Christ, Christian virtue and holy living for better comprehending the Scriptures, may be a reason for omitting Arius.⁴¹ In a pastoral apology where Jewish and Greek objections may have been included principally to bolster Christians' assurance in the incarnation, Athanasius may have deemed explicit mention of Arius unwarranted and a diversion from pastoral aims. However, whilst ostensibly absent, Arius casts his shadow over *De Incarnatione*. Emphatic declarations such as Christ being both God and Son of God, presenting Christ as the uncreated creator and the salvific efficacy of Christ's death as conditional upon his divinity, disclose Athanasius as anti-Arian to the core. Athanasius's Christology is categorically Trinitarian.

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³⁸ 'Athanasius rejects the attempt to delineate the distinction between divine otherness and nearness along the lines of an ontological prioritizing of the Father over the Son...[the distinction]...is articulated in terms of God being "outside" creation by his essence and yet present within it by his power...God's active agency within creation does not mitigate against his otherness as an agent; God does not become consubstantial with creation through his activity within it', Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence*, p.47.

³⁹ '...later works are manifestly preoccupied with defending Nicene doctrine and refuting the "Arians".', Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.31.

⁴⁰ See Thomson, *Contra Gentes*, pp.xiii and xxi and Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence*, pp.27, 30 and 31.

⁴¹ *DI-56, DI-57.*

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