

On the Incarnation, by Athanasius
Westminster Book of the Month
April 12, 2023

I. Introduction

A. Athanasius of Alexandria (~296– 373 AD) – *Athanasius Contra Mundum*

II. Athanasius’ Life and Context

A. Assistant/Advisor to the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander (d. 328 AD)

B. The Doctrine of the Trinity

1. WSC Q. 5. *Are there more Gods than one?*

A. There is but one only, the living and true God.

2. Q. 6. *How many persons are there in the godhead?*

A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

3. SABELLIANISM (denial of the real distinctions among the persons) vs. SUBORDINATIONISM (denial of the divine equality of the persons)

C. Arianism – “There was a time when he (the Son) was not.”

D. The Council of Nicaea – *I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial [homoousios] with the Father; through him all things were made. [Homoousios (same substance) vs. Homoiousios (similar substance)]*

III. Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*

A. What is the Incarnation?

1. The incarnation is the act of the divine Person of the Son of God to assume a full and complete human nature—so that the Divine Son is both fully God and fully man, with two natures, in one person forever!

a) “...*the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not far from it before ... [But] He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own ... as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt.*” (21)

b) “*You must understand, therefore, that when writers on this sacred theme speak of Him as eating and drinking and being born, they mean that the body, as the body, was born and sustained with the food proper to its nature; while God the Word, Who was united with it, was at the same time ordering the universe and revealing Himself through his bodily acts as not man only but God.*” (34)

c) “*The Word was not hedged in by the body, nor did His presence in the body prevent His being present elsewhere as well. When He moved His body He did not cease also to direct the universe by His Mind and might ... At one and the same time – this is the wonder – as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the Father. Not even His birth from a virgin, therefore, changed Him in any way, nor was He defiled by being in the body. Rather, he sanctified the body by being in it.*” (33)

B. Why did the Son Become Incarnate?

1. *“It would, of course, have been unthinkable that god should go back upon His word and that man, having transgressed, should not die; but it was equally monstrous that beings which once had shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption.” (19)*
2. *“What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? ... The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.” (29).*
3. *“But beyond all this, there was a debt owing which must needs be paid; for, as I said before, all men were due to die ... [T]he Word dwelt among us ... [that] He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering His own temple to death in place of all, to settle man’s account with death and free him from the primal transgression.” (38)*
 - a) **Heb 2:14** – *“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”*

C. What is the Proof of Christ’s Resurrection Power Today?

1. *“But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ treat it underfoot as nothing, and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection.” (47)*
2. *“If, then, the Savior is neither a mere man nor a magician, nor one of the demons, but has by His Godhead confounded and overshadowed the opinions of the poets and the delusions of the demons and the wisdom of the Greeks, it must be manifest and will be owned by all that He is in truth Son of God, Existent Word and Wisdom and Power of the Father.” (78)*
 - a) **Rom 3:2** – *“Let God be true though every one were a liar.”*

IV. Conclusion

- A. **Isaiah 19:19–23** – *“In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border.²⁰ It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them.²¹ And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them.²² And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them.²³ In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.²⁴ In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth,²⁵ whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.’”*