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### **“On the Incarnation” by Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: A Review**

“On the Incarnation” represents a classic example of Orthodox theology composed by a bishop born in Alexandria, Saint Athanasius. He is known for a passionate defense and support of Christian theology during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Due to his beliefs, St. Athanasius spent seventeen years in exile ordered by five different Roman Emperors. According to sources, Athanasius was inspired by the Christian martyrs during the period of Great Persecution when he was small, which later on predetermined the path of the theologian (Chadwick 227). Despite this fact, St. Athanasius managed to write several influencing treatises, where “On the Incarnation” became the first classic examples of the Christian theology.

The book is addressed to Marcarius, who was presbyter of Athanasius, and it was written in apologetic form. It is considered that “On the Incarnation” was not only constructed for the purposes of explanation, but in defense of the concept of incarnation against the critics of this notion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. However, some experts insist that the book was not the response to the accusations that eventually led him to exile, but his own opinion on the theological subject matter, particularly on the incarnation (Fitzgerald 2). The theologian criticizes the pagan rituals and beliefs by advocating the greatness of God and his acts.

The book is divided into nine chapters; each of them is dedicated to the theological issues argued by Athanasius. In the first part of the book, the author discusses the creation of man and his sins. The main problem the theologian sees is the fact that “the Word’s becoming Man and His divine Appearing in our midst” (Athanasius 1). The author implies that due to the Word gaining human form and people have broken the connection with God, the world fell into corruption and death. Athanasius sees God as a savior and insists people have to embrace Him in order to eliminate the sorrows and sins brought by them into the world. In the beginning of the second chapter, the author emphasizes that “because death and corruption were gaining ever firmer hold on them (people), the human race was in process of destruction” (Athanasius 12). In the result, according to Athanasius, the Word of God has emerged to save humans from destruction. It was the first reason of incarnation proclaimed by the theologian.

Its second reason underlined by Athanasius is connected to the concepts of worship, revelation, and interaction with God. The man, according to the book, has been created by the image of God and for the acknowledgement of His presence. Specifically, the theologian argues that man was created in order to love and worship God, but “as we have already seen, men, foolish as they are, thought little of the grace they had received, and turned away from God” (Athanasius 20). Here, the author criticizes paganism claiming that people have chosen to celebrate the act of creation rather than the creator himself. Athanasius blames the rituals practiced by pagans for the destruction they brought to this world. One of the peculiar concepts described by the author was the constraint of renovation of man. He claims that due to the prevalence of sins, the body has to be destroyed, but men must be completely renovated. Here, Athanasius conveys the notion of the fact that all sins die with the human body, while the soul is eternal. Yet, he does not imply it directly.

In the rest of the book, Athanasius supports the reason behind God's plan regarding His son. Specifically, the theologian justifies the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, as it embodied a certain purpose. The author insists that "the common Savior of all has died on our behalf, we who believe in Christ no longer die, as men died aforetime, in fulfillment of the threat of the law" (Athanasius 34). Furthermore, the theologian claims that Christ's death became publicly acknowledged in order no one would question the power of God. Additionally, Athanasius emphasizes that the sufferings underwent by Christian martyrs verify the victory of Christ over destruction.

"On the Incarnation" tends to oppose not only to the beliefs of pagans, the book was written to argue some of the Jewish system of faith. Overall, he puts the blame on the crucifixion and sufferings of Christ on Jews themselves by claiming that "it would have been better for the Lord to have avoided the designs of the Jews against Him, and so to have guarded His body from death altogether" (Athanasius 36). Here, the author emphasizes that Jews have vicious plans over Christ. In the separate chapters, the author addresses Jews and Gentiles (pagans). Athanasius demonstrates how God appeals to all people, while the pagan idols attract only the tribes praying for them. The theologian speaks to the Greeks, criticizing their love to oracles and serving multiple gods. He argues that after Christianity was introduced to this land; the oracles disappeared, which became evidence of their madness rather than knowledge.

Overall, Athanasius implies that the fantasies, sins, and worshiping multiple gods have the similar root. According to the author, these phenomena come from human nature and their desire to interpret the environment around them. However, people have forgotten that everything was created by God for them, where questioning its nature brings nothing but the doubt. At the end of the book, the theologian points to the need of learning the Scriptures in order to embrace

His love. Yet, Athanasius insists that “there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word” (Athanasius 90). Therefore, according to the author, a person has to maintain a pure life to understand the Word better and to follow it without any doubts.

### **Personal Opinion**

Despite the fact that “On the Incarnation” was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it is easy to read the book and understand its main concepts. The ideas illustrated in the text demonstrate classic interpretation of Christian beliefs and the fact that this work has become the first of the classic theological texts can be recognized quite easily. Constraints in the book are vivid and one idea piercing the entire work, which is to support the incarnation and to address the critics by strong and well-supported evidence. According to scholars, Athanasius received both secular and classic education (Fitzgerald 1), which made him intelligent person who can easily defend an argument and address a questionable issue. While reading the book, it is possible to admit that it is well organized and meticulously structured. This fact points to the knowledge and theologian's skills to logical argumentation.

Athanasius rationalizes the actions of God, His motives, and actions claiming that there is no place for miracles. This specificity is quite different from the other theological texts arguing that miracles root in God's acts. On the contrary, the theologian opposes the fantasies made by pagans and the actions performed by God, the validation of the last do not require proof, but have to be acknowledged as they are. Athanasius defends his position with multiple arguments and in some cases presents real life examples of his statements. Consequently, “On the Incarnation” makes an impression of holistic and multi-faceted work that supports every acclamation made in the text. While some experts believe that the text is unreadable due to the

time period it was written, it is probably the translation and adaptation that makes it easy to comprehend. However, even due to this fact, "On the Incarnation" remains a perfect example of theological thought that is relevant in the modern daytime.

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