

ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA



**TREATISE
ON THE
INCARNATION**

Athanasius of Alexandria

Treatise On the Incarnation

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Table of Contents

[§1.](#)

[§2.](#)

[§3.](#)

[§4.](#)

[§5.](#)

[§6.](#)

[§7.](#)

[§8.](#)

[§9.](#)

[§10.](#)

[§11.](#)

[§12.](#)

[§13.](#)

[§14.](#)

[§15.](#)

[§16.](#)

[§17.](#)

[§18.](#)

[§19.](#)

[§20.](#)

[§21.](#)

[§22.](#)

[§23.](#)

[§24.](#)

[§25.](#)

[§26.](#)

[§27.](#)

[§28.](#)

[§29.](#)

[§30.](#)

[§31.](#)

[§32.](#)

[§33.](#)

[§34.](#)

[§35.](#)

[§36.](#)

[§37.](#)

[§38.](#)

[§39.](#)

[§40.](#)

[§41.](#)

[§42.](#)

[§43.](#)

[§44.](#)

[§45.](#)

[§46.](#)

[§47.](#)

[§48.](#)

[§49.](#)

[§50.](#)

[§51.](#)

[§52.](#)

[§53.](#)

[§54.](#)

[§55.](#)

[§56.](#)

§57.

§1.

[Table of Contents](#)

Introductory. —*The subject of this treatise:* the humiliation and incarnation of the Word. Presupposes the doctrine of Creation, and that by the Word. The Father has saved the world by Him through Whom he first made it.

Whereas in what precedes we have drawn out —choosing a few points from among many —a sufficient account of the error of the heathen concerning idols, and of the worship of idols, and how they originally came to be invented; how, namely, out of wickedness men devised for themselves the worshipping of idols: and whereas we have by God 's grace noted somewhat also of the divinity of the Word of the Father, and of His universal Providence and power, and that the Good Father through Him orders all things, and all things are moved by Him, and in Him are quickened: come now, Macarius¹ (worthy of that name), and true lover of Christ, let us follow up the faith of our religion², and set forth also what relates to the Word 's becoming Man, and to His divine Appearing amongst us, which Jews traduce and Greeks laugh to scorn, but we worship; in order that, all the more for the seeming low estate of the Word, your piety toward Him may be increased and multiplied. 2. For the more He is mocked among the unbelieving, the more witness does He give of His own Godhead; inasmuch as He not only Himself demonstrates as possible what men mistake, thinking impossible, but what men deride as unseemly, this by His own goodness He clothes with seemliness, and what men, in

their conceit of wisdom, laugh at as merely human, He by His own power demonstrates to be divine, subduing the pretensions of idols by His supposed humiliation —by the Cross —and those who mock and disbelieve invisibly winning over to recognise His divinity and power. 3. But to treat this subject it is necessary to recall what has been previously said; in order that you may neither fail to know the cause of the bodily appearing of the Word of the Father, so high and so great, nor think it a consequence of His own nature that the Saviour has worn a body; but that being incorporeal by nature, and Word from the beginning, He has yet of the loving-kindness and goodness of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation. 4. It is, then, proper for us to begin the treatment of this subject by speaking of the creation of the universe, and of God its Artificer, that so it may be duly perceived that 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.

Footnotes

¹ See *Contra Gentes*, i. The word (Μ α κ ά ρ ι ε) may be an adjective only, but its occurrence in *both* places seems decisive. The name was very common (*Apol. c. Ar. passim*). ‘Macarius’ was a Christian, as the present passage shews: he is presumed (*c. Gent. i. 7*) to have access to Scripture.

² τ ῆ ς ε ὑ σ ε β ε ί α ς. See 1 Tim. iii. 16, and note 1 on *De Decr. 1*.

§2.

[Table of Contents](#)

Erroneous views of Creation rejected. (1) Epicurean (fortuitous generation). But diversity of bodies and parts argues a creating intellect. (2.) Platonists (pre-existent matter.) But this subjects God to human limitations, making Him not a creator but a mechanic. (3) Gnostics (an alien Demiurge). Rejected from Scripture.

Of the making of the universe and the creation of all things many have taken different views, and each man has laid down the law just as he pleased. For some say that all things have come into being of themselves, and in a chance fashion; as, for example, the Epicureans, who tell us in their self-contempt, that universal providence does not exist, speaking right in the face of obvious fact and experience. 2. For if, as they say, everything has had its beginning of itself, and independently of purpose, it would follow that everything had come into¹ mere being, so as to be alike and not distinct. For it would follow in virtue of the unity of body that everything must be sun or moon, and in the case of men it would follow that the whole must be hand, or eye, or foot. But as it is this is not so. On the contrary, we see a distinction of sun, moon, and earth; and again, in the case of human bodies, of foot, hand, and head. Now, such separate arrangement as this tells us not of their having come into being of themselves, but shews that a cause preceded them; from which cause it is possible to apprehend God also as the Maker and Orderer of all.

3. But others, including Plato, who is in such repute among the Greeks, argue that God has made the world out of matter previously existing and without beginning. For God could have made nothing had not the material existed already; just as the wood must exist ready at hand for the carpenter, to enable him to work at all. 4. But in so saying they know not that they are investing God with weakness. For if He is not Himself the cause of the material, but makes things only of previously existing material, He proves to be weak, because unable to produce anything He makes without the material; just as it is without doubt a weakness of the carpenter not to be able to make anything required without his timber. For, *ex hypothesi*, had not the material existed, God would not have made anything. And how could He in that case be called Maker and Artificer, if He owes His ability to make to some other source —namely, to the material? So that if this be so, God will be on their theory a Mechanic only, and not a Creator out of nothing²; if, that is, He works at existing material, but is not Himself the cause of the material. For He could not in any sense be called Creator unless He is Creator of the material of which the things created have in their turn been made. 5. But the sectaries imagine to themselves a different artificer of all things, other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in deep blindness even as to the words they use. 6. For whereas the Lord says to the Jews³: “Have ye not read that from the beginning He which created them made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they twain shall become one flesh? ” and then, referring to the

Creator, says, “What, therefore, God hath joined together let not man put asunder: ” how come these men to assert that the creation is independent of the Father? Or if, in the words of John, who says, making no exception, “All things⁴ were made by Him, ” and “without Him was not anything made, ” how could the artificer be another, distinct from the Father of Christ?

Footnotes

¹ Or, “been made in one way only. ” In the next clause I formerly translated the difficult words ὡς ἐπὶ σῶμα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ‘as in the case of the universe; ’ but although the rendering has commended itself to others I now reluctantly admit that it puts too much into the Greek (in spite of §41. 5).

² εἰς τὸ εἶναί.

³ Matt. xix. 4, &c.

⁴ John i. 3.

§3.

[Table of Contents](#)

The true doctrine. Creation out of nothing, of God 's lavish bounty of being. Man created above the rest, but incapable of independent perseverance. Hence the exceptional and supra-natural gift of being in God 's Image, with the promise of bliss conditionally upon his perseverance in grace.

Thus do they vainly speculate. But the godly teaching and the faith according to Christ brands their foolish language as godlessness. For it knows that it was not spontaneously, because forethought is not absent; nor of existing matter, because God is not weak; but that out of nothing, and without its having any previous existence, God made the universe to exist through His word, as He says firstly through Moses: "In¹ the beginning God created the heaven and the earth; " secondly, in the most edifying book of the Shepherd, "First² of all believe that God is one, which created and framed all things, and made them to exist out of nothing. " 2. To which also Paul refers when he says, "By³ faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the Word of God, so that what is seen hath not been made out of things which do appear. " 3. For God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness: nor⁴ could one that is good be niggardly of anything: whence, grudging existence to none, He has made all things out of nothing by His own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. And among these, having taken especial pity, above all things on earth, upon the race of men, and having perceived its inability, by virtue of the

condition of its origin, to continue in one stay, He gave them a further gift, and He did not barely create man, as He did all the irrational creatures on the earth, but made them after His own image, giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflexion of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise. 4. But knowing once more how the will of man could sway to either side, in anticipation He secured the grace given them by a law and by the spot where He placed them. For He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption. 5. Now this is that of which Holy Writ also gives warning, saying in the Person of God: "Of every tree⁵ that is in the garden, eating thou shalt eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ye shall not eat of it, but on the day that ye eat, dying ye shall die. " But by "dying ye shall die, " what else could be meant than not dying merely, but also abiding ever in the corruption of death?

Footnotes

¹ Gen. i. 1.

² Herm. *Mand.* 1.

³ Heb. xi. 3.

⁴ c. Gent. *xli. and Plato, Tim æus 29 E.*

⁵ Gen. ii. 16, *sq.*