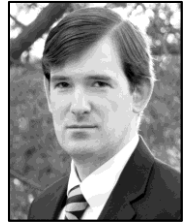


## Athanasius: A Review Article

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Together with Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius was one of the most vital figures of the patristic church. While Irenaeus was responsible for distinguishing Christianity from Gnosticism, Athanasius was responsible for ensuring the permanence of the doctrine of Christ's deity in Christendom. Yet he has not been able to escape fierce criticism. In 2000 the patristic scholar David Brakke, basing himself on the work of Timothy Barnes and a newly discovered letter of a contemporary of Athanasius, wrote a chapter in which he condemned Athanasius for his tyrannical actions as patriarch of Alexandria and compared him to a modern-day ayatollah, although this phrase could have arguably been better applied to Athanasius' proximate successors Cyril and Dioscorus.<sup>1</sup> Eleven years after Brakke's chapter, interest in this "opaque but complicated figure" was by no means diminished and was seen notably in one evangelical study of him and two translations published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

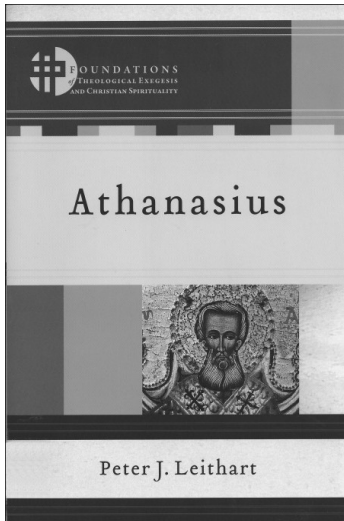
**Athanasius. Peter J. Leithart. Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality, eds. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011, 204 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8010-3942-3**

Peter Leithart is a pastor and professor in Moscow, Idaho. He has written only one other book on late antiquity, a study of Constantine the Great, but his work on Athanasius has the earmarks of an expert in the field. It is more of an evaluation of Athanasius than a biography and is additionally the first installment in the series Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality which, among other objectives, strives to recover patristic exegesis for contemporary theology. Despite this admirable aspiration, the series has a major flaw which will presently be considered.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip F. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2:1102-1127.

The description in chapter 1 of the shady aspects of Athanasius' personality cannot be improved on, especially since it is applicable not only to him but to his successors in the patriarchal chair of Alexandria. For all his piety, Leithart states, Athanasius was "a tough, skillful infighter, a community organizer and rabble-rouser, willing to use intimidation or other tools in pursuit of his aims."<sup>2</sup> Edward Gibbon, despite his favorable reception of Athanasius, described him as "tainted with the contagion of fanaticism." Leithart, with



more circumspection, claims to have sometimes been put off by his violent intensity while still recognizing in him a zeal akin to that of Moses and the prophets. Athanasius had a remarkable capacity for portraying himself as the victim, but Leithart stresses the conciliatory nature of his later career. His epitaph was perhaps best spoken by Christ: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12, with a favorable view of the subjects of the second half of the verse). Christianity was a religion of compassion, but in order for it to succeed it arguably needed well-meaning but belligerent scoundrels at the helm in its early days.

Athanasius had a thorough understanding of philosophy though not literature. He quoted Plato three times, was familiar with Middle Platonism, and resembled Plotinus in his claim that for the eye to see the sun it must become sunlike. But Leithart is correct to say that his basic convictions were shaped by Scripture rather than by Hellenism and that his image of the world as a body was not indebted to Stoic metaphysics. He gives as an example of Athanasius' dependence on Scripture his first encyclical letter, written during the second of his five exiles, in which he compared his deposition to the violation of the Levite's concubine in Judges 20. This comparison is typical of Athanasius' mind, steeped as it was in biblical imagery. Athanasius attended the First Council of Nicaea as a theological adviser to the Alexandrian bishop Alexander but did not, in Leithart's words, dominate the council. He appositely draws a connection between Bishop Alexander's Melitian opponents and the "puritanical" Donatists.

Alexander and Athanasius clearly had their hands full with the Melitians and the Arians, who impelled them, particularly Athanasius, to extreme measures. Before his first banishment, Athanasius was charged with bribery, sacrilege, imprisonments, depositions, the forced requisition of linen tunics, and conniving physical assault. He was exiled twice by Constantine's son Constantius, whom he compared to King Saul, the murderer of the priests of

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 8.

Nob, further allowing Leithart to illustrate Athanasius' dependence on biblical imagery.

Leithart commendably continues to use the descriptor "Arian" in a day when Arians are Homoeans, Monophysites are Miaphysites, and Gnostics are not Gnostics. His discussion of Arius' theology is fair to Arius: he took Origen's subordinationism to its logical conclusion and denied the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. He quotes James Joyce's humorous and juvenile description of Arius' death. Athanasius' words, less graphic than Joyce's, merely state that he was burst asunder like Judas. Although Arius had perhaps been poisoned (an unnecessary supposition), his end was such an embarrassment that none of his followers were henceforth comfortable with the Arian label, a fact which reveals much about late antiquity.

Leithart includes the compromise the Homoiousians reached with the normative Arian Homoeans but not the later compromise they reached with the Nicene Homoiousians. He cites the Arian desire to protect God from the mire of life by sending His less divine Son to save mankind, but he does not thoroughly investigate the Platonic agenda behind this desire. Athanasius himself disliked the idea of God suffering on the cross, a qualm his later successor Cyril, who seems to have modeled himself after him, would not share.

In chapter 3, though without explicitly mentioning Origen, Leithart shows that Athanasius followed the Ante-Nicene in distinguishing between *agennētos* (unbegotten) and *agenētos* (uncreated). The Son was for Athanasius both *gennētos* and *agenētos*, begotten but not created. Leithart translates *agenētos* "unoriginate" rather than "uncreated." He astutely compares the trinitarian views of Augustine and Athanasius. When the apostle Paul wrote that Christ was the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), Athanasius took this literally so that the Father has nothing that is not realized in the Son. For Augustine, by contrast, the Father has something that is His own and that is more intrinsic to His being than the Son is. In Augustine's mind the Father did not have to be made complete by the Son; for Athanasius He did. Athanasius still accepted the eternal derivation of the Son from the Father; in other words, there never was a moment when the Father did not have the Son.

Leithart's exegesis of Athanasius' theology is sound and reveals Athanasius' philosophical acumen. Often, however, Leithart is too garrulous. Although his book is not long, it outstays its welcome by many pages. He manages to lull his reader to sleep even in his discussion of the patristic doctrine of *theōsis* (deification). However, this is not true of Leithart's exposition of Athanasius' doctrine of the Holy Spirit, whose deity Athanasius fully embraced even though it would not be formalized until the Cappadocians.

Going against the Platonism in the air during his age, Athanasius maintained that bodily secretions are not evil, a fact which Leithart seems to over-emphasize. He helpfully rescues Athanasius from R. P. C. Hanson's charge that his Christ was God in a space suit. The patriarch has also been charged

with proto-Nestorianism; for instance, in his assertion that when Jesus healed Peter's mother He stretched forth His hand humanly but healed divinely. To accuse an Alexandrian such as Athanasius of a Nestorian tendency is somewhat ludicrous and merely discloses the essential orthodoxy behind Nestorius' confused terminology. Regardless, serious questions about Christology did not get under way until after Athanasius' time.

Leithart's introduction and epilogue are done "in the Augustinian mode," an unsettling juxtaposition of Eastern and Western Christianity. But Leithart is not afraid of unsettling juxtapositions and idiosyncrasies. In discussing Athanasius' doctrine of creation in chapter 4, he evaluates the nature versus grace debate as it stands at the present day. This leads him into a dialogue with such writers as Scheeben, de Lubac and Rahner, exponents of the ponderous philosophy of extrinsicism. His eleven-page excursus is unnecessary and amounts to a full-scale incongruity, like inserting information about technology stocks in a book of Renaissance history.

Regarding the patristic question of God's impassibility in the following chapter, the author spends five pages discussing recent philosophers like Hegel and Jürgen Moltmann. Typical of his love for the incongruous, he refers to Hegel as Alexandrian. (In a footnote he compares Hegel to Plotinus, here mentioning a thinker who might have been of service in his study of Athanasius: when the irradiations from the One in Plotinus are reabsorbed back into the One, they lose their identity, which is not the case with Hegel's God and "others.")

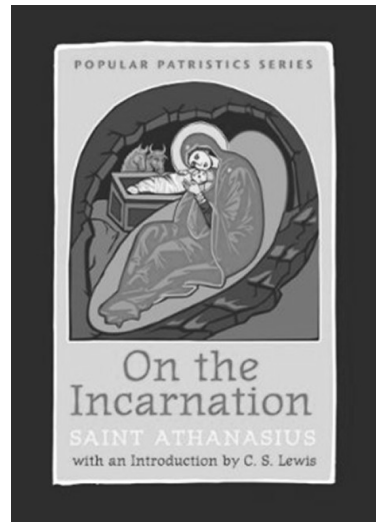
Leithart shares the "beginning, middle, and end" preoccupation of contemporary thought, illustrated by the line "In my end is my beginning," and duly applies this to the theology of Athanasius. All of this, it turns out, is partly the fault of the series to which he is contributing, *Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality*. As has been noted it strives to recover patristic exegesis for contemporary theology. What this unfortunately translates into is an attempt to make the patristic church relevant for contemporary readers. The insinuation is that the patristic church is not significant enough to speak to us on its own terms; it must be dressed up in modern garb in order for it to do so. Leithart gives one the impression of chronological snobbery, of turning his back on a supposedly deceptive past and embracing a worthless present. He should have taken to heart his criticism of Slusser, who ransacks the writings of Athanasius for insight on modern methodology, as anachronistic. I would aver that Hegel, Moltmann, and Rahner have no place in a book about the patristic church. Leithart fills his pages with such characters, from Bosch to Descartes, and gives one the impression that his book is not an investigation of the early church in the strictest sense. The reader who opens it wanting to learn something about Athanasius will come away with a measure of disappointment.

***On the Incarnation*. Athanasius, trans. John Behr. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011, 173 pp., paper. ISBN 978-088141-409-7**

In Athanasius' day religious figures were also political figures, and it is noteworthy that they wrote their own speeches and treatises. Athanasius was responsible for shaping Nicene Christianity, a religion shared by Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Nestorians, and Monophysites, and nowhere more so than with his treatise *On the Incarnation*. This was the second of a two-part compilation, the former of which was entitled *Against the Gentiles*. The double work was probably written in his early patriarchate, in other words in his thirties. It may have been undertaken, as Khaled Anatolios suggests, in response to Eusebius of Caesarea's effusive accolades to the emperor Constantine, an attempt to give back to God what had wrongly been given to Caesar. The treatises were written for a certain Macarius, who is literally translated here by the phrase "blessed one."

The translator of this edition is John Behr, the dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary. Behr teaches patristics at both St. Vladimir's and Fordham University and is the editor of *Popular Patristics*, which together with *Ancient Christian Texts* is one of the best recent series devoted to the Church Fathers. The preface is C. S. Lewis's introduction to an older translation of the treatise. Behr's translation is a supple one and easily sustains rereading, but "God the Word" would have been a better rendering of *ho Theos Logos* than "the God Word". The treatise begins by opposing the views of the Epicureans that all things came into being spontaneously without a creator, of Plato that God created out of preexistent matter, and of the Gnostics who introduced a god beneath God as the creator. As against all these, God Himself created the universe out of nothing. He created man and woman in His own image and gave them, in paradise, the life of the holy ones. As is appropriate for an Eastern Christian theologian, even at this early stage of church history, Athanasius emphasizes the freedom of the will in his discussion of the Edenic economy.

Throughout the treatise, Athanasius never wavers in his subscription to Christ's deity. During His earthly existence, He was able to do what no other mortal could do: sit inside a house while moving the sun and rotating the heavens. Athanasius also exhibits the allegorical and typological tendency of the patristic church. Christ's physical body was not divided at His death, as were the bodies of Isaiah and John the Baptist, in order to foreshadow the



undivided spiritual body of the church.

The eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection testify that it happened: "this thing was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). The fact that the Christian martyrs of Athanasius' childhood, men and women alike, rushed toward death without fear is another proof that Christ vanquished death. The martyrs play with death because it has been weakened, in the same way that children are able to play with a lion that has lost its power. But the fullest proof that Christ defeated death is His continuing work in the Christian. He makes the adulterer cease from his adultery, the murderer from his murders, the unjust from his greed, and the impious from his impiety.

Athanasius would amplify this thought, as Behr demonstrates, with his biography of St. Anthony, in whose good deeds, accomplished three hundred years after the Incarnation, Christ was seen as working. Even when Anthony felt he had been abandoned by Christ, Christ revealed that this was not the case: "I was here, Anthony. . . . I will be your helper forever."<sup>3</sup> Christ's presence in Anthony was vividly glimpsed when he reemerged into civilization after twenty years of complete isolation. Far from being a pitiful wreck, he evidenced stability of character and a total control over his emotions, displaying neither grief, laughter, dejection, annoyance, nor elation. Athanasius is careful not to use the pagan word *apatheia* (dispassion) in his description of Anthony. After Anthony's reemergence into society, he became an instrument of Christ, healing the sick, consoling the disconsolate, and reconciling enemies. Even his vigorous old age reflects the benefits accorded by the Resurrection. "He generally seemed brighter and of more energetic strength," Athanasius writes, "than those who make use of baths and a variety of foods and clothing."<sup>4</sup>

Another proof of the Resurrection is the decline of paganism and idolatry since Christ's day and, together with this, the wearing away of the magic of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Indians. Idolatry, the worship of the demons, was for Athanasius symbolic of the depths to which humanity sank after the Fall. He was particularly opposed to his countrymen's worship of the Nile River. Like other Christians of his day he followed the theory of the Greek historian Euhemerus that the pagan gods were idealized recreations of the earliest mortals. Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, was actually a man who practised healing and treated bodies with herbs; as such, he was less capable than Christ the Creator and Restorer of the universe. In addition to overcoming the gods, Christ outpaces the philosophers who tried in vain to do what He does now; namely, point humanity to immortality and the virtuous life.

Though his treatise is directed more to the Greeks than the Jews, Athanasius includes an expostulation against Jewish unbelief. He answers the Jews with their own Scriptures, focusing on Old Testament prophecies about

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 42.

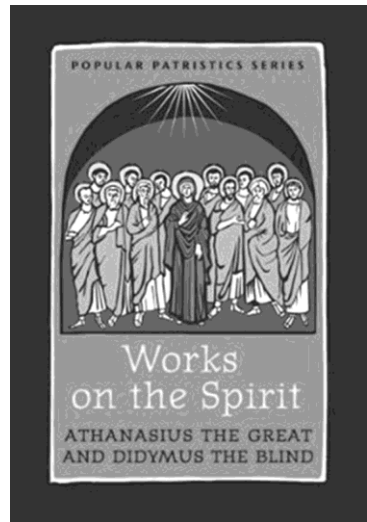
<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Christ, especially from the book of Isaiah. This had of course been done before him, most notably by Irenaeus in his *Apostolic Preaching*, previously translated by Behr. It strikes Athanasius as preposterous that the Jews believe Jesus did not fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament and that the Messiah has not yet come. Since the advent of Christ, the Gentiles have been called, visions have ceased, idolatry has been refuted, swords have been beaten into plowshares, and death has been destroyed. To enumerate all the changes Christ has worked in the world would be like standing on the shore and trying to count all the waves one sees.

***Works on the Spirit. Athanasius and Didymus*, trans. Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz and Lewis Ayres. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011, 243 pp., paper. ISBN 978-088141-379-3**

*On the Incarnation* was a product of the young Athanasius. The *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit* were written by a man who had been exiled three times and was currently hiding in the desert. The present volume pairs the letters to Serapion with Didymus the Blind's treatise on the Holy Spirit. The translators are professors at American and English universities. Mark DelCogliano should be particularly singled out as a specialist on Basil the Great and the author of an exemplary article on the influence of the Homoiousians on his theology.<sup>5</sup> In the introduction, he is more critical of Athanasius the man than are Leithart or Behr. He makes it clear that Tertullian's and Origen's anti-Monarchian writings, while necessary, led to a reluctance on the part of certain Christians to fully embrace the Holy Spirit's deity. But the fact that the Arian Homoeans and Anomoeans radically subordinated the Spirit to the Father, or denied His deity altogether, impelled the Homoiousians to emphasize His deity.

Serapion, the addressee of Athanasius' letters on the Spirit, was an Egyptian bishop and, together with Athanasius, the beneficiary of St. Anthony's two sheepskin cloaks, no small honor. He had written Athanasius about a group whom Athanasius termed the Tropikoi or Misinterpreters, predecessors of the Pneumatomachians who walked out at the First Council of Constantinople.



<sup>5</sup> "The Influence of Athanasius and the Homoiousians on Basil of Caesarea's Decentralization of 'Unbegotten,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19 (Summer 2011): 197-223.

The Tropicoi denied the deity of the Spirit and should be distinguished from the Arians, although Athanasius desires to show their kinship with them.

Athanasius was more pedantic in his letters to Serapion than he was in his treatise on the Incarnation. One also detects a sharper polemical intensity. In the treatise he had spoken only of the slander of the Jews and the mockery of the Greeks. In the letters he compared Serapion's opponents to the Sadducees, called the Arians Ariomaniacs, equated their religion with the Judaism of Caiaphas, and consigned them to bursting ten thousand times, a reference to Arius' death. A little confusingly he sometimes addressed his remarks to Serapion and sometimes to his opponents. He hinted that the Tropicoi's refusal to acknowledge the Spirit's deity was influenced by the Greeks who caricatured the Holy Spirit as the Father's grandson. His use of Scripture was occasionally careless. To illustrate the self-sufficiency of the Trinity, he quoted Isaiah 1:11: "I am full," cutting off the rest of the sentence, "of the burnt offerings of rams."

Although Athanasius' stance is irascible, he sometimes allows humor to penetrate his discussion. When the disciples heard Christ's command to "baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit", they did not wonder why the Holy Spirit was placed last, why there were three persons in the Trinity, whether the Son had a son, or whether the Father was actually a grandfather.

Turning from Athanasius' letters to Didymus the Blind's treatise is like experiencing a still night after a thunderstorm. Didymus was condemned for his Origenism by the irrepressible Second Council of Constantinople. As a result, much of what he wrote has been lost, but he should be regarded as only a moderate Origenist. He fully accepted the Spirit's deity, and his treatise was relied on by Ambrose. The intractable Jerome translated the treatise into Latin in order to show up Ambrose' dependence on it, but it is fortunate that he did so since the Latin version is the only one which has survived. In the prologue, Jerome refers to Ambrose as an ugly crow dressed in his better's plumes. His infrequent comments on Didymus' Greek text are included in indented paragraphs in this translation.

According to Didymus, the Holy Spirit is holy by nature while the angels are holy only by participating in Him; this would be reiterated by Basil the Great. The angels are messengers of salvation and are more honorable than humans because they participate in the Trinity with a greater affinity and completeness than humans, a point that would be hard to deny. Like the Apollinarians, Didymus calls Christ the Lordly Man, but unlike the Apollinarians, he does not envision Him as a mixture of God and man. Somewhat unusually, he states that the human soul can be filled or indwelt only by the Trinity, which allows Him to argue for the deity of the Spirit, who is said to fill Christians. He denies that Satan can fill a human, as when Peter asked Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart?" (Acts 5:3). This, for Didymus, is not to be taken literally. Satan can fill the heart only by suggesting sinful thoughts to it. The same is true in the case of Judas whom Satan



entered by acting on him from without rather than by joining with him substantially. The devil, and one assumes all demons, can indwell humans only through fraud, deception and malice.

There are five main similarities between Athanasius' and Didymus' writings on the Spirit: they distinguish Him from the angels, they emphasize the definite article in scriptural discussions of the Spirit, they agonize over the correct interpretation of Amos 4:13, they distinguish between the scriptural uses of the word "spirit," and they deny that the Holy Spirit can be thought of as the Father's grandson. Didymus probably wrote shortly after Athanasius. He uses the word *homoousios* (of the same substance) to describe the relationship between the members of the Trinity, while Athanasius generally reserves this for the relationship between the Father and the Son. Didymus can therefore be shown to stress the deity of the Spirit even more forcefully than Athanasius. In addition, Athanasius mentions, and Didymus highlights, the doctrine of the sanctifying role of the Spirit, which would have such a long and honorable history in the Eastern and Western churches.

The translation of DeIcogliano and his compeers is sometimes too colloquial, but it represents a great gift to patristic scholars. In their translation and introduction, they render service not only to Athanasius but to such lesser known figures as Serapion of Thmuis, Didymus the Blind, and Cyril of Jerusalem.