The Legacy of St. Athanasius
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Athanasius as Evangelist, Part Two:
On the Incarnation of the Word / De Incarnatione Verbum Dei (c.328 AD)

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The Problem of Evil: A Comparison Point

In a thoughtful and witty presentation called *The Problem of Evil*, prominent evangelical apologist Ravi Zacharias offers his answer to the most vexing questions of our age, and, indeed, of all time. How could God be good, in a world where there is evil? Especially gross human evil? One of the best known Christian apologists today, Zacharias takes the following approach: If there is no such thing as evil, objectively, then actions like Hitler's genocide have no moral repugnance, inherently. Genocide, murder, and the like may be offensive to our sensibilities, but that is all it is: our opinion. Unsettled by this moral ambiguity, human beings tend to explore whether there is, in fact, an objective basis for distinguishing good versus evil. If there is good and evil, then this points to a lawgiver higher than humanity. So the human complaint that there is evil, objectively, does not undermine the argument for God's existence. Quite to the contrary, according to Zacharias, our own human objection to actions that we call evil points to God's existence.

I find this argument necessary, but not sufficient, for a Christian apologist and evangelist. Because if Zacharias rests his argument on human beings having an intuitive sense of evil and good, then that very same intuition will resist the God for which Zacharias argues. Why? Because Zacharias' Southern Baptist background, and funding source, requires penal substitutionary atonement: the view that Jesus died to absorb the punishment which would satisfy an attribute of God supposedly known as retributive justice. And this divine retributive justice requires God to infinitely punish any transgression against his law, because God is an infinite being whose retributive justice is infinitely offended at any and all human disobedience.

At least some people would raise an eyebrow at the claim that God wants to infinitely punish every human being for whatever infraction each person has committed, however small or great. Stealing paper from the office becomes as worthy of infinite divine punishment as the genocide of Jews during World War II. This way of grouping people as sinners, categorically, has the effect of leveling the playing field among people in a moral sense, which is, arguably, a positive. But it also has the effect of leveling the playing field among all moral *actions*. The obvious question can be raised: Is stealing paper as morally reprehensible and punishable as genocide? Surely, advocates of penal substitutionary atonement argue that God does differentiate between those actions. But because the consequences are identical in category and magnitude, the argument lacks persuasive power. This is one puzzling downstream effect of portraying God within penal substitutionary atonement theology. It is a corollary consequence that many people find rather odd.

The other, deeper problem, however, is that penal substitutionary atonement makes the Christian God complicit with human evil. This complicity occurs through the logic retributive satisfaction deriving from God, supposedly. If Jesus absorbed some amount of divine wrath at the cross, as penal substitution asserts he did, we must ask the question, 'How much divine wrath? How much is left over for people in hell?' If Jesus took God's entire wrath against humanity at the cross, and then God poured out more wrath on the unrepentant in hell, would this not be a double accounting problem? On the other hand, we must also avoid the problem lurking at the other end of the spectrum: If Jesus took all of God's wrath at the cross, then there would be no wrath leftover for unbelievers, so there could be no hell. Since most evangelicals believe Scripture teaches that there is a hell, and at least the very serious possibility that there will be people in it, Jesus could not have taken all of God's wrath. According to this logic of avoiding a double accounting problem, Jesus did not actually die for all people, but only for those God elected or predestined. This is the idea of 'limited atonement,' which limits the scope of God's love and brings into question verses like Ezekiel 18:23, 32 – 33; 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:3 – 4; 4:10; and Titus 2:11.

This is a broader problem that others besides Zacharias confront. For example, here is well-respected evangelical scholar J.I. Packer, in his famous introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, arguing that penal substitution necessarily means limited atonement, which means God only determined to save, through

Jesus Christ, some people, and not all, from His own punitive wrath:

> '[John] Owen shows with great cogency that the three classes of texts alleged to prove that Christ died for persons who will not be saved (those saying that he died for 'the world,' for 'all,' and those thought to envisage the perishing of those for whom he died), cannot on sound principles of exegesis be held to teach any such thing; and, further, that the theological inferences by which universal redemption is supposed to be established are really quite fallacious…So far from magnifying the love and grace of God, this claim dishonors both it and him, for it reduces God's love to an impotent wish and turns the whole economy of 'saving' grace, so-called ('saving' is really a misnomer on this view), into a monumental divine failure. Also, so far from magnifying the merit and worth of Christ's death, it cheapens it, for it makes Christ die in vain. Lastly, so far from affording faith additional encouragement, it destroys the scriptural ground of assurance altogether, for it denies that the knowledge that Christ died for me (or did or does anything else for me) is a sufficient ground for inferring my eternal salvation; my salvation, on this view, depends not on what Christ did for me, but on what I subsequently do for myself…You cannot have it both ways: an atonement of universal extent is a depreciated atonement.'[1]

I agree with Packer's view that limited atonement is the inseparable – and for some, the unwanted – companion to penal substitution. For Packer wishes to avoid the double accounting problem. The tight link between penal substitution and limited atonement exists to ensure that Christ's death was efficacious for procuring the forensic salvation of some, lest Jesus be said to have died for no one in particular and theoretically none. Hence, advocates of limited atonement like J.I. Packer prefer to call their conviction 'definite atonement.'

Thus, in the theory of penal substitutionary atonement, the concept of God becomes vulnerable to the charge of complicity with human evil. In the high federal Calvinist expression, that charge is the most serious. As I mentioned in the first part of my analysis of Athanasius as evangelist, the high federal Calvinist understanding is that God caused the fall in Genesis 3 and actively causes people's sin, yet is somehow not guilty of sin Himself. Whether this arrangement of statements can logically be held together is one matter. Regardless, understood this way, how can God be morally qualified to be the source of human morality? Not to mention be the final judge of human moral behavior? It is not obvious how He can be these things. Such a concept of God can frighten people based on the sheer magnitude of divine power. But can it win people by a moral vision of God? That seems unlikely.

Even in other understandings of theodicy where God is not the efficient, mechanical cause of the primeval fall, or of ongoing human sin, there are nevertheless problems of divine complicity with human evil. When penal substitutionary atonement anchors one's understanding of God, it is hard to overcome the impression that God cares more about the next world than about this one. Penal substitution still means limited atonement, and if God not trying to undo all human evil, but only some of it, would that not make Him passively or actively evil? If I acted to stop some brawling children in my family, and not others, what would my moral character be as a parent? Moreover, how can God be wholly good if He finds it more important to satisfy His own retributive wrath (with Jesus the Son being the stand-in for that punishment) rather than to undo the problem of human evil within every person? Does something in God's character still somehow require that He have people to punish infinitely in a retributive hell? Is God only partially good? Is He partially evil?

Athanasius of Alexandria, however, did not have these problems. This courageous fourth century defender of the Nicene Creed and the orthodox expression of the Trinity, who was the first to explicitly give an account of the New Testament as the collection of twenty-seven documents we now receive,[2] did not believe in penal substitution. This fact cannot be stated forcefully enough. Although some modern theologians claim that Athanasius did, their claims cannot be sustained. Athanasius did not hold to the view that God was acting to satisfy a problem within Himself. He acted, rather, to undo the corruption of sin within each and every human being. Other aspects of biblical interpretation related to theodicy will also come into focus to defend the goodness of God. Athanasius, consequently, did not have difficulties asserting God's sheer goodness in the face of human evil, comprehensively.

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[1] J.I. Packer, 'An Introduction to John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ', reprinted in J.I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.126. See also R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2nd edition, 2000) for another example of a theologian who explains the verses above as referring to 'limited atonement.'

[2] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #39* 3 – 5

Nor does his theological vision suffer from the liabilities of moral inconsistency on God's part.

Ravi Zacharias' commitment to penal substitutionary atonement, by contrast, limits what he can say about God's goodness in the face of human evil. He says what is necessary, but he does not say what is sufficient. I agree with him when he says that human beings have an intuitive, pre-rational sense that good and evil are objective realities larger than us. I also agree with him that this intuition points to a divine lawgiver. But Zacharias cannot answer the question of whether this divine lawgiver is acting in such a way so as to undo the corruption of sin within each and every person. Therefore, his presentation is not compelling. How can God be the moral lawgiver for humanity when He is not acting to undo all human evil? The people to whom Zacharias appeals to via their moral intuition are left hungry and thirsty for a God righteousness enough to love every single person in the same way, who wants to undo all human evil, who is not complicit with human evil in the slightest, who can therefore be the source of human morality, and who is qualified to be the ultimate judge of human decision, although in an Athanasian (and patristic) framework, this would not be via a retributive hell.

The intuition that Zacharias appeals to therefore weighs against the theological vision he presents. Do people want to believe in a God who is only partially good? We are familiar with people who are two-faced, who hide their evil, selfish, and manipulative face from public view. They suspect that Christian evangelists and apologists are therefore defending a being who is partially evil. They think that Christians are the worst of salespeople, presenting only what is attractive, and hiding behind our backs what is detestable and repugnant about the deity we offer.

Perhaps Western secular universities suffer from the lack of Christian voices representing Eastern Orthodox and, especially, patristic, resources. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, co-editors of the recent book *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, draw together an impressive range of scholars to address this subject. Kyriacos C. Markides' contribution is entitled 'The Absence of Eastern Orthodoxy in American Academia and Its Possible Relevance for an Integral Vision of Reality,' and is a fine introduction to the wealth of Orthodox resources regarding such matters as the soul-body union and Christian mystical practices, especially in comparison with the Western curiosity with Buddhism and other 'Eastern religions.'[3] However, neither this chapter, nor any of the others, addresses philosophical matters like the nature of good and evil, the consistency of an Orthodox theological account as compared with other Christian accounts and other religious accounts, and the possibility of human moral and ethical transformation. I believe this is an area of deep concern, and great opportunity.

I firmly believe we must return to Athanasius' theological vision to present God in such a way that His goodness shines without shifting shadow. Athanasius held to an ontological understanding of atonement, redemption, and salvation. I am nicknaming it 'medical substitution' here in order to promote a deliberate comparison with penal substitution, and thus point this particular wing of the Protestant church towards the theological consensus sought by the Orthodox, and the Neo-Patristic synthesis advocated by Georges Florovsky, in particular. Athanasius, again, articulated God in Christ as healing human nature – in a medical and healing paradigm – and as undoing the deepest and foundational evil through Jesus' active, human obedience. Just as a doctor or surgeon hates the disease in our body because he loves us, so God hates the corruption of sin in us because He loves us. This distinction between the object of God's wrath, in this sense (the corruption of sin), and the object of His love (our personhood) is fundamental to patristic teaching on the atonement; it is not that there is no wrath of God or judgment of God, but that the wrath and judgment serve God's love for us as persons, and are in fact activities deriving from God's love. Thus, for Athanasius, God clearly has one and only one face, the face of love and goodness. And all other questions of theology and theodicy can be answered comfortably and naturally in this Athanasian framework. As a result, the moral intuition that we have that there must be a God who is wholly and perfectly good, and our deep longing for Him, can be vindicated as we follow the lead of the great Alexandrian theologian. To do this, I explore Athanasius as an evangelist, in his *On the Incarnation of the Word / De Incarnatione Verbum Dei*, written circa 328 AD.

God is Good, from Creation (1 – 3)

After mentioning his first volume, *Against the Heathen / Contra Gentes*, Athanasius returns to his audience, Macarius, to explain why the Word of God became incarnate in a human body, to 'the seeming low estate of the Word.' Even though both Jews and Greeks laugh, scorn, and mock Christian faith on this point, it is the very

[3] Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, editors, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), ch.15

essence of the saving message of Christ (1.1 – 3). Athanasius returns to summarize in a different form the Christian understanding of creation and the character of God (1.4). What he called 'the healing of creation' in *Contra Gentes*, he calls 'the renewal of creation' in *De Incarnatione*. He signals to his reader that God's action and self-revelation in Jesus Christ is for the healing and renewal of creation, not the satisfaction of some divine attribute as 'wrath' or 'anger' or 'retributive justice,' and the scope of that renewal is creation in its entirety, not in part.

To help his reader understand the Christian view of the world, Athanasius describes by contrast other views. He rejects the Epicurean view for failing in its own logic. If the world had been spontaneously generated, as Epicureans claim, then there would be an undifferentiated mass of matter. The fact that there are different parts of the universe and different parts of the human body attest to cause which ordered these diverse parts (2.1 – 2).

Athanasius also rejects the Platonist view, perhaps for being self-contradictory but also perhaps for being insufficiently Christian. The Platonists believed that matter existed for all eternity, 'without beginning' (2.3). Athanasius says that the god who is understood to have formed the world out of this pre-existing matter can only be called 'Mechanic,' on the analogy to a human sculptor or carpenter, and not 'Maker,' or 'Artificer,' or 'Creator' (2.4). It is unclear to me whether the Platonists did indeed claim these titles for god in their conception, or whether Athanasius is rebutting the Platonists' attack on the Christians.

Athanasius then cites Scriptures which speak of a 'beginning' of God's creative activity through His Word: Matthew 19:4 and John 1:3 (2.6); and then Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:3; and the first century document *Shepherd of Hermas* 1 (3.1 – 2). But the discussion of creation in a material, physical sense gives Athanasius the occasion to insist that:

> '3. God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness: nor 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.' (3.3)

As an evangelist, Athanasius is quick to keep the sheer and unqualified goodness of God in view. His rhetorical strategy seems to be in response to the Greek prejudice against the body – or the material – and for the soul – or the conceptual. He ties the existence of life in all its forms to God's generosity and love.

Athanasius then says that God gave the race of men 'a further gift' to these creatures specially 'made after His own image, giving them a portion of even of the power of His own word' (3.3). By this, Athanasius certainly includes human rationality, since he contrasts it to 'the irrational creatures on the earth' (3.3). But he does not seem to stop there.

> '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.' (3.4)

Athanasius is at pains to explain why God's goodness was not impugned by the free will of humanity, nor of their fateful choice. He made ample provision, the Alexandrian argues, for human beings to fulfill the vision God had for them from their creation. God gave them a command ('law') and a garden in which 'the life in paradise' was within close, intimate reach. Human beings, therefore, could have quite easily 'kept the grace and remained good.'

God also gave the human race the warning that disobedience meant 'corruption.'

> '4b. 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 tree that is in the garden, eating you shall eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, but on the day that you eat, dying you shall die. But by dying you shall die, what else could be meant than not dying merely, but also abiding ever in the corruption of death?' (3.4 – 5)

This is an important passage in Athanasius. The theologian, despite elsewhere admitting that he did not know the Hebrew language, accurately reproduces the rendering of 'dying you shall die' warning as both the infinitive and the future tense. From this, he deduces that human beings, even in a fallen state, will never, and indeed can never, reach annihilation, whether self-imposed or God-imposed. The former is impossible, and the latter is inconceivable, and both limitations are rooted in God's absolute goodness. God gives existence without grudging it, because He is good and loves His creation. Human beings, in particular, participate in the Word in a certain way, by default. Human death is, therefore, a tendency towards nothingness, but Athanasius is cautious about his language. Human beings in sin can only approximate nothingness, like an asymptote.[4] They will never revert to full nothingness. They cannot. God will not allow it.

The passage is also important because Athanasius begins to define 'corruption.' Whereas in *Contra Gentes*, he defined the fall and human sin using the terms 'disorder' and 'habituation' a la addiction, Athanasius here indicates that 'corruption' is not simply the deterioration and eventual disintegration of the body. This disproves the notion that Athanasius believed in the merely 'physical' notion of the atonement. It was not merely the physical aspect of our existence that Jesus healed. Athanasius can certainly speak of 'corruption' and 'death' in an elision: 'the corruption of death.' But he also speaks of them as distinct, albeit interrelated conditions and concepts: 'in death and in corruption.'[5] In *De Incarnatione* 4 – 5, Athanasius refers to the moral and relational quality of human life in view of sin. Importantly, Athanasius' preceding discussion in *Contra Gentes* 2 – 7 of the human as a soul-body composite, along with the resulting 'disorder' of sin, show that it is not merely the physical consequence of mortality that Jesus had to heal.

Correspondingly, this is Athanasius' first mention of the word 'evil.' Human evil, for Athanasius, is relational and directional. Human beings had the possibility of becoming 'evil.' It was not, in his view, a necessity. But because the relational possibility existed for Adam and Eve to reject God so totally that they would even eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God made provision for that disobedience. God made all things good. But humans 'became evil.' Evil, therefore, has a specifically *human* origin.

God is Good, Despite the Fall, Because of the Word's Incarnation in Our Humanity (4 – 10)
Given that the fall did happen, can Athanasius defend the goodness of God? Yes, he will say, God is good despite the fall of humanity, because God set about to rescue His creation from corruption and death. Human beings 'contrived evil for themselves' (4.4), and turned towards more evil, even though, ontologically 'what is evil is not, but what is good is' (4.5). He also introduces the devil into his discourse, who had a role in bringing about the fall because of his 'envy' (5.2). Of the devil and the demons, and human vulnerability to them, I will discuss in my analysis of *De Incarnatione* 11 – 16.

Athanasius then summarizes human life under condition of sin as progressively worsening, morally and relationally:

> 3. For even in their misdeeds men had not stopped short at any set limits; but gradually pressing forward, have passed on beyond all measure: having to begin with been inventors of wickedness and called down upon themselves death and corruption; while later on, having turned aside to wrong and exceeding all lawlessness, and stopping at no one evil but devising all manner of new evils in succession, they have become insatiable in sinning. 4. For there were adulteries everywhere and thefts, and the whole earth was full of murders and plunderings. And as to corruption and wrong, no heed was paid to law, but all crimes were being practised everywhere, both individually and jointly. Cities were at war with cities, and nations were rising up against nations; and the whole earth was rent with civil commotions and battles; each man vying with his fellows in lawless deeds. 8. Nor were even crimes against nature far from them, but, as the Apostle and witness of Christ says: For their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the women, burned in their lust one toward another, men with men working unseemliness, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.

Here, Athanasius repeats the essence of what he said in *Contra Gentes* 2 – 7, that human sin is about self-corruption. He includes a quotation of Romans 1:26 – 27, drawn from Paul's own view of the matter which he expressed in

[4] see also *De Incarnatione* 4.5 – 6
[5] cf. '*death* having gained upon men, and *corruption* abiding upon them' in 6.2

Romans 1:21 – 32 in the case of the general human population. Athanasius does not suggest anywhere that human sin presents a problem in terms of a supposed build-up of divine wrath. The apostle Paul himself had the same understanding ('God gave them over' in Romans 1:24, 26, 28), so the wrath of God is already unfolding and manifested in the sad quality of human life and the horrible experiences people undergo at each other's hands because of the increasing levels of self-corruption.

Athanasius also considers the possibility that God simply go back on His word and revoke the 'death' that the human fall at the tree introduced (6.1 – 6). He says that it was 'impossible to evade the law' (6.2), for it would be 'monstrous' for God to speak and then 'prove false,' that 'God's word should be broken' (6.3). He continues, in the next chapter, to inveigh against the possibility that God would ' appear a liar for our profit and preservation' (7.1).

This abbreviated treatment is a *rhetorical* weakness, in my estimation. Elsewhere, Athanasius shows that he is more than familiar with other, better, ways of explaining the primeval exile from the garden in terms of God being good to human beings, and loving and protecting them. Curiously, at this point, Athanasius makes God sound like His primary concern was that He not be called untrue, even in the face of such dire human circumstances. This apparent motivation will have a role to play later in *De Incarnatione*. But for the moment, attributing an arguably self-concerned and self-referencing motivation to God, at this point, weakens the argument for God's goodness and love, which the Alexandrian bishop is keen to maintain in this very section (6.8).

What other explanations were available? The second century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 – c.202 AD), the third century theologian Methodius of Olympus (died 311 AD), and Athanasius' younger fourth century contemporary Gregory of Nazianzus all demonstrate their understanding that God exiled human beings from the garden to prevent human beings from immortalizing the corruption of sin in their very beings. In other words, they understood God's action as motivated by love for humanity, not merely God's concern to be a promise-keeper. Here, as an example, is Irenaeus:

> 'Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.'[6]

Given that Athanasius knew the writings of Irenaeus,[7] and probably Methodius as well, that these writings taken together attest to a common oral foundation in Christian teaching, it is somewhat surprising that Athanasius does not follow his predecessor more explicitly here.

To substantiate my assertion that this is not a defect in Athanasius' overall *understanding*, however, I will show how Athanasius understood *what* the fall entailed, and why God decreed that death was the consequence for it. The Alexandrian theologian recognized in *De Incarnatione* 8.1 that God preferred human death over immortalized

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[6] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6. Methodius of Olympus, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5, says, '*In order, then, that man might not be an undying or ever-living evil*, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body, and was provided with immortal sustenance, God for this cause pronounced him mortal, and clothed him with mortality… For while the body still lives, before it has passed through death, sin must also live with it, as it has its roots concealed within us even though it be externally checked by the wounds inflicted by corrections and warnings… For the present we restrain its sprouts, such as evil imaginations, test any root of bitterness springing up trouble us, not suffering its leaves to unclose and open into shoots; while the Word, like an axe, cuts at its roots which grow below. But hereafter the very thought of evil will disappear.' Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 45*, says 'Yet here too he makes a gain, namely death and the cutting off of sin, *in order that evil may not be immortal*. Thus, his punishment is changed into a mercy, for it is in mercy, I am persuaded, that God inflicts punishment.'

[7] Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 54; *De Decretis* 14; *Apology Against Arians* 1:39, 2:70; 3:19, 3:33, 3:53; *Epistle to Serapion* 1:24; *De Synodis* 51; *Epistle to Adelphi* 4 quoting Irenaeus' preface to *Against Heresies* 5. Khaled Anatolios, 'The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius', *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001), p.463–76 considers the question of Athanasius' reliance on Irenaeus. Eusebius of Caesarea named Irenaeus as one of two writers whose theology was eminently reliable: 'Who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito which proclaim Christ as God and Man?' Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75. J.A. McGuckin, 'The Strategic Adaptation of Deification,' edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.96 – 97 notes that Alexandrians Clement, Origen, and Athanasius either echo Irenaeus' language or quote him directly, and the Cappadocian theologians Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa do as well.

sinfulness.

> '1. For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition…'[8]

In other words, once the corruption of sin had set in to human beings, death was the only way to rid it from us. Athanasius shares this view explicitly with several other patristic writers. Was not God acting retributively towards Adam and Eve? Not at all. And was God merely concerned to vindicate His truthfulness or word-promise? No. God had in mind humanity's good by exiling Adam and Eve from the garden, since the fall was protective. God's act was neither simply Him following through on a promise that He would rather not have had to keep, nor God acting retributively towards Adam and Eve. It is still God's goodness and love for humanity.

Athanasius goes on to consider the motivation and effectiveness of the Word incarnate (6.7 – 10). The motivation of God was love for humanity, pure and simple. And that love flowed out of God's sheer goodness:

> '7. So, as the rational creatures were wasting and such works in course of ruin, what was *God in His goodness* to do? Suffer corruption to prevail against them and death to hold them fast? And where were the profit of their having been made, to begin with? For better were they not made, than once made, left to neglect and ruin. 8. *For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God's part*— if, that is, He allows His own work to be ruined when once He had made it— more so than if He had never made man at all. 9. For if He had not made them, none could impute weakness; but once He had made them, and created them out of nothing, it were most monstrous for the work to be ruined, and that before the eyes of the Maker. 10. It was, then, *out of the question* to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of *God's goodness*.'[9]

God's goodness and love for humanity requires that God act on behalf of His corrupted creation. This is not an apologetic for Jesus' death on the cross from some supposed need to satisfy divine retributive justice. Nor would Athanasius' logic be of use to anyone who wanted to argue that God desires to save only some human beings, and not all. For God to not act in a saving way towards each of His creations would be 'neglect,' in Athanasius' view. And neglect would be, quite simply, 'weakness, and not goodness on God's part.' The density of appeals to God's goodness shows Athanasius' concern to call forth a response from his audience to God in His goodness, not simply an emotional response to Jesus on the cross.

In keeping with his vision of God being determined to renew the creation, Athanasius considers the argument that repentance should have been enough.

> '4. Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?'[10]

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, Athanasius asks us to imagine Adam and Eve making a small mistake or committing a small offense against God, each other, or their future children – a raised voice, an inappropriate gesture, an unthankful or wasteful attitude, a fearful self-defense, etc. And he says that if they had done this, 'repentance would have been well enough,' because God would have easily forgiven them that. In a day and age where Anselm's honor-satisfaction theory[11] and Calvin's retributive-justice-satisfaction theory (i.e. penal substitution theory) have so colored our view of God that we view any small offense against God as calling forth infinite, unlimited anger from Him, it is startling to find Athanasius casually dismissing it as beneath God. Many have simply not known what to do about this statement other than say that Athanasius must have been

[8] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 9.1
[9] Ibid 6:7 – 10
[10] Ibid 7.4
[11] Patrick Henry Reardon, *Reclaiming the Atonement: An Orthodox Theology of Redemption, Volume One: The Incarnation* (Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2015), ch.2 gives a compelling criticism of Anselm from an Orthodox perspective.

wrong. American Protestant evangelical Donald Fairbairn, a scholar of patristics, is an example of many Protestants who are simply shocked at Athanasius' casual declaration.[12] Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, who try to project penal substitution and divine retributive justice back onto Athanasius, sidestep this passage altogether.[13] One suspects that they do so because it would completely ruin their attempt to enlist Athanasius into the penal substitution camp.

Unlike Fairbairn, I believe Athanasius was correct. But how do we explain his statement? Why did Athanasius say this? How could so great a theologian make this statement? Nowhere in his writings does Athanasius explain why God would simply accept repentance for 'ordinary' and, presumably, relatively minor trespasses – that is, trespasses not including eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. What was his understanding of the character of God? Can we reproduce his logic?

On the one hand, Athanasius must have explained the tree of knowledge of good and evil in a way that was appropriate to biblical exegesis and textual analysis. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any place in Athanasius' literary corpus where he explains his view of what the tree of knowledge of good and evil was, or what it represented. However, from the way Athanasius describes the moral and relational corruption that befell humanity after eating from the tree, my best estimate of his view is that the tree of knowledge was a necessary part of God's creation order. It represented God in His relation to us as law-giver, whereas the tree of life represented God in His relation to us as life-giver. To human beings newly created – and especially without power tools – trees represented God: They are larger than us, older than us, more firmly rooted than us, and able to give us nourishment without dying. The two special trees, in particular, which might have appeared with special glory unique among trees, were invested with particular aspects of the life of God, perhaps sacramentally. The tree of life, as Athanasius seems to acknowledge in a simplified and philosophical way without naming it as such, would have nourished us into more of the immortal life of God (Gen.3:22 – 24; cf. *De Incarnatione* 3.3 – 4). For God is life. The tree of knowledge of good and evil, by contrast, would have provided us with an appreciation that God defines good and evil for us. For God is good, and loving, which can be minimally expressed as law. For Adam and Eve, then, to take into themselves the power to define good and evil, which only properly belongs to God, is the heart of corruption. Humanity became our own law-givers. We became living contradictions, holding to the language of good and evil, which attest to objective realities larger than us. And yet each one of us wants to define good and evil for ourselves, and in so doing, we want to be our own gods in an utterly corrupt way. We are relativistic absolutists: Absolutist because we cannot shake the moral intuition that good and evil are given to us from beyond, and are, thus, objectively true; relativistic because we want to control the definitions. As a biblical scholar, evangelist, and pastoral theologian, Athanasius must have had a working understanding of Genesis 2 – 4 much like this.

On the other hand, and simultaneously, Athanasius rooted his understanding of God's exiling of Adam and Eve in his own conviction that God's nature absolutely conditioned all of God's actions. As with the pagan Greek mythological gods, so with the one true Christian God: 'For their deeds must correspond to their natures.'[14] Put another way, God being *good* conditioned all His actions towards humanity as *loving*. This must, by definition, include God's exiling of Adam and Eve from the garden. This is why Athanasius does not claim that death expressed God's divine claim of retributive justice on Adam and Eve for their self-corruption. Athanasius does not see retributive justice as among the 'attributes' of God. Furthermore, Athanasius would not be able to regard God's placement of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the original garden as anything but God's goodness towards us. God is good, and all of God's actions towards us are loving. Therefore, God's placement of the tree of knowledge was for our good and our growth in goodness. It was not a test, trick, or a probationary measure. It was simply part of the fabric of reality vis-a-vis God's relationship with humanity.

After explaining why repentance was not enough to undo the corruption of humanity (7.1 – 5), Athanasius reiterates the effectiveness of the incarnation of the Word. He reminds us once again that God's motivation was love: 'He comes in condescension to show loving-kindness upon us, and to visit us' (8.1). He saw, first, that 'the race of rational creatures in the way to perish,' second, that death reigned over us through the corruption of sin, and thirdly, that the Sinai covenant was not having the effect of delivering people from corruption (8.2).

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[12] Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.163

[13] Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p169 – 173

[14] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 16.4 and 35:1; *De Incarnatione* 6:5 – 10; 12:6; and 43.4; for discussion, see my paper *Athanasius as Evangelist, Part 1: Against the Heathen / Contra Gentes*, p.5 – 8

Athanasius insists that Jesus had a body, 'of no different sort from ours' (8.2), 'of our kind' (8.3), 'one of like nature' (8.4).

> '2. He took pity on our race, and had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption, and, unable to bear that death should have the mastery— lest the creature should perish, and His Father's handiwork in men be spent for nought— He takes unto Himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours. 3. For He did not simply will to become embodied, or will merely to appear. For if He willed merely to appear, He was able to effect His divine appearance by some other and higher means as well. But He takes a body of our kind, and not merely so, but from a spotless and stainless virgin, knowing not a man, a body clean and in very truth pure from intercourse of men. For being Himself mighty, and Artificer of everything, He prepares the body in the Virgin as a temple unto Himself, and makes it His very own as an instrument, in it manifested, and in it dwelling. 4. And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death He gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father— doing this, moreover, of His loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in Him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord's body, and had no longer holding-ground against men, his peers), and that, secondly, whereas men had turned toward corruption, He might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of the Resurrection, banishing death from them like straw from the fire.'[15]

Jesus' goal in the incarnation, according to Athanasius, was to bring about a *new humanity*, cleansed from the corruption of sin and the reality of death which was the result of an alienation from God. At this juncture, I want to consider specific objections to my understanding of Athanasius, and by so doing, explore Athanasius' use of the terms 'debt' and 'satisfaction' in *De Incarnatione* 9 and 20. What do penal substitution supporters say about this? What did Athanasius mean by these terms? In what sense was there a 'debt' which needed to be paid? And to whom? Or what? Athanasius says:

> 'For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*.'[16]

Penal substitution advocates like Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach enlist this language of 'satisfaction' from Athanasius. By inflicting death on human beings, was not God satisfying His own need to punish sin? And by sending Jesus to die on the cross, is not God exhausting that punishment, at least for some? The three authors say:

> 'At one point, while alluding to the apostle John's explanation of why Christ came into the world in John 3:17, he states that Christ ('the Word') accomplished our salvation by suffering the judgment due to the guilty world: '*Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all*' [quoting from Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1, chapter 8, paragraph 60]. This is a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution. According to Athanasius, the whole world is guilty of failing to keep God's law, but Christ took upon himself the judgment due to us, and suffered in our place for our salvation.'[17]

These three authors believe that Athanasius held up human 'guilt' as the problem God saw, that the Sinai Law both measured and called down penal judgment for that guilt, that Jesus took the divine penal judgment that would have otherwise been placed by God on human beings, and that this deflection of punishment constitutes 'salvation.' But if this is true, then why do human beings still die? For if Jesus absorbed all the punishment which God meted out on account of human lawbreaking, then followers of Jesus should no longer physically die.

In penal substitution, the penalty and the underlying 'debt owed' must be transferred from human beings *over to Jesus*, so that we as human beings no longer have to pay the debt ourselves. Athanasius does not speak that way.

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[15] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 8:2 – 4
[16] Ibid 9.1 – 2
[17] Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, p.169

The full context of what he says involves every human being owing to God *their own death*. Each human being *including Jesus as a human being* owes God their own death, because death is the necessary prerequisite for us to be rid of the corruption. Death is not sufficient in itself, says Athanasius, because we must choose to participate in the work of the Son of God on our behalf. But death is nevertheless required:

> '1. For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might, because of the Word which had come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the Grace of the Resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. 2. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding-ground against men, by reason of the Word, which by His one body has come to dwell among them. 3. And like as when a great king has entered into some large city and taken up his abode in one of the houses there, such city is at all events held worthy of high honour, nor does any enemy or bandit any longer descend upon it and subject it; but, on the contrary, it is thought entitled to all care, because of the king's having taken up his residence in a single house there: so, too, has it been with the Monarch of all. 4. For now that He has come to our realm, and taken up his abode in one body among His peers, henceforth the whole conspiracy of the enemy against mankind is checked, and the corruption of death which before was prevailing against them is done away. For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to meet the end of death.'[18]

Jesus' human body was the 'body capable of death.' What is the debt that Jesus satisfied? To die, and to do so *as a dying being*. Previously in *De Incarnatione,* when he first brought up the topic of the fall in Genesis 3, Athanasius spoke of God saying, 'dying you will die.' To reiterate an earlier point, Athanasius shows his awareness that the formal Hebrew grammatical construction of God's warning in Genesis 2:17 is the ongoing progressive tense plus the future tense: 'dying you will die.'[19] This understanding serves Athanasius through his book when he notes that Jesus, too, was 'mortal.'[20] Jesus had to take on a *dying* human nature, and die in it. If 'dying you will die' is the condition of every human being, then Jesus had to live under that condition, too: dying, he would die.

Later in *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius says that Jesus 'could not *but* die':

> 'For if He took a body to Himself at all, and— in reasonable consistency, as our argument showed— appropriated it as His own, what was the Lord to do with it? Or what should be the end of the body when the Word had once descended upon it? For it could not *but* die, inasmuch as *it was mortal*, and to be offered unto death on behalf of all: for which purpose it was that the Savior fashioned it for Himself.'[21]

Only in this way would God's pronouncement in the garden about the consequences of the fall be strictly true. Can God lie? No, Athanasius avers. It cannot be:

> 'But just as this consequence must needs hold, so, too, on the other side the just claims of God lie against it: that God should appear true to the law He had laid down concerning death. For it were monstrous for God, the Father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation.'[22]

The same reality which held true for humanity writ large also held true for Jesus in particular, as a matter of the truthfulness and consistency of God. For the Word of God to come into human flesh, He had to take on dying,

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[18] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 9.1 – 4
[19] Ibid 3.5
[20] Ibid 13.9; 17:7; 20.1, 4 ('yet being mortal, was to die also, conformably to its peers'); 23.2; 31.4; 44.6, 8
[21] Ibid 31.4
[22] Ibid 7.1

mortal, fallen humanity which owed a debt to God – 'to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all'[23] – and so to die.

This is even more apparent in *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66 – 67, where Athanasius says that, to correct the 'imperfection' which has set into human nature from the fall,

> 'The perfect Word of God puts around Him an imperfect body, and is said to be created 'for the works;' that, paying the debt in our stead, he might, by Himself, perfect what was wanting to man.'[24]

The Alexandrian theologian does not say 'suffer what was due man,' as if some amount of pain constituted the 'debt.' Rather, he says, 'perfect what was wanting' constituting the healing of human nature including death in a godly way which only He could live out. Therefore Athanasius says that the one who spoke Genesis 3:19 is also the one to live under it and pass through it to the other side:

> 'The proper Word and Image of the Father's Essence, who at the beginning sentenced, and alone remits sins. For since it is said in the Word, 'Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return,' suitably through the Word Himself and in Him the freedom and the undoing of the condemnation has come to pass.'[25]

With that understanding in place, we are in a better position to read the full context of Athanasius' statement from which Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach believe they have found, in their words, 'a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution':

> 'Moreover the words 'He is become surety' denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the 'Word,' He 'became flesh [John 1:14]' and 'become' we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression 'He is become,' expounding it according to a second sense, viz. because He has become man. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that His essence has become, knowing, as he did, that He is Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father; but here too he refers the word 'become' to the ministry of that covenant, in which death which once ruled is abolished. Since here also the ministry through Him has become better, in that 'what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],' ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word, He made us walk, no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, and say again and again, 'But we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit [Romans 8:9],' and, 'For the Son of God came into the world, not to judge the world, but to redeem all men, and that the world might be saved through Him [John 3:17].' Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all. With a view to this has John exclaimed, 'The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ [John 1:17].' Better is grace than the Law, and truth than the shadow.'[26]

In this passage from *Discourses Against the Arians* 1, which continues themes from *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius actually provides the substance of the medical-ontological, not penal, substitutionary atonement. He distinguishes between who the Word of God 'is' as 'Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father,' and who the Word 'became' in 'a second sense' as 'man' and even 'flesh.' Athanasius prepares his audience to understand Paul's pivotal statement in Romans 8:3, where Paul says that God's own Son came in the likeness of sinful flesh. The implication of Athanasius' prefatory remarks is that Jesus 'is' the Word of God who 'became' sinful flesh at his conception without changing who he 'is.'

In fact, who 'he is' healed and renewed what 'he became.' Jesus condemned sin in the flesh, not simply at his death, but by his lifelong obedience which was inseparable from his death. We can be confident Athanasius had the lifelong obedience of Jesus in view because he refers to 'the ministry through him' and because he deploys the

[23] Ibid 7.5
[24] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66
[25] Ibid 2.67
[26] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.60

quotation of Romans 8:3 about the *positive*, guiding, and helping role of the Sinai Law. If the first purpose of the Sinai Law was simply to condemn Israel for its disobedience, then Paul and Athanasius really should have said, 'What the Law *did* in that it was *strong against* the flesh of Israel…' But Paul and Athanasius are reading the role of the Sinai Law positively, not negatively. Their reading of the Law is that God gave it to Israel to assist them in condemning sin in themselves. In other words, the Sinai Law served a medical purpose, something more like a health regimen given by a caring doctor to a sick patient. The doctor intends the regimen to help the patient *over a long stretch of time*. Only in a secondary sense, given the sick condition of the patient who is unable to fully live within the regimen, does the Sinai Law further expose the sickness in the patient.

Thus, Jesus' lifelong obedience *as an Israelite* was necessarily guided by and measured against 'the Law' of the Sinai covenant, for he substituted himself in place of Israel. Jesus 'is' the doctor who 'became' one of his sick patients in order to live fully within his own health regimen, heal the sick human nature he had taken to himself, and become the source of salvation. 'Salvation' here is defined fundamentally as his healed new humanity fully united with his own divine nature in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus' goal – which he achieved – for his 'sinful flesh' was 'ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind.' In Athanasius' usage, 'the trespass' presented not a forensic problem but an ontological one, embedded as it was in human nature. It was the corruption of human nature which was inherited by every human being from Adam and Eve. The word 'trespass' is not a shorthand way of referring to whatever long list of 'trespasses' committed by every single person, kept on a ledger in the mind of God. Rather, Athanasius is referring to the primal 'trespass': the original defacing and corruption of our pristine human nature as God created it. Athanasius indicates this by referring to the fact that human nature was 'continually held captive' to the trespass. The sinful condition even reached into our minds, in that we 'admitted not the Divine mind.' We bear a relational resistance to God which affects the qualities of human existence, showing forth in both our moral inconsistency and our alienation to a life dynamically led by the Spirit. Significantly, as Athanasius describes how Jesus undid this in his own humanity, he says that Jesus' ministry as a human being acting upon his own human nature 'rendered the flesh capable of the Word' and 'made us walk…according to the Spirit.' Athanasius' mind reposes on Romans 7:14 – 8:11 as a whole unit when he quotes Romans 8:3 and 8:9 explicitly, and explains why Jesus himself had to come in sinful flesh.

By speaking this way, Athanasius shows that he regards 'the trespass' as an intrusion into and upon human nature. We laid claim to something upon which God Himself laid claim: ourselves. And that is where the disorder and corruption occurred. That is also the problem which God, as the loving Creator, had to resolve. Often, in penal substitution, one gets the distinct impression that God cares more about His commandments than He cares about human beings. I regard this as not accidental: It is part of the necessary rhetoric inherent in a penal substitution framework which requires its advocates to prioritize God's commandments above God's creation. Penal substitution requires that God look upon our breaking of His commandments as damaging Himself and detracting from Himself, rather than as damaging ourselves and detracting from ourselves as God's beloved creation. But to the bishop of Alexandria, suggesting that God cares about His commandments more than He cares about humanity would be an utterly foreign thought.

Jesus 'suffered in the body for all [and] has bestowed salvation to all' not in the sense of turning aside some kind of retributive justice of God which loomed over our heads, but in the sense of medically carrying out upon his own human nature, and within his own human nature, the good will of our divine healer. 'Salvation' must be defined as God's healing and recovery of human nature from death, by the divine Son in his own person. It is as much a claim upon 'all' as it is 'bestowed' as a gift 'to all,' and not simply 'the elect,' which is what penal substitution logically requires. In this passage's context, and in its every detail, Athanasius does not support Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach's project of advocating penal substitution. Instead, he gives us a straightforward statement of medical-ontological substitution.

By comparison, fellow penal substitution supporter Peter Leithart confesses his *inability* to find penal substitution in Athanasius:

> 'How does the cross achieve this [i.e. our liberation from sin, death, and the devil]? Athanasius' answer to that question does not easily fit into the traditional categories of atonement theology. He certainly sees Jesus as a representative of the human race and as a substitute for Adamic humanity. Yet he does not

> express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve. Instead, he tends to think in liturgical categories. Seeing that humanity was under the dominion of death, the Son was full of pity and compassion and so took on a body. His body was like all human bodies mortal and so he too 'surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered to the Father' (*On the Incarnation* 8). Like a king who comes to the rescue of a city that has been attacked by robbers, the Son 'by the offering of His own body…abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching' (*On the Incarnation* 10)… The Son, we might say, seizes humanity in the incarnation and in the cross entices it towards the heavenly sanctuary to worship the Father.'[27]

Leithart's more perceptive and honest statement that Athanasius' atonement theology does not fit into traditional categories comes from a Protestant evangelical perspective. Evangelicals tend to be familiar with only three main 'atonement theories': penal substitution, moral exemplar, and christus victor in a reductionistic sense (e.g. ransom from the demonic as external foes of humanity). One might include Anselm's satisfaction of divine honor theory, Grotius' governmental theory, and others, I suppose. But Leithart seems unfamiliar with, or unwilling to consider, the patristic doctrine of atonement wherein atonement occurs not *upon* the Son, but *within* the Son and *by* the Son, *in* the power of the Spirit, and *upon* the corruption of sin. Thus, he continues by sharing his perplexity that Athanasius does not deploy the language of 'debt' in a penal substitution sense:

> At times Athanasius explains the cross in terms of debt. The Son 'assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all' *(On the Incarnation* 9). All men owe a debt of death: 'All men were due to die,' and the Word came in mortal flesh in order to 'settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression.' Because the Word's body was capable of death, he offered it in death, but because it was the body of the incorruptible *Word*, it could not remain in corruption. Thus 'it happened that two opposite marvels took place at one: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished.' Death was unavoidable 'that the due of all might be paid' (*On the Incarnation* 20).'[28]

In the penal substitution theory, God cannot categorically 'pay out' the punishment for sin twice, because that would amount to a double accounting problem. That is, if God poured out His retributive justice upon Jesus at the cross, and then poured it out again in hell upon those who resist Jesus, that gives rise to the double accounting problem. That is why physical 'death' is a logical problem for penal substitution supporters, because all human beings obviously still die. The problem might be conceptually avoided by saying that physical death only prefigures eternal death, and that Jesus absorbed the punishment of *eternal* death. But when we read Athanasius' statements, he clearly intends his audience to consider the significance of physical death.

Leithart's difficulty in interpreting this language of 'debt' in Athanasius appears related to his assumption that 'death' serves God as a strictly punitive and retributive measure. What Leithart does not perceive is that Athanasius and the patristic theologians use the word 'death' as a shorthand for the undoing of sin's corruption, a positive responsibility shared by every human being by God's design. Based on the literary evidence, this tradition among Christian appears to be unanimous. As I showed above, it is attested to by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, Methodius of Olympus in the third, Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth.[29] Despite being an enemy and a tyrant, physical 'death' to these bishop-theologians serves at least one positive, constructive purpose: fulfilling our 'debt' to put to death the corruption of sin in our own bodies. Death prevents human beings from immortalizing evil in themselves. That is why God exiled Adam and Eve from the tree of life. It was, in fact, an imposition Adam and Eve placed *on God* because of God's love for them. Based on the literary evidence from those patristic writers who comment on Genesis 3, this tradition among Christian also appears to be unanimous. Therefore, contrary to what Leithart seems to assume, God did not invent death as an additional retributive punishment for the fall, which under penal substitutionary logic would have to be deflected from us by Christ, but rather named it as a reality inherent to Adam and Eve's choice to corrupt their own human nature, with the constructive purpose being a check on the corruption of human sin.

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[27] Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154 – 155
[28] Ibid p.155
[29] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6; Methodius of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5; Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45

Keeping that interpretation before us, I will briefly reexamine one of the passages Leithart cites, chapter 8 of *On the Incarnation*, placing explanatory comments in brackets. I believe the comments show how readily the medical substitutionary atonement model fits not only the semantics of Athanasius' language, but the larger and deeper structure of Athanasius' thought.

> 'But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die [*because each person still needs to put to death the corruption of sin in his or her own body, so that sin would not be immortalized*], for which especial cause, indeed, he came among us [*vicariously for us and on our behalf*]: to this intent, after the proofs of his Godhead from his works, he next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding his temple [*that is, his body*] to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass [*which is not the inherited guilt but the inherited corruption from Adam and Eve*], and further to show himself more powerful even than death, displaying his own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all… And so it was that two marvels came to pass at one, that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord's body, and that death and corruption were wholly done away by reason of the Word that was united with it. For there was need of death, and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all [*and with all, rather than deflected from all*], that the debt owing from all [*to return our human nature back to God healed and intact, circumcised of the corruption of sin through our active obedience*] might be paid.'[30]

God is Good, Because the Word Assumed Our Full Humanity to Unite Us Fully to God (4 – 10)
Athanasius has been criticized for leaving too unclear his view of whether Jesus had a human soul. Colin Gunton, for example, critiques Athanasius for saying too 'incautiously' that the Word 'wielded the human body like an instrument,'[31] because that phraseology diminishes the proper qualities of Jesus' humanity – such as the role of the human soul, mind, and will – within the definition of salvation as God's recovery of true humanity. The matter is important from the standpoint of pastoral care and evangelistic concern. Can we present Jesus as having lived a fully human life and under the same mental and emotional conditions as the rest of us? The question is also germane to theological debates that followed Athanasius' publication of his early two volume work circa 328 AD.

In the mid to late fourth century, Apollinarius of Laodicea (died 390 AD) taught a heretical view much like the one Athanasius is sometime accused of subtly endorsing. Apollinarius opposed the Arians and wanted to uphold the divine-human unity of Jesus, but in such a way that he denied to Jesus a human mind and soul. Those who followed him, called the Apollinarians, were large in number. Apollinarius, the one time ally of Athanasius and Basil, seems to have suspected that sin somehow resided in the soul, and therefore the Word must have assumed a body but displaced the mind and soul and occupied its place instead. The orthodox critique in reply was that this denied salvation to the human soul for all the rest of humanity. For if Jesus did not also save the human soul in himself, then he has no redeemed human soul to offer. It would be left for Gregory of Nazianzus to deploy against the Apollinarians the logic used by Athanasius against the Arians, by asserting, 'The unassumed is the unhealed.' That is, what God does not assume to Himself in the person of Jesus must, of necessity, remain unhealed.

Athanasius gives evidence that he understood the importance of holding that Jesus had a human soul. First, we can glance at this critical passage from Athanasius' *Discourses Against the Arians* 1, written in the early 340's, in which Athanasius quotes the important passage Romans 8:3 to assert that Jesus made the flesh fully admit the 'Divine mind':

> '…what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],' ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word…'[32]

Since Athanasius uses the term 'flesh' to indicate the entire human being, body and soul, considered from the

[30] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 20
[31] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997 2nd edition), p.69 critiques Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17, 42
[32] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.8, paragraph 60

standpoint of being corrupted (as the apostles Paul and John did), and since the mind was held to be the first part of the soul, Athanasius can be understood as asserting that Jesus' divine mind did not displace his human mind. Rather, by and through his human mind working in partnership with his divine mind, Jesus consciously struggled to align his entire soul and body with his divine nature in the power of the Holy Spirit. He thereby governed his entire humanity in conformity with God's will, healing and strengthening it from within. Thus, he 'rendered the flesh capable of the Word.'

Second, in the work *Tome to the Antiochenes*, dated to 362 AD, Athanasius and others report on their investigations of a quarrel between two pro-Nicene groups who used Greek terms for theological matters in different ways. In response, Athanasius says he listened for the *underlying structure of their thoughts*, because they gave different meanings to words: 'Having accepted then these men's interpretation and defense of their language…'[33] He then expresses his approval for one of the groups:

> 'For they confessed also that the Savior had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that His body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word Himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.'[34]

Athanasius' associates Paulinus and Karterius adds a postscript, for good measure, saying:

> 'For the Savior had a body neither without soul, nor without sense, nor without intelligence. For it were impossible, the Lord being made Man for us, that His body should be without intelligence.'

Third, in his *Letter #59, to Epictetus of Corinth*, Athanasius refers to the human soul of Jesus:

> 'But truly our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul alike, has truly obtained salvation in the Word Himself. That then which was born of Mary was according to the divine Scriptures human by nature, and the Body of the Lord was a true one; but it was this, because it was the same as our body, for Mary was our sister inasmuch as we all are from Adam.'[35]

Fourth, George Dion. Dragas also critically examines Athanasius' writings against Apollinarius, as well as recent scholarship on this issue, and concludes:

> 'Now in examining the doctrine of the soul of Christ in APO1 and APO2 we have found positive indications that such a condition is clearly upheld even in cases where the 'mind' 'thoughts' and generally the 'perception or consciousness' (*noesis* or *noema aisthesis*) of Christ is concerned... Christ's humanity with all its perfections, psychological as well as noetic, remains for the authors of APO1 and APO2 an objective reality which finds its particular existence in the person of the Creator Logos who assumed it in union with Himself and, making it His own, used it for effecting a perfect salvation.'[36]

Fifth, Dragas, in his later analysis of semantic terminology in Athanasius' most important dogmatic texts, *Contra Gentes*, *De Incarnatione*, and *Contra Arianos 1 – 3*, finds that when the theologian uses the term 'body,' along with others, he is speaking holistically in such a way so as to include the human soul:

> ''To become' is used with both 'man' and 'flesh,' but never with 'body,' whereas 'to assume' is used both with 'flesh' and 'body' but never with 'man.' Hence, 'man' and 'body' can be both synonymous to flesh, but never to each other. 'Flesh' then moves between 'man' and 'body,' sometimes agreeing with the one and sometimes with the other. So, we may distinguish between two nuances of the term 'flesh,' a 'flesh^{1}' and a 'flesh^{2},' which are never separated because 'flesh' is for Athanasius a holistic concept. Equally holistic are the terms 'man' and 'body,' in the sense that their particular nuances signify the whole human

[33] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Tomus ad Antiochenos* 6
[34] Ibid 7
[35] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59, to Epictetus* 7; cf. ch.8 where Athanasius argues in reverse that the Word did not have flesh or soul prior to his incarnation, 'As then this is the sense of the above text, they all will reasonably condemn themselves who have thought that the flesh derived from Mary existed before her, and that the Word, prior to her, had a human soul, and existed in it always even before His coming.'
[36] George Dion. Dragas, *Athanasius Contra Apollinarem* (Durham: University of Durham Press, 1985), chs.6, 7

reality and are never seen in the abstract.'[37]

Sixth, circling back to Athanasius' *De Incarnatione*, Dragas observes:

> 'In the *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius says that the Logos is *not* in man as the soul in the body.'[38]

This observation itself, concerning *De Incarnatione* 17, is important because it weighs against the Apollinarian stance. And if the Logos is in man, but not so as to displace the human soul or mind within the body, then the next logical step is to attribute Jesus' human intelligence, learning, emotions, etc. to a human soul. Khaled Anatolios' defense of Athanasius on this point is also persuasive:

> 'His characterization of Christ's body as an 'instrument' is not to be interpreted in light of an analysis of the composition of Christ, but rather within the framework of the Creator-creature distinction, with its attendant dialectic of divine transcendence and immanence. The 'instrumentality' of the body is concerned precisely with its being a medium for the immanent revelation of the transcendent God. In other words, the focus is not on the relation of the Logos to the body, so much as on the body as mediating between God and world. Athanasius himself speaks of the 'instrument' of Christ's body not in order to emphasize that it is 'directly and physically' moved by the Logos, but rather to characterize it as a privileged locus wherein the invisible God becomes knowable and visible.'[39]

What this quick examination of the human soul of Christ might mean for our view of Athanasius is at the very least this: The robustness and complexity of his theological thought should not be seen as constrained to the topics of the Arian controversy. Maximally, however, I believe it means this: If Athanasius' understanding of the human soul from the first part of *Against the Heathen* also reflects his basic understanding of what happened in the human soul of Jesus throughout the course of Jesus' life and ministry, which is reasonably likely, then Athanasius can be seen as anticipating the explicit work of Gregory of Nazianzus.

This is important in a pastoral and evangelistic sense because it strengthens and seals the ability for any given person to appreciate that Jesus lived a fully human life and labored under the same mental and emotional conditions as the rest of us. It will undergird my discussion of *De Incarnatione* 11 – 16 and the intellectual salvation of humanity through God's self-revelation in Christ *as being rooted in Christ's human self-understanding, which he articulates to us*. But another substantial point must be considered. And that concerns the Word's assumption of a fallen human nature.

God is Good, Because the Word Assumed Our Fallen Humanity to Heal It (4 – 10, 17 – 19)

There is quite a lively discussion happening within all three major traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) about whether the Word assumed a fallen or pristine, pre-fallen humanity. For example, Orthodox priest Emmanuel Hatzidakis asserts that if Jesus assumed an *unfallen*, *uncorrupted* human nature at conception; he therefore claims that Jesus did not inhabit fallen humanity from his conception.[40] He criticizes fellow Eastern Orthodox theologians Kallistos Ware, John Meyendorff, and Vladimir Lossky, for supposedly being influenced by Protestant theologians Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance in believing in Jesus' assumption of *fallen* human nature. This is indirectly significant for my argument against penal substitution per se. For there was nothing cursed about pre-fallen Adamic humanity. So the Pauline language of Christ becoming a curse for us (Gal.3:13) invites explanations edging towards a punitive, retributive understanding of his death. I also think, in addition, that it is difficult to pastorally and evangelistically present a Jesus who commands us to fight intense personal battles with temptations that he actually did not have to fight, or experienced in a fundamentally different way from us. Thus, where one lands on this question has important ramifications (a) pastorally about to what degree we can understand Jesus as being sympathetic to our own temptations as we experience them; (b) theologically about how we understand God as good, retrospectively, towards Mosaic Israel.

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[37] George Dion. Dragas, *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives* (Rollinsworth, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2005), p.21

[38] Ibid p.19 emphasis mine; cf. ch.1 in its entirety

[39] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.71 – 74

[40] Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013)

I wish to approach Athanasius' *De Incarnatione* with two particular questions. First, how does Athanasius understand Jesus' active obedience under the Sinai covenant? Second, how does Athanasius deploy Galatians 3:13? Admittedly, these questions merit a lengthier analysis of Athanasius' literary corpus to ascertain his view of the Sinai covenant and Jesus' relation to it. I believe Athanasius' use of Pauline material from Romans 7:7 – 8:11 is especially important. Since that analysis is not possible here, I can only offer some glances which I hope are helpful and instructive for future study. The former question can be answered with reasonable certainty from within *De Incarnatione*. The second question will require that we look a bit more broadly at other patristic writers.

If the Word assumed a pre-fallen Adamic humanity, then we would have some difficulty explaining a question of theodicy: Then what purpose did God have for the Sinai covenant and Israel? What became of the Sinai covenant? In the penal substitution paradigm, a common explanation for the question, 'Why Israel?' involves making the Sinai covenant out to represent divine retribution (in threat or actuality), so that Jesus can represent the satisfaction of that retribution, so he can offer mercy and forgiveness. In my opinion, this understanding misconstrues many Old Testament passages describing the relationship between God and Mosaic Israel. It also answers the question, 'Why Israel?' with the reply that God needed Mosaic Israel as a whipping post, upon which to establish His right to punish. Is this what we must tell our Jewish neighbors as we proclaim the gospel to them?

Athanasius reminds us that the early church understood the Scriptures and the question differently. In *De Incarnatione* 8, Athanasius says that the Word saw, first, that 'the race of rational creatures in the way to perish,' second, that death reigned over us through the corruption of sin, and thirdly, that the Sinai covenant was not having the effect of delivering people from corruption (8.2). This last detail gives a rather important clue to how Athanasius interpreted the Sinai covenant and God's relationship with Israel. 'The threat against transgression gave a firm hold to the corruption which was upon us, and that it was monstrous that before the law was fulfilled [by a faithful human being] it should fall through' (8.2; cf. Rom.7:7 – 8:4).

The law of the Sinai covenant called not simply for adherence to laws, but to do so to accomplish 'circumcision of the heart' (Dt.10:16; 30:6). That is, it was a guide for each Israelite to present his or her own humanity to God in such a way, in partnership with God, that the deep, inner corruption of sin was excised and cut away. However, the Sinai covenant also drew forth the internal problem the apostle Paul termed 'the flesh' (Rom.7:7 – 25), which resisted that very demand, calling, and vocation. So, 'what the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh [of Jesus]' (Rom.8:3). Jesus was the faithful Israelite who condemned sin in sinful flesh, by never sinning. Instead, Jesus presented his human nature to God the Father, through the power of the Spirit. Jesus, in other words, was the one true Jew who circumcised his heart by the Spirit (Rom.2:28 – 29), put to death the old self (Rom.6:6), and fulfilled the Sinai covenant as its *telos*, purpose, and climax (Rom.10:4).

In fact, in his great pastoral work, *Life of Antony*, Athanasius will show that Romans 8:3 either always was, or had become, an important pastoral principle, as shown by his use of the verse in a key location in his *Life of Antony* 7. What the incarnate Word did in his own humanity, namely, 'condemn sin in the flesh' through his active obedience, becomes a point of *imitatio Christi* for Athanasius in the active obedience of Antony and any other Christian believer.

> 'This was Antony's first struggle against the devil, or rather this victory was the Saviour's work in Antony, 'Who condemned sin in the flesh that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.' [Romans 8:3]'[41]

The two works – that of Jesus by the Spirit in his own humanity, and that of Jesus by the Spirit in Antony – are logically connected, Athanasius says. What Jesus did then in himself, so the believer does now, as our *imitatio Christi*. For Athanasius, Jesus condemned sin in the flesh of Antony by his Spirit. And simultaneously, what Jesus did then, so he does now in the believer. This is our *participatio Christi*. Athanasius' point is all the stronger if Jesus had assumed a human nature which had the corruption of sin within it (i.e. the flesh, in Pauline and Johannine terms). The same point, it would seem, would be greatly diminished, if not eviscerated, if Jesus had not. If the incarnate Word assumed an unfallen human nature, this creates a pastoral and evangelistic difficulty: How can one hold forth to others a Jesus who commands us to fight incredible personal battles that he himself did not?

[41] Athanasius of Alexandra, *Life of Antony* 7

Israel could not 'circumcise their own hearts', as the prophets had called for. Moses had called for it (Dt.10:16), but in the end said that God Himself would have to circumcise the hearts of Israel on the other side of exile (Dt.26:4; 30:6). Jeremiah had called for it (Jer.4:4), too. But, like Moses, Jeremiah said that God Himself would have to change the diseased human heart (Jer.17:1 – 10) on the other side of exile, in the new covenant, where God would inscribe His law on the hearts of human beings, rather than the stone tablets of the law (Jer.31:31 – 34). Ezekiel had his own idiom for it, and like Moses and Jeremiah, and again foresaw God performing a heart-level change on the other side of Israel's exile, in the new covenant, when the Spirit was poured out (Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 37:14). Hence, circumcision of heart came to either denote or connote the restoration from exile, and in either case should be viewed as inseparable from it.

Paul explained Israel's experience through his own personal autobiography. He said that the tenth commandment condemning coveting, jealousy, lust, and greed condemned him ever since he was mature enough to understand it (Rom.7:14 – 25). Significantly, the tenth commandment had no corresponding punishment, indicating that Anselmian 'honor,' or Calvinist 'holiness' and 'justice,' or whatever attribute is usually positioned against God's love in a satisfaction-driven atonement theory, cannot actually be considered a symmetrical attribute to God's love, but only a particular expression of God's love and must be rethought through as a derivation of it. The tenth commandment recalled the primal sin of Adam and Eve. Not *pride* per se, which arguably comes into the human mind to justify the desire after the fact, but *jealousy* moved Adam and Eve to usurp from God the defining of good and evil, and internalize that power into themselves. *Jealousy* moved Cain to murder Abel. Hence, as Paul experientially discovered, jealousy of every kind was triggered by his mature awareness of the tenth commandment. This is what it meant for Paul to be 'under the law' (Rom.7:1 – 13; cf. 2:12; 3:19; 6:14 – 15; Gal.4:4) and have sin imputed to one's self (Rom.5:13). The Sinai Law was supposed to be God's holy partner to Israel to help them condemn sin in their own flesh. But 'what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh [of Jesus Christ]' (Rom.8:3). That is, Jesus was the only Israelite who was able to 'condemn sin' fully and totally within himself by never allowing himself to covet, to be jealous, to lust, to be greedy. He is the one true Israelite who is 'the circumcised one' (Rom.2:28 – 29) because he is 'the resurrected one' (Rom.4:25).

Hence, contra Emmanuel Hatzidakis, Jesus had to recapitulate Israel's temptation in their fallen human flesh, not just Adam's temptation in his pre-fall condition. A discussion of biblical narrative is important here. Matthew's Gospel in particular presents Jesus as the representative of Israel, and in fact as him *being* Israel, who did in himself what Israel did not and could not do. Jesus, like Israel, was pursued by a genocidal foreign ruler (Mt.2:1 – 18). Jesus, like Israel, came from Egypt back into the land (Mt.2:19 – 23). Jesus went through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River (Mt.3:13 – 17), like Israel went through the waters of the Red Sea in a kind of baptism (1 Cor.10:2). Jesus wandered the wilderness for forty days (Mt.4:1 – 11), like Israel wandered through the wilderness for forty years. Jesus pondered the words of Deuteronomy while in the wilderness, like Israel did under Moses, as shown by the fact that all three of Jesus' quotations of Scripture during his temptation were from Deuteronomy (Dt.8:3; 6:16; 6:13 quoted in Mt.4:4, 6, 10 respectively). Jesus, like Israel at Mount Sinai, came to a mountain (Mt.5:1 – 2) and, in his case, both gave and received the covenantal law into his humanity (Mt.5:3 – 7:28). But unlike Israel, Jesus successfully resisted temptation – all of it, not just the outward action but all the way at the source, at the level of his identity as 'Son of God.' Unlike Israel, Jesus on the mountain both received into his own human flesh (or demonstrated that he was already doing so) the law of God all the way onto the 'tablet of his heart' as Jeremiah saw as constituting the human person in the new covenant (Jer.31:31 – 34). At every point in his own life, Jesus succeeded where Israel failed, because Jesus succeeded on behalf of Israel, because Israel could only ultimately fail. Finally, Jesus, like Israel, went through the exilic experience – suffering pain, humiliation, and death at the hands of the Gentiles (Mt.27:1 – 61). And first among all Israel, and actually *as Israel*, Jesus emerged in his resurrection on the other side of exile, with the 'authority' which was promised to the 'Son of Man' figure which represented Israel in the prophecy of Daniel (Mt.27:62 – 28:20).

Because 'circumcision of heart' had become the inner meaning behind Israel being restored from exile (Dt.30:6), and because Jesus himself was Israel and was restored from exile in his resurrection, then it follows quite logically and of necessity that he is the one who was 'circumcised of heart.' In Colossians, the apostle Paul foregrounds his consideration of the Sinai covenant (Col.2:14) with mention of 'the circumcision of Christ' (Col.2:12), which is the fullness of it. We can look at Jesus from the vantage point of his humanity, specifically his Jewish humanity 'under the Law,' which is arguably why Luke was at pains to note that Jesus was circumcised as an infant as all Jewish

males were (Lk.2:21). If Jesus entered into the place of Israel, then he recapitulated not only Israel's early journey, he completed Israel's appointed task which Israel could not do: he circumcised his heart against the law (Dt.10:16). As man, he cut off the unclean aspect of his human nature; he put it to death. He fulfilled Israel's side of the covenant to God.

But we can also look at Jesus from the vantage point of *God's* covenant faithfulness to Israel. If Jesus entered into the place of Israel, the divine one who carried Israel's humanity upon his shoulders, then and only then did God actually do what He said He would: circumcise the heart of Israel (Dt.30:6, cf. 29:4). That is, the Word of God inscribed His law on a human heart through human partnership. That simultaneously means that God was faithful to the covenant to produce a humanity that is restored from exile and resurrected into the intended life of the garden paradise (Dt.30:1 – 6). And if Jesus, in himself, circumcised something away from himself at his death (Rom.6:6), then Jesus must have taken on *fallen* humanity, not an already perfected or pre-fall humanity. The fulfillment of God's long covenant with Israel logically requires Jesus' full identification with Israel's fallen condition, not simply with Adamic humanity in its pristine, pre-fallen sense.

I believe Athanasius' language for Jesus' human obedience under the law is indicated by his discussion of Jesus having 'sanctified the body' and 'cleansed the body also.'

> '5. And this was the wonderful thing that He was at once walking as man, and as the Word was quickening all things, and as the Son was dwelling with His Father. So that not even when the Virgin bore Him did He suffer any change, nor by being in the body was [His glory] dulled: but, on the contrary, *He sanctified the body also*. 6. For not even by being in the universe does He share in its nature, but all things, on the contrary, are quickened and sustained by Him. 7. For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, *He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says, no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth*. [quoting 1 Peter 2:22 and Isaiah 53:9].'[42]

Athanasius sees the history of the incarnate Word in three relational ways simultaneously. First, 'He was at once walking as man.' During the days of Jesus' life on earth, in relation to his human body which he had assumed from the womb of his mother, the Word was especially present in that human body. But throughout that same time, second, 'the Word was quickening all things.' That is the Word's relation to the universe which He had created. And, third, simultaneously, 'the Son was dwelling with His Father.' That is the Word's relation to God the Father.

Because Athanasius uses 'walking' and 'quickening' in the imperfect tenses, he spans a range of time corresponding to the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is this time span that, in Athanasius' mind, constituted the accomplishment of the Word he emphasizes here: 'He sanctified the body;' and 'He quickened and cleansed the body also.' Athanasius uses an intervening analogy of the sun's rays touching 'bodies upon earth' without being itself touched, to address an important moral question. Did the flesh, or corrupted humanity, assumed by the Word cause him to become sinful? Athanasius' answer is a firm no. Jesus never sinned in deed or word, or for that matter thought or emotion. His biblical touchstone text for that is 1 Peter 2:22 which itself quotes Isaiah 53:9, both of which insist that Messiah Jesus committed no sin in deed or word.

In addition, we must weight heavily the early Christians' consistent preference for the Greek Septuagint translation of Isaiah 53:10, which reads, 'Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with *disease*,' which more naturally indicates that the messianic Servant bore the disease-corruption of sin *within* himself, rather than bearing some other external experience of pain *upon* his person.[43] This is in contrast to the Hebrew Masoretic, and even the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QIsa[a]), versions of Isaiah 53:10, which reads, 'and cause him to suffer' (NIV), 'putting him to grief' (NASB), 'to crush him with pain' (NRSV), or some other, more generic description, which gives the impression that

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[42] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 17.5 – 7 emphasis mine

[43] Significantly, early church theologians consistently preferred the LXX version of Isaiah 53:10. It is cited by Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, chapter 16. Justin Martyr cited it in two places: *First Apology*, chapter 51, and *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 13. Augustine quoted it in *Harmony of the Gospels*, book 1, paragraph 47. John Chrysostom cited it in *Homilies on First Corinthians, Homily 38*, regarding 1 Cor.15:4. This preference for the LXX version of Isaiah 53:10 by ancient authorities coincides with the early church's confession of a medical substitutionary view of atonement.

the mere *fact* of the Servant's suffering, rather than the *type* of suffering and struggle, is the decisive factor. In *Discourses Against the Arians* 3, Athanasius discusses Isaiah 53:4, 'he bore our infirmities,' in an extended exploration of other incarnation-related texts like John 1:14 and Philippians 2:6 – 8.[44] In other words, the early Christian preference for reading Isaiah 53 indicates their understanding of atonement: Jesus, in his earthly life, accomplished the full sanctification, quickening, and cleansing of the human body through the moral-relational quality of his earthly life. In other words, Jesus healed and renewed his humanity, which had the disorder of sin within it, through his *active obedience*. In Mosaic, prophetic, and Pauline idiom, Jesus circumcised the heart of his humanity through his life lived obediently unto the Father from the midst of his humanity. Critics of Athanasius accuse him of equating the Incarnation itself with salvation, as if the mere conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary was the sufficient condition for the salvation of human nature. To the contrary, Athanasius' understanding encompasses the active obedience of Jesus which culminated in his death - for Jesus was the substitute for Israel, and for all humanity, in a medical sense of perfecting the antibodies of sin within himself. Athanasius' theological forebear, Irenaeus of Lyons, called this 'recapitulation.'[45] It was an atonement wrought by Jesus from *within* the depths of our corrupted humanity, as one of us, via his active obedience.

Moreover, in *De Incarnatione* 44, Athanasius considers the objection that God could have merely spoken and healed humanity of corruption by verbal fiat (44.1). His response?

> '2. To this objection of theirs a reasonable answer would be: that formerly, nothing being in existence at all, what was needed to make everything was a fiat and the bare will to do so. But when man had once been made, and necessity demanded a cure, not for things that were not, but for things that had come to be, *it was naturally consequent that the Physician and Saviour should appear in what had come to be, in order also to cure the things that were*. For this cause, then, He has become man, and *used His body as a human instrument*.'[46]

In other words, the Word had to take humanity as it existed after the fall. It was not only practical, since that was the only type of humanity available. It was also logical. The Word did this 'in order to cure the things that were.' In this context, Athanasius repeats his dictum: The Word 'used His body as a human instrument.' This saying, for which he has won remarkable, unwarranted criticism, now works in favor of his argument for Jesus' active obedience. It was not his supposedly passive obedience on the cross which won human nature salvation. Rather, it was his active obedience, throughout his life and all the way up to his last breath, by which the Word 'used' his body and eliminated the disorder, the corruption of sin from within it, by human agency, in the power of the Spirit. For the Word to be 'Physician,' as Athanasius says, means that He is 'Saviour.'

Athanasius continues, in this critical passage:

> '3. For if this were not the right way, how was the Word, choosing to use an instrument, to appear? Or whence was He to take it, save from those already in being, and in need of His Godhead by means of one like themselves? For it was not things without being that needed salvation, so that a bare command should suffice, but man, already in existence, was going to corruption and ruin. It was then natural and right that the Word should use a human instrument and reveal Himself everywhither. 4. Secondly, you must know this also, that the corruption which had set in was not external to the body, but had become attached to it; and it was required that, instead of corruption, life should cleave to it; so that, just as death has been engendered in the body, so life may be engendered in it also. 5. Now if death were external to the body, it would be proper for life also to have been engendered externally to it. But if death was wound closely to the body and was ruling over it as though united to it, it was required that life also should be wound closely to the body, that so the body, by putting on life in its stead, should cast off corruption. Besides, even supposing that the Word had come outside the body, and not in it, death would indeed have been defeated

[44] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.31
[45] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.3 writes, 'He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished… *man, who had sin in himself*… was liable to death… [So] it behooved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, *man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage*, but was held by death, so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death… Thus, then, was the Word of God made man… God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, *that He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.'
[46] Ibid 44.2 emphasis mine

> by Him, in perfect accordance with nature, inasmuch as death has no power against the Life; but the corruption attached to the body would have remained in it none the less. 6. For this cause the Saviour reasonably put on Him a body, in order that the body, becoming wound closely to the Life, should no longer, as mortal, abide in death, but, as having put on immortality, should thenceforth rise again and remain immortal. For, once it had put on corruption, it could not have risen again unless it had put on life. And death likewise could not, from its very nature, appear, save in the body. Therefore He put on a body, that He might find death in the body, and blot it out. For how could the Lord have been proved at all to be the Life, had He not quickened what was mortal? 7. And just as, whereas stubble is naturally destructible by fire, supposing (firstly) a man keeps fire away from the stubble, though it is not burned, yet the stubble remains, for all that, merely stubble, fearing the threat of the fire— for fire has the natural property of consuming it; while if a man (secondly) encloses it with a quantity of asbestos, the substance said to be an antidote to fire, the stubble no longer dreads the fire, being secured by its enclosure in incombustible matter; 8. in this very way one may say, with regard to the body and death, that if death had been kept from the body by a mere command on His part, it would none the less have been mortal and corruptible, according to the nature of bodies; but, that this should not be, it put on the incorporeal Word of God, and thus no longer fears either death or corruption, for it has life as a garment, and corruption is done away in it.'[47]

The Word had to take 'man, already in existence, [which] was going to corruption and ruin' (44.3). He had to assume human nature as it now is, since 'corruption... *had become attached to it*' (44.4). He incarnated himself into a body in which 'death *was wound closely to the body* and was ruling over it *as though united to it*' (44.5). Because the Word is life, that was the only way life could be joined to humanity again, to 'cast off corruption' (44.5). Critically, the Word had to come into a human body which had the disorder, the corruption of sin, because if He had not, then 'the corruption *attached to the body* would have remained in it none the less' (44.5). So the Word came to 'find death *in the body*, and blot it out' (44.6), by eclipsing the mortality of the body with His own immortality infused into it (44.5 – 6). If Jesus had not been incarnate in corrupted, fallen humanity and fought his way through it, to present his humanity to God the Father at every moment, then the very reason for his incarnation in the first place would have been undermined and negated.

Poetically, Athanasius also repeats his analogy of fire burning straw and stubble (44.7 – 8), which he deployed before, in his first exposition of the incarnation of the Word into human flesh (8.4). This time, however, he expands on the analogy, giving it more clarity and force. Previously, he said that the fire of the Word's presence would consume corruption and death from His humanity. This time, he says that *humanity* is enclosed by the Word, like stubble can be enclosed by asbestos, and survive the fire. The corruption of sin does not survive. But the human body does and can, because of the Word's incarnate union with it. Thus, the purpose of the incarnation is completed through Jesus' death and resurrection of his human body, as the 'corruption is done away in it' (44.8).

Athanasius, through the healing atonement paradigm of medical substitution, not penal substitution, provides a more honoring response to Jewish non-Christians today to their frequent question, 'Why Israel?' from a Christian perspective. The answer consists of the following points. God always acts with human partnership; this is part of our ontological design and definition, from creation as made in the image of God. So when God developed Israel, He was calling for a community of people who would accept His diagnosis of the human disease, and struggle to resist it. He was calling for that community to write down that diagnosis to serve as evidence for the future mission. He was calling for them to wait eagerly for the cure when He Himself in the person of His Word would come into corrupted humanity to be that cure. He was calling for them to protect and nurture and raise this vulnerable human being, Jesus of Nazareth, and then to partner with him in his mission to the nations. In my opinion, that is a far better answer than the one provided by penal substitution.

To reinforce this conclusion about Jesus' fallen humanity and victorious life lived under the Sinai covenant, I will now examine Athanasius' deployment of Galatians 3:13, 'he became a curse for us.' The term 'curse' appears four times in a short, dense exposition, in *De Incarnatione* 25:

> '1. But if any of our own people also inquire, not from love of debate, but from love of learning, why He suffered death in none other way save on the Cross, let him also be told that no other way than this was

[47] Ibid 44.3 – 8

> good for us, and that it was well that the Lord suffered this for our sakes. 2. For if He came Himself to bear the curse laid upon us, how else could He have become a curse [Galatians 3:13], unless He received the death set for a curse? And that is the Cross. For this is exactly what is written: Cursed is he that hangs on a tree [Deuteronomy 21:23]. 3. Again, if the Lord's death is the ransom of all, and by His death the middle wall of partition is broken down [Ephesians 2:14], and the calling of the nations is brought about, how would He have called us to Him, had He not been crucified?'[48]

Athanasius does seem to believe, either that death itself is the curse, or the signifier of the one who is already cursed. Given that this section of *De Incarnatione* is his exposition of the cross and death, it would seem that the theologian's use of curse language here indicates some belief that a curse met Jesus on the cross, or at his death in any case. However, it is clear by the sheer repetition of the word 'death,' that Athanasius believes Jesus' death was the expression, enactment, or fulfillment of the curse he 'became.' Athanasius says he welcomes anyone who questions 'why He suffered death' (25.1). And he replies, 'He received the death set for a curse' on a tree (25.2). This concerns 'the Lord's death,' for 'by His death,' as in his being 'crucified,' did he accomplish 'the ransom of all' (25.3). There is no indication of any invisible spiritual or emotional torment that Jesus underwent, nor 'silence' from or sheer 'abandonment' by the Father.

But is it possible that Athanasius was eliding two concepts that he finds related in Scripture? What if the phrase 'he became a curse for us' from Galatians 3:13 meant that the Word assumed fallen humanity?

Justin Martyr, the Christian evangelist-philosopher of Rome, martyred around 165 AD, uses the language of the curse of Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23 to mark as sinful the lives of Jews and Gentiles alike.[49] This was one argument among many he employs with his Jewish interlocutor Trypho. Since both Jews and Gentiles sinned, with or without knowledge of the Sinaitic covenant and its commandments, every single person demonstrates that her or his existence is already cursed, according to Justin. Hanging on a tree is simply confirmation of that fact, not an additional punishment thrown on top of it. As far as Justin's writings are concerned, we find evidence that the early Christians held that despite Jesus being morally blameless, he nevertheless shared in the 'curse' upon all humanity. The 'curse' was not a divine punishment absorbed by Jesus instead of human beings.

Athanasius himself, writing in 370 AD, roughly two hundred years after Justin and Irenaeus, would go one step further in his explicit written exposition and theological reasoning. For Athanasius, if Jesus shared in the curse upon all humanity, as designated clearly by the manner of death he endured, then his sharing in the curse must have begun prior to his death. But when? Athanasius answers that by explicitly uniting Galatians 3:13 with *John 1:14*. For Athanasius, 'becoming a curse' is a synonym for 'becoming flesh.'[50] Athanasius thus offers that the root cause of humanity's cursedness was the underlying corruption of human nature.

Ambrose of Milan (circa 340 – 397 AD), in his *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, explains Galatians 3:13 by referring to *Philippians 2:5 – 11*, which is also about Jesus' incarnation. Immediately after quoting Galatians, Ambrose writes of the incarnation, 'Cursed He was, for He bore our curses; in subjection, also, for He took upon Him our subjection, but in the assumption of the form of a servant, not in the glory of God; so that while he makes Himself a partaker of our weakness in the flesh, He makes us partakers of the divine Nature in His power.'[51] Among the curses we experience as fallen human beings is 'our weakness in the flesh,' which recalls Paul's assessment in Romans 8:3 that the Sinai Law could not accomplish its goal through Israel because it was weakened by the flesh. Weakened flesh is not simply mortal flesh, but morally rebellious flesh.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 389 AD), one of only three church leaders the Eastern Orthodox tradition labels 'the theologian,' also quotes Galatians 3:13 in reference to the incarnation. He does this in *Oration 2.55* and *Oration 30.5 – 6*. Most notably, however, in *Epistle 101.7*, 'to Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius,' Gregory rejects Apollinarius' attempt to replace Jesus' human mind with the Logos. Apollinarius made this theological move in order to avoid claiming Christ was sinful, since it was believed that sin resides in the mind or soul. Gregory,

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[48] Ibid 25.1 – 3
[49] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 94 – 96;
[50] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter 59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8; see below
[51] Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 5.178

however, argued that such a move compromised Jesus' true humanity, thus making it impossible for him to secure redemption for the whole human being: 'For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole… Just as he was called a curse for the sake of our salvation, who cancels my curse, and was called sin, who takes away the sin of the world, and instead of the old Adam is made a new Adam – in the same way he makes my rebellion his own as Head of the whole Body.'[52]

John Chrysostom (circa 347 – 407 AD) in his *Commentary on Galatians* focuses on the death of Christ alone without discussing the incarnation.[53] However, in his *Homilies on John's Gospel* 1:14, he immediately refers us to Galatians 3:13, saying, 'It was fallen indeed, our nature had fallen an incurable fall, and needed only that mighty Hand. There was no possibility of raising it again, had not He who fashioned it at first stretched forth to it His Hand, and stamped it anew with His Image, by the regeneration of water and the Spirit.'[54]

This appears to be the standard pre-Nicene and Nicene interpretation of Galatians 3:13, including a difficult passage by the second century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons.[55] Considering this patterned usage, where all the 'he became' passages in the New Testament are tightly woven together to be mutually interpreting, we arrive at the following synthetic exegesis: he became flesh (Jn.1:14), meaning he became man (Phil.2:7) meaning he became sin (2 Cor.5:21), meaning he became poor (2 Cor.8:9), meaning he became a curse (Gal.3:13). This arguably goes back all the way to the Genesis fall, where Adam and Eve corrupt themselves, and Cain shows that it is certainly possible to corrupt one's own human nature further, so much so that the land was not fruitful for him, curiously. The Genesis 2 – 4 material seems to act as an overarching hermeneutical reminder about what human nature has become, and is in danger of becoming further. In fact, Jesus says that when one allows evil to proceed from the heart, it can further defile a person (Mt.15:18 – 20; Mk.7:21 – 23). All of this means that one is probably never as defiled or corrupted by sin as one possibly could be, since one can always imagine sinning more! In regards to Jesus' humanity, however, being hung on the tree of the cross identified Jesus' humanity as indeed corrupted by sin. But it was not being hung on a tree, or dying per se, that made the curse fall on Jesus. *To wear a fallen humanity is already to be cursed.* Jesus (or, at the very least, Paul) merely used the cross, interpreted by the Deuteronomic proviso about being hung on the tree, to identify the unfortunate and ugly truth about our common humanity.

Athanasius, in *De Incarnatione* 25.2, can now be fairly understood as saying, 'For if He came Himself to bear the curse laid upon us [by bearing our corrupted humanity], how else could He have become a curse, unless He [also] received the death set for a curse? And that is the Cross.'

God is Good in the Word's Recovery of Humanity's Mind for God (11 – 16)

The third main section of Athanasius' *De Incarnatione* concerns the Word's intellectual salvation of humanity through his incarnation. Athanasius opens this section by referring again to God's creation of humanity (11.1). He saw 'the weakness of their nature, that is was not sufficient of itself to know its Maker, nor to get any idea of God.' God therefore bridged the gap of knowledge between Himself and His creatures by allowing them to know the Word, and specifically to know the Word as the image of the Father. However, human beings turned away from God, 'darkened their souls, as not merely to forget their idea of God,' and began to worship idols (11.4). Athanasius asserts that 'God alone, and His Word, was unknown, albeit He had not hidden Himself out of men's sight, nor

[52] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle 101*.7

[53] John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians* 3.10 – 14

[54] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John's Gospel* 1:14; see also *Homily 13* from *Homilies on Romans* 8:3 – 4

[55] I believe we are on fairly strong footing to see this pattern in Irenaeus of Lyons as well, primarily in *Against Heresies* 3.18.3. Irenaeus seeks to explain 'the reason of His incarnation... and to His human nature, and His subjection to death' all the way unto resurrection. In that context, he quotes Galatians 3:13. Not only does this interpretation accord well with many other passages in Irenaeus, especially in the pivotal sections 3.18 and 3.19, but it logically fits the immediate context of 3.18.3. Irenaeus' immediate purpose there was to prove that 'Jesus' and 'Christ' were not two separable beings, as the gnostics argued. He says further that if Jesus' death finished unraveling our disobedience, then it can only mean that the quality of human nature which he took in his incarnation was in need of unraveling. This is why Irenaeus stressed that 'man, who had sin in himself, showing that he was liable to death' needed the eternal Son of God 'himself [to] be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage.' That is, the quality of 'man' assumed by the Son of God was the same quality of 'man' that we all share: the kind with 'sin in himself.' When God took human flesh to himself, He 'recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man' in the physical body of Jesus. This, Irenaeus says, constitutes humanity's 'salvation' which many should receive and be justified by participating in Christ by his Spirit. 'Salvation' is not merely the turning aside of the wrath of God, as penal substitution advocates think of it, but the purging of the sinful corruption within us by the wrath of God, that God's life and power might be joined to the whole human person in the love of God.

given the knowledge of Himself in one way only; but had, on the contrary, unfolded it to them in many forms and by many ways' (11.7). This claim making human beings accountable to God would surely provoke in Athanasius' modern readers the question of: 'On what basis? How did God unfold knowledge of Himself and maintain it after the fall?' I will explore this below.

Athanasius understands the fallen human intellectual problem in two distinct and interrelated ways. First, there is the problem of data. Prior to the incarnation, generally, human beings were not able 'to get any idea at all of God, because while He was uncreate... and while He was incorporeal' – for we could have 'had knowledge of nothing but earthly things' (11.1 – 2), 'seeking about for God in nature and in the world of sense' (15.2). The data of the cosmos, if we observe it alone, without interpretation from revelation, does not give us sufficient information to conclude that there is a loving, good God who wants to heal us and bring the cosmos in its entirety to renewal. In fact, atheists who live in the modern era with scientific knowledge such as the second law of thermodynamics would more naturally conclude that the universe is winding down. Left to itself, it will all become cold and dead. We need, as human beings, a data point that gives us sufficient information about the one true God and His loving purpose to unite all things to Himself in a more profound way.

Second, there is the problem of damaged human perceptiveness. 'Or how could they be rational without knowing the Word (and Reason) of the Father, in Whom they received their very being?' (11.2) There is some mode in which our rational faculty is damaged, Athanasius says. Because we were created to be dependent upon, and relationally reflective of, the Word itself in creation, and the Word's relation to His Father, the rupture caused by the corruption of sin actually damages our ability to think straight, at least about spiritual and theological matters. This is, perhaps, what the apostle Paul referred to when he said that the human mind 'set on the flesh is hostile towards God' (Rom.8:7). Between the two main points Athanasius makes, the second requires a bit more explanation to moderns. But Athanasius must engage with both points, and so must we. How, given an apparent absence of data from the physical world alone, and given a hostile human mind, could God communicate Himself sufficiently so as to hold human beings accountable for knowing Him? Athanasius' answer hangs on the divine Word, human words, and our participation in rational language. An explanation from Scripture is required before I return to Athanasius.

Any serious attempt to grapple with the meaning of Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 must include the strong indication that language preceded humanity. Regardless of whether interpreters are trying to historically contextualize Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 relative to other Ancient Near Eastern literature, or demythologize it altogether, Scripture portrays God as possessing some form of language by which He said, 'Let there be light,' and welcomed human beings into that language. This remains an outstanding and intriguing question for scholars of all types. Neuroscience today, for example, suggests that the physical brain develops via language acquisition, and seems to be made for it. That God blessed humanity verbally (Gen.1:26 – 28) would seem to indicate that God created humanity with a built in capacity to understand the words of that blessing. Then, as Adam named the animals, and other human beings later followed suit, he demonstrated the image of God by ordering the creation by speaking, just as God did in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3. Adam's words apparently made a permanent mark on the history of the creation, for God Himself must have accepted the names Adam invented and used them. For example, 'lion' and 'lioness' became names God used henceforth, too. 'Cain,' 'Abel,' and 'Seth' were the names God used henceforth, too. Experiencing God use the names that human beings named animals and children must have been rather astounding. Our special role is to be drawn from the earth to give creation voice in rational praise to God. In this way, the non-human creation is drawn up into the human by a temple arrangement, as people say out loud what the rocks say silently. And the words of praise spoken by human beings deepen as the words 'thank you' and 'thank You, Lord,' overflow with more meaning every time we utter them.

In fact, Adam and Eve still had yet to forge, or receive, and experience certain words, such as the word 'word.' How could human beings have confessed, 'The Word was God,' before they themselves spoke in such a way that ordered creation within the happy commitment of God Himself to use those very words? 'God calls them lion and lioness, too, and uses the name we gave our child.' They needed to speak, observe the impact, and then reflect rationally on the very act of speaking. If their speech had this impact, then what impact did God's speech have? What is God's speech? Or, how about the word 'beget'? How could human beings have confessed, 'The Father eternally begets the Son,' before they themselves had begotten a child? What does it say about God's purpose in creation that the doctrine of the Trinity – as in, our human ability to articulate and understand it – depended on human obedience to God's creational command to be fruitful and multiply, our experience of childbearing, and the further development of language, in partnership with God, that would provide the adequate categories to even begin

reflection on it? Perhaps that the distinction between 'nature' and 'grace' as developed in the West should be declined as a false opposition. Nature already is grace, and expects more grace. In fact, nature articulates grace, because grace has stamped itself indelibly upon nature while calling nature to experience more grace. This is well within the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the 'divine energies.' Human beings already participate in the rationality of language, for we were made 'in him,' that is, 'in the Word' (Col.1:17; Acts 17:28). And thus, it is in the creative Word and through human words that God already anchored His own self-giving to humanity, through the agency of human beings and the words we utter back to God, to provide for the return of God to God in a structure of ever-increasing fullness.

If rational language and concepts existed with God prior to humanity's creation, human beings had to learn that language and those concepts by experience. At least two second century Christian writers strongly suggest this awareness – important to note because both of them came from Asia Minor, which was the mission field of the apostles, intentionally.[56] In other words, the minds of Adam and Eve needed to be gradually filled by experiential knowledge which they could coordinate with the abstract words God shared with them from the outset. The human mind itself needed to be filled. God anchored those words in the human mind, and probably some very preliminary sense of their meaning. But the meaning of those words could only be filled out in the divine-human partnership. Elsewhere, in *Discourses Against the Arians*, Athanasius uses the terminology of God's Son as Word and Wisdom impressing itself upon the human mind in creation, so that we might be capable of knowing the Father, and thus, 'not only be, but be good':

> 'Now the Only-begotten and very Wisdom of God is Creator and Framer of all things; for 'in Wisdom have You made them all,' he says, and 'the earth is full of Your creation.' But that what came into being might not only be, but be good, it pleased God that His own Wisdom should condescend to the creatures, so as to introduce an impress and semblance of Its Image on all in common and on each, that what was made might be manifestly wise works and worthy of God. For as of the Son of God, considered as the Word, *our word is an image*, so of the same Son considered as Wisdom *is the wisdom which is implanted in us an image*; in which wisdom we, having the power of knowledge and thought, *become recipients* of the All-framing Wisdom; and through It we are able to know Its Father.'[57]

If Athanasius' reading of creation and language is correct (and if my reading of Athanasius and Scripture is correct as well), then the pull of the rationality of language is itself a force that exerts itself upon us. For human beings to have linguistic categories of 'good' and 'evil,' especially, immediately places us into a world where we are the inhabitants of a moral framework larger than us, which exerts itself upon us and reaches into our very being. In fact, it also emerges from our very being. This force is not trivial. A challenge we face today is the lack of cross-cultural consensus on the dignity of each human being, as well the objective nature of good and evil. For example, American philosopher Richard Rorty advocates that we abandon these kinds of discussions altogether, arguing that they are psychological mirages created by our language. Our language gives us the appearance of being placed in a moral universe larger than ourselves. Rorty prefers to adopt a pragmatic attitude where we chalk up 'human rights talk' to simply 'a culturally acquired taste' of Western Europeans and Americans, that is, a white, Eurocentric culture.[58] In effect, Rorty wants us to say, 'We do this simply because we like it.' Athanasius would eschew Rorty's view as exemplary of the hostility of the human mind to God which he and the Christian tradition observe. But our language, he would say, *nevertheless* bears witness to us that we live in a moral universe larger than ourselves. We are given to it, and it is given to us.

This is not a 'natural theology,' but rather something that can only be asserted and appreciated in light of the self-revelation of the Word, and the incarnate Word's revelation of the Trinity and further insights into our creation and destiny. Athanasius is simply saying that in order for our minds to have any hope at all of rationally apprehending God, God must have impressed His own rationality upon us in the creation, *and specifically through language and our ongoing development of language*. All this hangs on God's prior gracious act. And, at the same time, to

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[56] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1 refers to Adam and Eve as 'infants.' John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p.50 credits Theophilus of Antioch (d.183 – 185 AD), *Letter to Autolycus* 25 with being the first to write that Adam had been *nepios*, 'a child,' and needing to properly mature. Irenaeus repeats that in *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 11, 14. I suspect that Theophilus and Irenaeus meant that Adam and Eve were mentally, not biologically, children.

[57] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.78 emphasis mine

[58] Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,' note 43, at p.116. Michael Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.38 – 39 offers a good critique of Rorty.

'become recipients' of God's Wisdom, we have to exercise the power of knowledge, thought, and even language. That power *increases and develops* with right usage. God could not automatically supply all the experiential knowledge necessary for Adam and Eve to personally grasp the full meanings of those words as understood by God Himself, precisely because He cannot lie (Heb.6:18) and manufacture false memories. There may even be a temple structure to certain words insofar as human beings communicate with them: Words like 'good' and 'beautiful' and 'love' are *anchored* and *framed* in the human mind by God, but we must *fill* those words with appropriate and increasing content in partnership with Him. The Wisdom of God, as Athanasius says, did 'condescend to the creations, so as to introduce an impress and semblance' of God's wisdom in our minds, from which further human development could unfold.

In *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius further develops his point by saying that the prophets of Israel were given not only to Israel but to the whole world (12.2 – 6). God made known in Israel, and through Israel, how to 'live a virtuous life' by 'sending a law' (12.2). This refers to Moses, the Sinai covenant, and the Torah as a literary document. The prophets in succession also were 'men such as they knew... for men are able to learn from men more directly about higher things' (12.2). Even if the verbal content spoken by the prophets was too much to bear, Athanasius says, ' it was possible for them to meet at least the holy men, and through them to learn of God, the Maker of all things, the Father of Christ; and that the worship of idols is godlessness, and full of all impiety. Or it was open to them, by knowing the law even, to cease from all lawlessness and live a virtuous life' (12.4 – 5). Athanasius interprets this history of revelation to Israel, and through Israel to the world, as an expression of God's 'provision' (12.1, 2) for the 'weakness of men' (12.1), motivated by 'God's goodness and lovingkindness' (12.6). But men were overcome by 'the pleasures of the moment' deceived by the demons (12.6).

This would be the appropriate place to begin discussing Athanasius' understanding of the demonic. The Alexandrian theologian constantly refers to this spiritual warfare motif. Athanasius, like other patristic theologians, sees demons connected with deception, and human freedom from demonic influence and deception as being progressive. In *De Incarnatione*, every single mention of the word 'deceit,' 'deceive,' or 'deception' – and there are many[59] – occurs in the same breath as 'the demons.' This tells us a great deal about Athanasius' cosmology. The demons, like their master, infest 'the air' (Eph.2:2, *De Incarnatione* 25.5 – 6) and resist the Christian's growth. He spends a good deal of effort explaining, in his *Festal Letters* and especially *Life of Antony*, exactly how a Christian breaks through and breaks free of the demons and the temptations and deceptions they offer. This is an inseparable part of his view of sanctification. It involves becoming more spiritually powerful, as in able to exorcise the demons. But it is also, and more fundamentally, a matter of becoming more *truthful* and truth-filled. Jesus defeats the demons for all humanity in a representational sense, of course. But the various facets of his person and ministry bring about victory after victory over the demons. His teaching guides human beings in the virtuous and truthful life, especially against idol worship.[60] His power over the demons through his exorcisms is shared with his followers, ridding the earth of the demonic.[61] His placement on the cross 'in the air' is a displacement of the devil in his own space.[62] And especially his resurrection triumph over death drains death of the terror it holds over human beings.[63]

The Word, Athanasius says, would not stand to let human beings become 'brutalized,' with 'demonical deceit clouding every place' (13.1). To clarify his meaning, Athanasius says God would not let human beings be like the irrational, brute animals (13.2). This comment reinforces the sense that the Alexandrian has in mind humanity as the *speaking* beings, not simply the *rational* beings per se. The Word, therefore, had to come to reestablish His image in humanity (13.3), so that humans could 'worship Him' (13.4), presumably the highest form of speech. Athanasius attests to his understanding that the Word's deliverance of human beings from the demonic has to do not only with cognitive information about the one true God and His Word, but the ontological healing of human nature from the corruption that had set into it (13.7 – 9). Athanasius insists that God's motivation was love for humanity: 'Such going astray proves the cause of their ruin and undoing, and since it was unfitting that they should perish which had once been partakers of God's image. What then was God to do? Or what was to be done save the renewing of that which was in God's image, so that by it men might once more be able to know Him?' (13.6 – 7) Neither men nor angels could properly reinstate the image in human beings (13.7), for they could take away neither corruption nor

[59] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 2.5 – 6; 12.6; 13.1; 14.3 – 4; 25.5; 27.3; 45.5 – 6; 46.3; 47.1 – 2; 48.3; 49.6; 55.5
[60] Ibid 1, 12, 14, 20, 30, 46, 50 – 53, 55
[61] Ibid 32.4, 6; 43.3; 46.3; 47.2; 48.3 – 9; 49.3; 50.4; 55.1
[62] Ibid 25.5 – 6
[63] Ibid 10.4; 20.6

death (13.8). Only the original and true Image of the Father, the Word, could do this (13.9).

Athanasius then deploys a touching analogy of the subject of a painting coming a second time to allow his portrait to be re-painted on a faded surface. He twice quotes Jesus' dictum, 'I came to find and to save the lost,' as referring to the Word's recovery of the Image (14.2; 15.7) and places important material in between the two quotations. Only the Word could bring about the second birth and coordinating this Johannine phrase with the creation 'anew in the likeness of the image' (14.2). Only the Word could touch all humanity, 'everywhere beneath the sun,' says Athanasius, once again highlighting that the scope of the atonement was universal in principle, since all humans bear the corrupted image of God (14.3). Only the Word could correct both the soul and the mind of humanity (14.4), and undo 'these great evils [which] have come to pass' (14.5). This compares with penal substitution's theory of God resolving the 'conflict of attributes' in Himself (love vs. justice; holiness vs. mercy; etc.). In Athanasius' mind, the incarnation of the Word was to undo human *evil* and *heal humanity*. Only the Word could show forth the truth of the love of the Father for humanity (14.6 – 8).

The Word came 'down' to the level of human beings to communicate (15.1), 'like a kind teacher who cares for his disciples.' Once again, human beings needed valid data about God beyond the physical world (15.2). Without the revelation of the Word about the Father, God's love for humanity, and therefore, God's goodness, human beings would have only logically concluded that whatever 'god' existed was cruel and malicious at worst, or partially good and partially evil at best. The incarnation of the Word was God's move to meet human beings 'half-way' (15.3). If they worshiped creation, creation showed her own worship for the Word (15.4). If they worshiped demons, demons showed their own obeisance to the Word (15.5). If they worshiped the dead, the Saviour's resurrection proved the dead to be false gods (15.6). 'In whatever direction the bias of men might be,' the Word recalled them, and revealed the good Father (15.7). The incarnate Word put up obstacles to every other avenue of worship and devotion, clearing the way to the Father alone, and this is how Athanasius interprets the Word coming 'to find and to save the lost' (15.7).

Athanasius presses further. If men's minds were fixated on the sensory, physical world, the Word's human body transferred their attention to the Father (16.1). Athanasius returns his attention to the bodily nature of the Word's incarnation. In this body, the Word revealed himself everywhere, in principle (16.2 – 3), doing bodily works including miraculous signs (16.4) and especially works of love (16.5), ' first, in putting away death from us and renewing us again; secondly, being unseen and invisible, in manifesting and making Himself known by His works to be the Word of the Father, and the Ruler and King of the universe' (16.5).

Athanasius has therefore answered the twofold problem that he identified at the outset of this section (*De Incarnatione* 11 – 16). The incarnation of the Word was necessary as an expression of God's goodness and love for humanity to give real knowledge of God. The Word overcomes the first problem – that of human beings having limited data from the physical world alone – by becoming incarnate and participating in the physical world as an embodied human. Humanity can now appreciate the veracity of the law and the prophets of Israel as a prelude to the Word incarnate. Humanity can also grasp the ramifications of the resurrection of Jesus: His resurrected body is evidence that God has greater plans for humanity and the cosmos. Any accusation that God neglects or abandons humanity, or is otherwise evil in some form, now must confront the loving union established and disclosed by the Word's assumption of His creation, undoing corruption and death, and carrying it into new resurrection life.

The Word overcomes the second problem – that of human beings having a damaged sense of spiritual perception and resistance to God – by becoming incarnate and sharing about his own relation to His Father. He is the prophet par excellence, the embodiment of the virtuous life, and the teacher who loves his disciples. Above all, He is the Word of the Father who stamped His image again upon humanity, who worshiped the Father and spoke of Him, and drew us into worship. While this is admittedly not Athanasius' main point in *De Incarnatione*, he nevertheless shows that we enter by invitation into the incarnate Word's own relation with His Father, and we have the words of Jesus to anchor our spiritual perception, and the humanity of Jesus in which our resistance to God is overcome.

Questions and Answers on the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of the Incarnate Word (17 – 32)
From here, Athanasius considers various logical questions or objections. Was the Word 'circumscribed in the body,' or limited to it (17.1)? No, Athanasius answers. The Word still was 'present in the whole of Creation' (17.1), both 'distinct' from all things and yet 'present in all things by His power' (17.1 – 2). Here is where Athanasius says that the soul-body relation in one human is *not* an adequate analogy to the relation of the incarnate

Word to the human body He inhabited (17.3 – 4). The Word was not changed by inhabiting a human body (17.5), just as the sun is not changed by illuminating and touching everything else on earth by its rays (17.6 – 7).

Can we speak of the Word's incarnate activity as *God's* activity (18.1)? Yes, Athanasius answers. Despite Platonic philosophy's privileging of soul over body where the two must ultimately be separated, the deeds done by the incarnate Word in a human body can be properly ascribed *to God*. The self-revelation of the Word of God abolishes the spirit-matter dualism of Greek philosophy. Being born, eating, and suffering can now be said of *God* (18.1). For Jesus said that he reveals the Father (18.2). Because he is the Power and Word of God (18.3), his exorcisms and healing miracles are acts of *God* (18.4). The miraculous birth of Jesus from a virgin is an act of *God* (18.5). And the transformation of water into wine, the walking on water, the multiplication of food, may all be said to be acts of *God* (18.6). Athanasius argues that the sinful ignorance of human beings of God's providence in creation generally provoked the Word to do these things in creation by His human body to confront them as *God* (19.1). The demons acknowledged Him as the Son, Wisdom, and Power of *God* (19.2). The earthquake and darkening acknowledged Him '*as God and the Son of God*' (19.3).

Was it absolutely necessary for the incarnate Word to die bodily (20.1)? Yes, Athanasius answers. Despite the shame of death and the stigma of crucifixion, this particular death was necessary. The theologian begins a long section focused on the nature of Jesus' death, its motive and purpose, pressing on to his resurrection (20 – 32). Death was the debt owed by every human being to God (20.2), as I have described above, in order to be part of the overall pathway for each human being to be cleansed of the corruption, at least potentially, based on their response to the Word incarnate and His work. The Word presented His body to the Father 'in the stead of all,' not to deflect the phenomenon of death, but to fashion a pathway through it into resurrection (20.2). Hence, it may be possible to speak of a 'penal participation,' in the sense that Jesus participated in the general penal consequence of death, if we were to speak of death merely in a penal sense, which is only partially true. But it is not possible to speak of 'penal substitution' in Athanasius.

Nevertheless, the Word incarnate also came to die bodily, and to be resurrected bodily. That was His very purpose in 'sharing the same nature as all' (20.4). Although he took his humanity from the virgin, his body, 'yet being mortal, was to die also' (20.4), not to remain dead but to make it 'no longer subject to corruption according to its own nature' so as to raise it anew and thus '[place] it out of the reach of corruption' (20.4). The death of the Word in the body accomplishes the death of all (20.5 – 6). For everyone has to pay the debt of death to God (20.5), Athanasius reminds us, and we still do. But the Word's union with our humanity in his body is not a deflection of the debt of death away from us, through some 'passive obedience' of the incarnate Word on the cross. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the creation of a passageway through death, not from death. The incarnate Word removes its terror, but does not remove it per se. 'We are only dissolved, agreeably to our bodies' mortal nature... that we may be able to gain a better resurrection' (21.1). We are like seeds cast into the earth, who rise in a different form, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 (21.2). Jesus' death had to be public, and verifiable (21.3 – 5). His identity as Word of God prevented his body from succumbing to sickness (21.6), but death was needed for resurrection (21.7).

I believe Athanasius' arguments in 21.6 – 7 and 22.1 – 5 contain a weakness. Is it true that Jesus could not have gotten sick, or voluntarily released his life from his body, as Athanasius says? The biblical data admits of another interpretation. In his temptation experience (Mt.4:1 – 11; Lk.4:1 – 13), Jesus declined to use divine power to serve his own needs. By not turning stones into bread, Jesus demonstrated his commitment, among other motivations to be sure, not to use power for himself, but only for others. I concur with Athanasius that, in the plan of salvation, Jesus had to not die from ordinary sickness. But the health-oriented quality of Jewish law and historical circumstance were enough to mitigate against that possibility. It does not necessarily follow, as Athanasius *further* argues, that Jesus *never* got sick, or was absolutely invulnerable to viruses, torn muscles, broken bones, and digestive problems simply because his was the body of God the Word. If Jesus hungered and thirsted, which Athanasius acknowledges in 21.6, then his human body was vulnerable to other everyday bodily ailments, because hungering and thirsting indicate Jesus' real bodily dependence on, and interaction with, the physical creation.

Furthermore, Athanasius makes the unfortunate claim that Jesus could not simply give up his life in the human body, 'For as it was not fitting for the Word of God, being the Life, to inflict death Himself on His own body' but rather made use of other the Jewish and Roman desire to kill him (22.1). In my opinion, this does not accord well with Jesus' own statement, 'I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I

lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again' (Jn.10:17 – 18). Nor does it accord with the rather strong impression that the crucifixion experience per se did not kill Jesus' body, but rather his voluntary release of his spirit – an impression which only increases from Matthew and Mark's terse descriptions where they omit Jesus' words from the cross (Mt.27:50; Mk.15:37), to Luke's account which coordinates Jesus' death with the tearing of the veil and the sun being darkened (Lk.23:44 – 46), and John's account which coordinates Jesus' death with prophetic gestures and conversations that he had to have prior to death (Jn.19:28 – 30). I think that Jesus decided when to when yield up his life to the Father, that the crucifixion experience was ultimately the circumstance and not the cause of his death, and that Athanasius introduces an unnecessary principle. He corrects himself some fifteen to twenty years later in *Discourses Against the Arians*, when he quotes the Johannine statement, 'No one takes it from me,'[64] and explains it by saying, 'but the Lord, being Himself immortal, but having a mortal flesh, had power, as God, to become separate from the body and to take it again, when He would.'[65]

Could not Jesus have hidden his purposes from the Jews so as not to die (22.1)? No, Athanasius replies. For death was his purpose (22.1). His death was not weakness, but rather the Word's victory over death 'for the salvation of all' (22.2). That is, his death per se was not his chief aim, but death for the sake of all, 'the death of men' (22.3). 'The Lord was especially concerned for the resurrection of the body which He was set to accomplish... having effected the blotting out of the corruption' (22.4).

Could Jesus have died privately, out of sight of the public (23.1)? Athanasius denies this possibility. His death had to be apparent, so his resurrection would have a firm basis as not hidden (23.1). He who did miracles publicly had to die publicly (23.2). His disciples needed to be convinced of his death before they could be convinced of his resurrection (23.3). 'Or how could the end of death, and the victory over it be proved, unless challenging it before the eyes of all He had shown it to be dead, annulled for the future by the incorruption of His body?' (23.4)

Could Jesus have died a glorious death instead of a shameful one via crucifixion (24.1)? Athanasius denies this as well. To men, the type of death matters, and Jesus' death was humiliating to demonstrate his power over every type of death (24.2). Like a confident wrestler who welcomes all opponents, Jesus allowed others to determine that crucifixion would be the method of his death (24.3). Interestingly, Jesus' bodily unity in death (i.e. not beheading, etc.) prefigured the unity of his church body (24.4).

Why death on a cross (25.1)? Athanasius here replies that the cursed human nature that the Word assumed could be placed on a tree to be identified as cursed, as Deuteronomy 21:23 indicated (25.2). Jesus' outstretched arms on the cross prefigured his reaching out to all the nations (25.3). His death in mid-air was an ironic expression of humanity lifting him up (25.4) but either achieved or foretold the defeat of the devil in his own space, that is, 'in the air' (25.5). Thus, the Word cleared 'the air' so that his followers could ascend with him to heaven (25.6).

Moving onto the subject of the resurrection of the incarnate Word (26.1), Athanasius argues that the crucifixion practices enabled his body to judged quickly as dead, be taken down, and entombed (26.1). He did not immediately rise from the dead, or even after two days, because that would open him to the charge of having never been dead at all (26.2 – 3). Athanasius claims that more than three days would have led to (a) the excessive decomposition of the body requiring a new body beyond recognition (26.4 – 5) and also (b) the despair and forgetfulness of his disciples (26.6).

The resurrection of Christ is proved by the disciples' lack of terror about death (27.1 – 2). The devil's power over humanity through death has been nullified, and the devil is now scorned by Christians (27.3 – 4). Death is now made weak (28.1 – 2). Death can be overcome like fire can be overcome by asbestos, which does not burn (28.3). The Christian martyrs show this power, and thus show that the tyrant of death has been bound by Christ (28.4). So anyone struck by the power of these witnesses should 'receive the faith of Christ, and pass over to his teaching' (28.5). When one sees men who used to be weak before death now be strong, and even willing to die for the Christian faith, this means that the resurrection of Christ has really occurred (29.1 – 6). That Christ is alive is attested by the fact that people are converting to the Christian faith means that the Word 'is invisibly persuading so great a multitude from every side, both from them that dwell in Greece and in foreign lands, to come over to His

[64] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.54
[65] Ibid 3.57

faith, and all to obey His teaching' (30.4), 'pricking the consciences of men' so that the adulterer is such no longer, and so on (30.5). In his name, demons are cast out and idolatry is deposed (30.5 – 7; 31.1 – 4).

An implicit question Athanasius answers is, 'Where is the body of the risen Jesus now?' For he considers the fact 'that he is not seen' (32.1). Athanasius replies that God has always been unseen, so this should not pose a difficulty (32.1). The effects of the death and resurrection of Christ are logically sufficient (32.2). Even a blind man can feel and sense the effects of the sun (32.3). Demons and spirits, who are cast out of people in the name of Jesus, do not obey a dead man (32.4). They see that the Word is *God*, and the *Son of God* (32.5). The transformation of people and the casting out of demons furnish enough proof that the Word incarnate raised his once dead body, 'for the salvation of all, and taught the world concerning the Father, and brought death to nought, and bestowed incorruption upon all by the promise of the Resurrection' (32.6).

Refutation of the Jews (33 – 40) and Greeks (41 – 54)

I will only briefly consider Athanasius' responses to both unbelieving Jews (33 – 40) and Greeks (41 – 54). To the Jews, Athanasius enters into dialogue over the prophetic Scriptures. He cites Isaiah's virgin birth prophecy from Isaiah 7:14, Moses' star out of Jacob prophecy from Numbers 24:5 – 17, and Isaiah's prophecy of the messianic child from Isa.8:4. He argues that the messiah had to go into Egypt from Isaiah 19:1, and then come out of Egypt again from Hosea 11:1 (33). He makes liberal use of the 'suffering servant' prophecy of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 as a prediction of the messiah's death (34). He cites Psalm 22:16 – 18 and Isaiah 11:10 as fulfilled by Jesus. Then he argues that no one prior to Jesus was born of a virgin, nor born under the auspice of a star (35). No king in Israel or Judah reigned with goodness and peace, died and rose for anyone's salvation, or fulfilled these prophecies (36). No one was pierced in hands and feet to fill to the full the words of Psalm 22, nor hung on a tree as a sacrifice for the salvation of all. No one can declare the manner of His conception in the virgin's womb (37). No other proofs are so impressive (38). Daniel's seventy week prophecy in Daniel 9:24 – 25 was fulfilled by Jesus, Athanasius reasons, by Jesus as the anointed ' holy of holies' itself (39). Athanasius then points out that no other prophet or visionary has spoken to Israel from God, since the time of Christ; and none of Israel's defining institutions – whether priest, sacrifice, king, prophet, temple, or Jerusalem itself – reliably continue (40).

Athanasius then turns to the unbelieving Greeks. He challenges those Greeks who say there is no Word that structures and fills the cosmos. He points out that Greek philosophers readily assert that the Word 'is in the Universe, which is a body, and has united Himself with the whole and with all its parts.' Why, then, is it remarkable to say that the Word has united Himself with man also? (41) A man's power and strength is spread out in his body in his various parts. So it is unremarkable that Word, who pervades all things, 'has used as His instrument a human body to manifest the truth and knowledge of the Father. For humanity, too, is an actual part of the whole.' (42) The Word did not come in material that was 'more noble' than humanity like the sun, moon, or elements because that part of creation had not 'swerved from their order.' Moreover, He did not come to simply make a display, but to 'heal and teach those who were suffering' (43.1, 2). Athanasius even summons Plato into his comparison, brushing aside Plato's well-known dualism, and making the Athenian philosopher serve a Christian argument: 'For if even Plato, who is in such repute among the Greeks, says that its author, beholding the universe tempest-tossed, and in peril of going down to the place of chaos, takes his seat at the helm of the soul and comes to the rescue and corrects all its calamities; what is there incredible in what we say, that, mankind being in error, the Word lighted down upon it and appeared as man, that He might save it in its tempest by His guidance and goodness?' (43) God the Word could not simply speak again to undo the corruption, but had to unite Himself with humanity in order to save it (44). 'The Lord touched all parts of creation, and freed and undeceived them from every illusion' (45). Athanasius then returns to historical and social facts. Men are deserting the worship of idols since the Word came (46). The deceit of the oracles has ceased, false gods have been unmasked, and men now despise the fear of death and turn their thoughts heavenward (47). Men and women are inspired to live remarkably holy lives, and his name drives out demons (48). Asclepius healed using natural remedies, but the Word incarnate healed supernaturally and instantly. Though the pagan god Dionysus taught drunkenness, Christ teaches temperance, and yet he is mocked? (49) Who else has reformed so many from idol worship, or drives out demons? (50) The Word empowers virtue, self-control, and peace with neighbors (51), unlike any other idol or demon or man (52 – 53).

Athanasius then invites his readers to see Christ with their understanding, in order to see God (54.1). Then comes the famous quotation which can summarize *De Incarnatione*: 'For He was made man that we might be made God ; and He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality' (54.3).

I find it noteworthy that Athanasius argues from the social impact of Christian faith and its spread. Interestingly, he does not make apologies for the cultural changes wrought by the missionary advance of the Christian gospel. He seems to assume that his non-Christian readers consciences will be so pricked and moved by the truth of his Christian presentation that they will agree that these results are good and right. Occasionally, Athanasius might catch his non-Christian readers in some kind of self-inconsistency of their own. But most of the time, he is simply propounding the *intended effects* of Christian faith upon humanity; he assumes that this narrative will have its own positive impact on his hearers.

Numerous scholars have made these kinds of arguments, combining theological, biblical, historical, sociological reflections. Sociologist Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (2005) notes that science did not develop as a corporate enterprise – and as a knowledge industry – except in European Christian lands and under Christian leadership, nor was slavery abolished except in northern and northwestern Europe under Christian conviction. American Orthodox philosopher and theologian *David Bentley Hart, Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (2009), destroys misconceptions about the church supposedly being directly responsible for the death of pagan philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria in ancient times, and the silencing of Galileo Galilei in late medieval times; Hart responds with the consistent Western Christian contributions to education, human dignity, social justice, and peace-making. Historian Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (2015) traces the story of how Christian theological conviction gave us the dignity of every human being, Christian monasticism originating in Egypt gave us the ability to weaken the authority of the family and instead organize people around vocations, Christian practices of sanctuary gave us humane Western European cities, and Christian papal activity gave us checks on state powers over people and organized legal codes in Western Europe. More focused studies are also invaluable. For example, historian and missiologist Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (1999), shows how the first Indian bishop of an Anglican diocese led efforts to preach Christ to Indians, challenge the Hindu caste system, and improve social conditions, and was rewarded by earning the *opposition* of Mohandas K. Gandhi, a fact little remembered by Westerners wishing to discredit Christianity and celebrate Gandhi. Many more works can be named along these lines. I have followed this line of argument in my own writing, preaching, and teaching at mostly secular Western universities, and the responses have been consistently positive.[66] So I am persuaded from experience, and from what intellectual honesty demands, that Athanasius' basic paradigm of evangelism is essential.

Conclusion (55 – 57)

Athanasius then summarizes again the evidence he regards as important to establish the reality of the incarnate Word and His work. Idolatry and the influence of evil spirits are declining, he repeats. (55) He encourages his reader to study the Scriptures (56). His one very brief mention of the final judgment and the possibility of 'everlasting fire and outer darkness' occurs in *De Incarnatione* 56.3. Among those informed by penal substitutionary atonement theology, who view hell as the place of divine retribution and imprisonment, any mention of this 'everlasting fire' and 'outer darkness' are sure to be read as support for Athanasius' supposed belief in penal substitution. But this question needs to be taken to Athanasius' *Festal Letter #3*, from 331 AD, which he wrote as the young bishop of Alexandria to his fellow North African Christians, very shortly after he wrote his two volume work. There, he demonstrates his understanding that the motif of fire in Scripture is to be interpreted with God as the consuming fire, seeking to consume the corruption of sin in us.

> 'For when a man despises the grace given him; and immediately falls into the cares of the world, he delivers himself over to his lusts; and thus in the time of persecution he is offended, and becomes altogether unfruitful. Now the prophet points out the end of such negligence, saying, 'Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord carelessly [Jeremiah 48:10].' For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea,

[66] My presentations can be found online at http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/resources.earlychurch.htm. *Human Dignity: Does Every Human Being Matter?* is an essay including material on the early church presenting universal human dignity to the world; *Slavery and Abolition in the Early Church: How the Early Church Got It Right* is a presentation on how the early Christians read Scripture in such a way so as to limit, then eventually abolish slavery in northern and northwestern Europe well before the trans-Atlantic slave trade; *Women in the Early Church* and *Children in the Early Church* are presentations describing the positive revolution for women and children as Europe transitioned from paganism to Christianity; *The Impact of Jesus* is a presentation drawing on anecdotes and patterns from history from a global, not merely European, perspective; *The Role of Jesus in Revolution and the Pursuit of Justice* narrates the story of Christian influence in twentieth-century non-violent resistance movements around the world.

> moreover, *burning like a flame*, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called '*a consuming fire* [Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:26; Hebrews 12:29] Therefore, the God of all, 'Who makes His angels [spirits],' is a spirit, 'and His ministers *a flame of fire* [Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7].' Wherefore, in the departure from Egypt, He forbade the multitude to touch the mountain, where God was appointing them the law, because they were not of this character. But He called blessed Moses to it, as being fervent in spirit, and possessing unquenchable grace, saying, 'Let Moses alone draw near [Exodus 24:2].' He entered into the cloud also, and when the mountain was smoking, he was not injured; but rather, through 'the words of the Lord, which are choice silver purified in the earth [Psalm 12:6],' *he descended purified*. Therefore the blessed Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, 'Quench not the Spirit [1 Thessalonians 5:19].' For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. For he said, 'Quench not;' not because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to suffer anything from them; but because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. 'For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, nor dwell in a body that is subject unto sin; but will remove from thoughts that are without understanding [Wisdom 1:5].' Now they being without understanding, and deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having that 'Light which lights every man that comes into the world [John 1:9].' Now a *fire* such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, when the word was in him *as a fire*, and he said, 'I pass away from every place, and am not able to endure it [Jeremiah 20:9].' And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this upon earth, and said, 'And what? Would that it were already kindled [Luke 12:49]!' For He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death [Ezekiel 18:32]; so that *evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit*; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred. [Mark 4:20] Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas, although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were *inflamed* with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him [Luke 24:13 – 34]. The blessed Paul also, when seized by this *fire*, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of the Word [Acts 9]. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them [Luke 17:11 – 17]; nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, 'while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor.' But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful, *the last fire*, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.'[67]

Athanasius' letter reflects the understanding of the broader, united church for over a thousand years. Athanasius shows that the primary purpose of God showing Himself as a fire is to purify His people, as Moses was purified in his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. God's interaction with people and their willing reception of His word results in a certain type of human experience: the experience of internalizing this divine fire as a passion for God, for preaching, for proclamation as Jeremiah experienced it. Jesus came to cast this purifying fire upon the earth, for the purpose of bringing about repentance, and, very notably, 'that evil should be entirely consumed in all men,' for the purification of their souls. Purifying the corruption of sin away from people 'clears the ground' as it were for the word of God to bring forth fruit. Paul was 'seized by this fire' on the Damascus Road – for Jesus appeared in divine light – and became a preacher. God is also 'the last fire' towards 'such men' as Judas who are 'ungrateful' and 'unthankful.' Fire towards the repentant is the same fire towards the resistant: two sides of the same coin. For God by His very nature cannot help but to shine and purify – light and fire can do no other – even upon those who do not want the light, and call for the surrender of everyone who has not yet voluntarily participated in their own purification. For those who somehow fix their resistance in place for all eternity, refusing to be thankful for Jesus' action on their behalf, their 'end' will be 'the last fire' shared by the devil and his angels. They will experience darkness, but only because they blind themselves to God's light.

On this topic, Athanasius – like Irenaeus of Lyons,[68] Origen of Alexandria,[69] Antony the Great of Egypt,[70]

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[67] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #3: Festal Letter of 331 AD* 3 – 4 emphases mine

[68] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.29.1 writes, 'For one and the same God [who blesses those who believe] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [blinds] those who, by reason of any weakness of the

Ambrose of Milan, [71] Augustine of Hippo, [72] Maximus the Confessor, [73] John of Damascus,[74] and Isaac the Syrian[75] – is consistent because he understands God to be consistent. Even when the Scriptures use the motif of fire to express something about God, it reflects God always working for the healing and cleansing of all humanity, and our highest good which is found in union with Himself. Now it is possible that a person can cling eternally to the very corruption that God wants to burn away in him or her. But this does not mean that God suddenly becomes punitive for its own sake, as if He takes infinite offense to His holiness and pays back pain infinitely in response. God was and is and always will be consistently for our healing. Actions flow out of natures, as Athanasius has already said.[76] And all God's actions are good, because God's entire nature is good. Athanasius wants us to walk forward with the conviction that sin is terrifying. God is not. God is a healer. The only reason we would fear Him is if we feared being healed, so that would be a problem *of our own manufacturing*.

Finally, Athanasius immediately qualifies his admonition to study the Scriptures by saying that the Scriptures open truly to one who lives virtuously.

> '1. But for the searching of the Scriptures and true knowledge of them, an honourable life is needed, and a pure soul, and that virtue which is according to Christ; so that the intellect guiding its path by it, may be able to attain what it desires, and to comprehend it, in so far as it is accessible to human nature to learn concerning the Word of God. 2. For without a pure mind and a modelling of the life after the saints, a man could not possibly comprehend the words of the saints. 3. For just as, if a man wished to see the light of the sun, he would at any rate wipe and brighten his eye, purifying himself in some sort like what he desires, so that the eye, thus becoming light, may see the light of the sun; or as, if a man would see a city or country, he at any rate comes to the place to see it—thus he that would comprehend the mind of those who speak of God must needs begin by washing and cleansing his soul, by his manner of living, and approach the saints

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eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.' Cf. 4.39.1 – 4

[69] Origen of Alexandria, *De Principiis*, book 3, chapter 1 'On the Freedom of the Will', paragraph 11 writes, '…the sun, by one and the same power of its heat, melts wax indeed, but dries up and hardens mud not that its power operates one way upon mud, and in another way upon wax; but that the qualities of mud and wax are different, although according to nature they are one thing, both being from the earth.'

[70] Antony the Great, *Philokalia*, Vol.1: On the Character of Men, 150 writes, 'God is good, dispassionate, and immutable…Thus to say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind.'

[71] Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170 writes, ''And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention… What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God… And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: 'A fire shall burn in His sight.' *For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints*.'

[72] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* book 5.3 writes, 'O God, *you are the consuming fire* that can burn away their love for these things and re-create the men in immortal life.' 11.29 says, 'I have been divided…until I flow together unto You, *purged and molten in the fire of Your love*.' He explains the principle of hell in *Confessions* 1.19, 'Every inordinate affection is its own punishment.'

[73] Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Knowledge*, par.12 says, 'God is the sun of justice, as it is written, who shines rays of goodness on simply everyone. The soul develops according to its free will into either wax because of its love for God or into mud because of its love for matter. Thus just as by nature the mud is dried out by the sun and the wax is automatically softened, so also every soul which loves matter and the world and has fixed its mind far from God is hardened as mud according to its free will and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is softened as wax, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.'

[74] John of Damascus, *Against the Manicheans* 94.1569, 1573 says, 'In eternity God supplies good things to all because He is the source of good things gushing forth goodness to all... After death, there is no means for repentance, not because God does not accept repentance – He cannot deny Himself nor lose His compassion – but the soul does not change anymore... people after death are unchangeable, so that on the one hand the righteous desire God and always have Him to rejoice in, while sinners desire sin though they do not have the material means to sin... they are punished without any consolation. For what is hell but the deprivation of that which is exceedingly desired by someone? Therefore, according to the analogy of desire, whoever desires God rejoices and whoever desires sin is punished.'

[75] Isaac the Syrian, cited in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.234; and Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p.181 – 82 says, 'The sorrow which takes hold of the heart which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God…But love acts in two different ways, as suffering in the reproved, and as joy in the blessed.'

[76] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 16.4

themselves by imitating their works.'[77]

I explored some of the intriguing facets of Athanasius' challenge in my essay on the theologian's first volume, *Contra Gentes*. Suffice to say here that I continue to be struck by the confidence with which Athanasius makes this invitation. *He assumes that his audience now wants to know Christ.* He is not naive, as he certainly recognizes that there are personal and social and even demonic disincentives to know the Scriptures and Christ. But now that he has finished his two volumes, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, Athanasius writes as though his readers will be won over to a life of honor, purity, and virtue. Why does he write this with such confidence?

Athanasius as Evangelist: Concluding Thoughts

To answer that question, I set forth this study of Athanasius as an evangelist. I argued for a direct comparison between the Athanasian 'medical substitutionary atonement' paradigm and the Calvinist 'penal substitutionary atonement.' I conclude this essay certain that Athanasius cannot be cast as an early proponent of penal substitution. Both in the details of his writings, and in the widest possible lens with which we can view his writings, Athanasius believed in an atonement that happened *within* the incarnate person of the Word, and specifically *within* his humanity. The atonement was not an event *upon* Christ. It was not an event *between* the Father and the Son, although that analysis will have to wait for substantiation from Athanasius' *Discourses Against the Arians / Contra Arianos*, written in the early 340's. And the atonement did not take place simply at Jesus' death. It consisted of his entire incarnate life, beginning from conception, through every step of his active and faithful obedience to the Father, including his death, of course, and also his resurrection. Athanasius believed that God was 'healing' and 'renewing' the creation through the new humanity of Christ. Christ made this healing and renewing in himself available to all humanity.

Significantly, Athanasius does not try to construct motivations in his readers related to fear of divine wrath of a God of retributive justice, guilt over one's own transgressions, and personal anxiety over one's standing with God. For Athanasius, God's justice is restorative, not retributive. So for the Alexandrian theologian, penal substitution would be a misrepresentation of God's motivations. God's motivation in atonement was not to satisfy His own retributive justice through a substitutionary pain-bearing and death. Rather, 'our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word' (4.2) to produce in himself a new, healed, and cleansed humanity *for us*.

Rather than trying to produce an emotional response to the death of Christ alone, therefore, as penal substitution practitioners often try to do, Athanasius calls forth an emotional response to the *incarnate Word* as we know him as Jesus of Nazareth, in the totality of his person and his ministry for us. He also wants us to respond with love to *God* in the totality of God's relationship to us from creation. He wants us to sympathize with God as our Creator who has watched us go awry into self-harm and self-corruption, declining ever steadily. He wants us to feel and glimpse God's joy, as we read of the Word becoming incarnate to live out His mission of salvation.

Athanasius argues that evil – especially human evil – can and will be defeated by this good God, who has already acted in Christ to defeat evil. And He has done so in such a way that He cannot be accused of acting in an evil manner, or being evil in any sense in His character. God in His goodness is undoing human evil while respecting human moral agency and thus not becoming passively or actively evil Himself. For Athanasius, the Word is never passive, which is why He is *good*. 'For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God's part' (6.8). On that basis, Athanasius would repudiate any notion of 'limited atonement,' the logical counterpart to penal substitution, as making God out to be neglectful, weak, and evil.

God's goodness is also why, the theologian says, we have a moral intuition that leads us to be quite interested in Jesus' new humanity. Perhaps amazingly to some ears, Athanasius believes that every human being longs to hear this great news of a good God, and know it for a fact, not least by personal, spiritual encounter with the Lord. He is convinced of this because the Lord 'day by day is invisibly persuading' us through our consciences (30.4 – 5), because it is consistent with our deepest, truest selves – and because the Word of God who created us and never let go of us has redoubled His bond with us by sharing our humanity.

As an evangelist, Athanasius tries to call forth nostalgia in us for what could have been and what still might be, and a longing to know this heavenly Father who Jesus reveals. He is intent on proving that the one true God is wholly

[77] Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione* 57.1 – 3

good and beautiful, and not evil in any way, and that human life with this God can be rich and satisfying for the human person, and productive of peace for human relationships. I, for one, believe Athanasius succeeds.