

**An Analysis of Atonement Theory in St. Athanasius' De
Incarnatione in relation to earlier thinking.**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree
Master of Christian Theology*

2019

University of Wales, Trinity Saint David

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Abstract:

Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria during the fourth century, and was completely unyielding in his defence of the full divinity of the person of Jesus Christ as the Divine Word of God. His steadfast resolve in the face of ever-increasing heresy, has gained him much admiration in every generation since his death. Athanasius' Christology, and consequently his atonement understanding, has been a topic of some debate amongst theologians of the last hundred years. This thesis will investigate whether Athanasius' atonement understanding was true to the teaching of the Church and the theologians that preceded him. Section one will analyse and evaluate the main texts on the subject of atonement prior to Athanasius, and will conclude that although no systematic theory of atonement can be seen to have existed at this time, nevertheless, a common thread of understanding is apparent. Section Two will closely analyse Athanasius' work *DIVD*, and will conclude that despite framing his understanding in an ontological framework that was not used previously, the atonement ideas he presents are wholly consistent with those preceding him.

Introduction to Athanasius:

St Athanasius was the Bishop of Alexandria during the fourth century, 328-373AD. He has become known as the Pillar of Orthodoxy for his defence of the Nicene ‘homoousios’ against the Arian heresy at this time. Exiled on five separate occasions for refusing to compromise the faith, Athanasius has developed an almost legendary status amongst patristic scholars and early Church historians alike. Known as a caring and forgiving man, as Bishop, he was loved by the people of Alexandria, and by the end of his life his reputation was firmly established as a respected authority of the Church whose advice was worth seeking.¹

In his foundational work, which is the focus of this thesis, Athanasius elucidated his theological understanding of the creation and redemption narrative. The theological principles outlined within this work are those to which he remained faithful throughout his lifetime.² The “impassioned theologian of the Logos,³” is how Pope Benedict XVI described Athanasius, and this phrase sums up very accurately the driving force behind Athanasius’ works. Athanasius realised that if the person of Jesus Christ was not God and man then redemption was put at risk, and the Christian faith would be in vain. Writing before the construction of the dogmatic formulas of Chalcedon, his works show such a level of understanding, that it could be argued that they provided the foundations for the Trinitarian dogmas that would emerge in the succeeding centuries.

Athanasius’ life and career received a positive assessment during the centuries since his death until the twentieth century, when some scholars questioned his personality, evaluating him as a stubborn and sinister individual, and even blaming him for much of the trouble during his episcopacy.⁴ Athanasius continues to divide theologians today, and many have now attempted to find a middle ground between

¹ Gwynn (2012) p.16

² Gwynn (2012) p.12

³ Pope Benedict XVI (2007) http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070620.html

⁴ For a thorough analysis of the negative interpretation on Athanasius’ character, see Davis (2017) chapter VIII

the extreme evaluations of his character.⁵ Whatever interpretation decided upon, it is obvious that the Church still owes Athanasius a huge debt of gratitude for his resolute defence of the truth, and for his role in the development of monastic ideals which continue to influence the Church today. Athanasius' perseverance in the face suffering, particularly when it seemed the world was against him, continues to inspire Christians today to stand up against false teaching, faithful in the knowledge that God's truth will prevail in the end.

⁵ cf: Weinandy (2017) and Davis (2017)

Atonement and Redemption before St. Athanasius:

The Apostolic Age:

The writings of the apostolic age that later became the NT, are an important starting point for anyone seeking to discover the early Christians' understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. For centuries, Christians and theologians debated the intended meaning of passages, phrases and even individual words of the NT. As a result, many scholars have attempted to defend their specific atonement theories by arguing that theirs is the most consistent with the NT texts.⁶ The all-encompassing message of the NT writers is that God came as man, Jesus Christ, and by his death and resurrection established a new relationship between God and humanity. This relationship, they explain, had been damaged by sin, and despite God's efforts to provide humanity with laws to aid their sanctification and correct it, the Old Covenant, humanity had still been found lacking. The authors explain that God therefore, acted once and for all in the person and work of Jesus Christ to fix the damaged relationship and to establish a New Covenant, one which contains the promise of eternal life with God. Within the NT texts, one can find a variety of metaphors and phrases that seem to offer an explanation as to how Christ's death dealt with the problem of sin permanently, and how by his death upon the cross all humanity is now offered eternal life. This section will give a brief summary of some of the atonement language found in the NT, and will conclude that no systematic theory of atonement can be found therein. This is of course, because the texts were mostly written in order to describe the good news of what Jesus Christ had done for humanity, and to encourage people to place their hope in him, rather than to explain in detail the specifics of how this accomplishment was achieved.

⁶ cf: Aulén (1970)

The Writings of St Paul, focussing on his Letter to the Romans:

Paul is well known for explaining Jesus' death and its effects by employing a variety of mixed metaphors,⁷ making it difficult to gain a definitive answer as to how he would explain its atoning effect. Paul's overall intention was to show that Christ's death superseded all previous forms of ritual sacrifice for all those who united themselves to it. It is clear that Paul views Christ's death as sacrificial in nature. In Romans 8:3 for example, Paul says "God has done what the law, because of our unspiritual nature, was unable to do. God dealt with sin by sending his own Son in a body as physical as any sinful body, and in that body God condemned sin."⁸ The phrase translated here "dealt with sin," in the Greek, *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* is used in the LXX as a translation of the Hebrew word *hatta'th* meaning sin offering, and as a result, Dunn argues that Paul is referring to Jesus' death as a sacrifice.⁹ Sacrifice within Judaism had no explicit rationale,¹⁰ and as such understanding what type of sacrifice Paul believes Christ to have been is more difficult to ascertain. The main focus of this debate centres around how one translates the word "ἱλαστήριον" or "hilasterion" in Romans 3:25, which has been given expiatory or propitiatory connotations by different scholars, it is to this debate we will now turn.

Paul says that sinful people who were all under "the curse of the law,¹¹" because of Jesus' death are "now justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."¹² Paul is saying that the status of people before God has changed, and that this was accomplished by the shedding of Jesus' blood. The imagery of this section of Paul's writing mirrors the sin offerings of the priests in Leviticus, who slaughtered an animal without blemish and offered it to God on behalf of the community, thus atoning for their sins and gaining them forgiveness.¹³ It has been argued that Paul utilised this comparison to emphasise the need to understand Jesus in the covenantal context of the OT.¹⁴ Young has argued that these OT sin

⁷ Finlan (2007) pp. 18-42

⁸ Romans 8:3

⁹ Dunn (1991) pp.42-43

¹⁰ Dunn (1991) p.43

¹¹ Galatians 3:13

¹² Romans 3: 24-25

¹³ Leviticus 4

¹⁴ Allen (2017) pp. 122-123

offerings were expiatory rather than propitiatory in nature and were a God given means to remove sin and deal with transgressions of the law.¹⁵ It is therefore possible that Paul is alluding to an expiatory sacrifice as his theory of atonement. Dunn argues convincingly that expiation is “the better translation for Rom. 3:25¹⁶” saying, “for Paul God is the subject of the action: it is God who provided Jesus as hilasterion, and if God is the subject, then the obvious object is sin or the sinner.¹⁷” This can further be supported by Colossians 1: 18-20, where Paul clearly has God as the subject acting to fix the problem.

Other scholars, have translated the word hilasterion in Romans 3:25 as meaning a sacrifice of propitiation, arguing that when read alongside other Romans passages, for example Romans 5:9, “much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God,” this implies that the blood of Christ appeases God’s wrath.¹⁸ Dunn counters the propitiation arguments regarding Paul’s mention of the “wrath of God,” by saying that Paul had explained previously what he meant by that phrase. In Romans 1:18 Paul refers to the wrath of God as being the consequence of the law of God which came into being when mankind turned from honouring their rightful creator to their own falsehoods and lustful passions, consequently to corruption and death. The wrath then, for Paul, is no more than the fulfilment of the words of God in Genesis “you shall most surely die.¹⁹” Meaning that Christ’s coming was for the purpose of restoring mankind, and saving them from their situation of corruption, as Paul explains, “anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation.²⁰” Kelly has gone so far as to say that Irenaeus’ recapitulation is foundationally a Pauline concept.²¹ Meyer has analysed Paul’s soteriology and has concluded similarly to Dunn, that in Paul, “Jesus is not placating the wrath of God... [he is] vicariously acting to reconcile the world with God... and this vicarious atonement is prefigured in Judaism’s theory of mystical and non-judicial redemption.²²” It would appear that Paul has answered clearly for himself any

¹⁵ Young (1979) p.43

¹⁶ Dunn (1991) p.48

¹⁷ Dunn (1991) pp.48-49

¹⁸ Mody (2008) pp. 115-135

¹⁹ Genesis 2:17

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17

²¹ Kelly (2004) pp.170-171

²² Meyer (1998) p.170

accusations of a propitiatory understanding of atonement with regard to the phrase “wrath of God.”

Finlan has interpreted the word *hilasterion* differently, arguing that translating the word as “sacrifice of atonement,” as it has been translated above, is inadequate. He prefers “place of atonement” or “mercy seat.”²³ In the LXX the word is used frequently to describe a physical place where the cleansing was accomplished,²⁴ and even to refer to the lid of the Ark itself,²⁵ which supports Finlan’s claim. One would argue that this is nevertheless, an expiatory image employed by Paul to explain what happened at the cross, with the blood of Christ being offered at the new place of mercy, Christ’s body. In the same way the people in Leviticus were made innocent of their sins via a sacrifice of blood at the place of mercy, Jesus’ sacrifice of his body and blood deals with the problem of sin, but more than this, he also becomes the new “mercy seat” for those who believe in him. Clearly, this is an expiation of sin rather than a propitiation of God, and is logical given Paul’s purpose of writing overall, suggesting that Dunn is correct and expiatory rather than propitiatory sacrifice is the more accurate understanding of Paul’s atonement thought.

Paul is not wholly consistent, clear or systematic in his atonement language, far from it, there are still many juridical and transaction like motifs mentioned in Paul’s writings, for example “you have all been bought and paid for,”²⁶ but Finlan has warned theologians to read Paul as a whole, and not take any of his individual metaphors too literally or in isolation. If taken in isolation, Finlan says “you will be missing the point,”²⁷ for example the phrase about being bought above comes within the context of a teaching about being a slave only to God and not to the desires of men and also about one’s body being no longer one’s own if one is truly united to Christ, as a result the transaction language is fitting but is not seeking to explain exactly how Jesus’ death atoned for sin. Finlan says, “the best atonement theologians use all of the metaphors together, as Paul did, to contrast the old way of atonement and reconciliation with the new way.”²⁸ There is a great deal of consensus amongst

²³ Finlan (2007) p.20

²⁴ Bailey (1999) p.1

²⁵ Dunn (1991) p.41

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:23

²⁷ Finlan (2007) p.32

²⁸ Finlan (2007) p.33

scholars that the overarching atonement language found in the letters of Paul, though scarce and contradictory at times, suggests he believed in some form of expiatory sacrifice, and that other metaphors were simply employed by him to demonstrate that the death of Christ replaces the old sacrifices and rituals in the religious calendar, for example Passover. Finlan states that, "Paul wants his readers to see the OT ritual as a type... an image that now meets its real fulfilment in Jesus, the true means by which sin is cleansed."²⁹ One would argue overall, that Paul's atonement understanding is grounded in a New Adam thematic and rooted within the Jewish cultic ideas of atonement. A form of expiatory sacrifice is Paul's understanding of what happened at the cross, where Christ dealt with the consequences of sin and thus recreated man. Some theologians have sought to speak of this sacrifice as a form of substitutionary death,³⁰ but although elements of this can be seen in Paul's writings, for example 2 Corinthians 5:14 "one has died for all," this narrows Paul's meaning far too much. Substitution seems to minimise the importance of the person about whom Paul is speaking when one discusses Jesus Christ, who was not just a man who died instead of us, but God, come as representative man in whom all have died and with whom all have the potential to rise again.³¹ One would agree with Dunn, that whilst "substitution expresses an important aspect of Paul's theology of atonement,³²" it remains just one element.

²⁹ Finlan (2007) pp.21-22

³⁰ Ladd (1975)

³¹ for example, Colossians 1:18-20

³² Dunn (1991) p.51

Atonement language in the Letter to the Hebrews:

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is absolutely focussed upon demonstrating to his audience that the death of Jesus Christ was the final sacrifice to God, made permanent because the one who made it was the ultimate high priest, God incarnate. There is an entire rejection of the old cultic sacrifices within this epistle, alongside a determined explanation showing how they are now, not just replaced by something novel, but have been completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ.³³ It has been argued that the epistle was written to a first-century Jewish-Christian community who had a clear understanding of the temple cult and the Levitical priesthood.³⁴ Chester suggests that this is likely, and that their pressing question would have been concerning the location of atonement without the temple, he says that many of them would have been tempted to continue to participate in temple sacrifices, “if the community addressed in Hebrews had known the temple cult as providing the sole means of atonement for sin, and the Aaronic priesthood as directly mediating the divine rule, it would be surprising if these did not continue to offer an attraction.³⁵” It is therefore necessary that the author show the importance of the person of Jesus Christ before showing how his sacrifice makes eternal atonement to God, and it is this theme that begins the epistle.

The opening chapters of Hebrews explain that Jesus, has been given the title Son of God by God himself, and that through the Son all creation was made.³⁶ The Son is said to be, “the radiant light of God’s glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command.³⁷” Immediately having made these claims, the author states that, “now that he has destroyed the defilement of sin, he has gone to take his place in heaven at the right hand of divine majesty. So he is now as far above the angels as the title which he has inherited is higher than their own name.³⁸” The author establishes that Jesus is higher than any created being, even the angels, even than Moses, “it is the difference between the honour given to the man

³³ cf: Chester (1991) p.57

³⁴ Horbury (1983) pp.43-71

³⁵ Chester (1991) p.59

³⁶ Hebrews 1:2

³⁷ Hebrews 1:3

³⁸ Hebrews 1:3-4

that built the house and to the house itself,³⁹” and that Jesus’ relationship with the Father is unique, attributing divine titles directly to Christ, such as *kyrios* and *theos*.⁴⁰ The unique relationship with the Father is fundamental to the author’s argument about atonement.

As in Paul, the moment of atonement in the Old Covenant was when the High Priest once a year entered the Holy of Holies to scatter the blood of a sacrificed animal at the mercy seat and before the Ark of the Covenant. The author of the Hebrews argues, that this is a man-made version of “the greater, the more perfect tent⁴¹” existing within the heavenly realm. Chester argues that reading the epistle to the Hebrews with the apocalyptic-mystic cosmology and spatial dualism that the author had in mind, is essential if one is to fully understand the conceptual framework of sacrifice within which the author is working.⁴² The “operative metaphysics [in Hebrews] is Platonic: the earthly reflects crudely what goes on at the heavenly level.⁴³” As a result, Jesus’ sacrifice of his own body and blood is superior to anything a mere mortal high priest could possibly offer to God, and consequently temple sacrifice is shown to be redundant. The author does not deny the effectiveness of the Old Covenant sacrifices in the past, but demonstrates that they had only limited efficacy, because the priests had to continue to make the offering annually, and no one was made eternally perfect by means of their offerings.⁴⁴ In contrast, the New Covenant, which has been inaugurated by Christ’s death and blood, is shown to have permanent effectiveness because of who’s blood was offered, his relationship with the Father, and the offering having been made to the Father within the heavenly realm.⁴⁵ It is important to note that for atonement to be made possible, a blood sacrifice remained necessary, “if there is no shedding of blood, there is no remission.⁴⁶” The mechanics of the author’s atonement understanding seem to operate in the same way within the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. It has been argued that the author’s “attempt to

³⁹ Hebrews 3:3

⁴⁰ Hebrews 1:8-12

⁴¹ Hebrews 9:11

⁴² Chester (1991) p.61

⁴³ Finlan (2007) p. 51

⁴⁴ Hebrews 7:11

⁴⁵ Hebrews 9

⁴⁶ Hebrews 9:22

literally reject but typologically affirm the cult is often confusing.⁴⁷ What is clear is, like Paul the author employs the idea of a cleansing accomplished by a blood sacrifice offered to God which has permanent effects upon humanity's relationship with God.

In seeking to portray Christ as the ultimate high priest and the fulfilment of the Old Covenant, the author of the Hebrews places a strong emphasis upon the life of Jesus who due to his incarnation and lived experience, is able to feel "our weaknesses with us [and]... has been tempted in every way that we are."⁴⁸ Jesus is therefore presented as a compassionate high priest, and one who can truly represent the people for whom he is making atonement. As well as this, Finlan notes that in the Old Covenant "moral solidarity is what legitimises the sacerdotal function... yet Christ's is a non-sacrificing order of priesthood... his order does not get legitimacy through human lineage... it is God who designated Christ a high priest"⁴⁹ This demonstrates the superiority of Jesus's high priestly role. Once again, the author is clearly at pains to show the similarity and yet the distinctiveness of the Old and New Covenants. The incarnation, becomes not only central to Jesus' sacrifice of atonement, but also to man's redemption, as Jesus' lived obedience to God's will is presented as an example for all to follow; all are now challenged to turn "from dead actions and towards faith in God,"⁵⁰ as he is "for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation."⁵¹ It is clear that the life as well as the death of Christ is imperative to the author's soteriology.

The overall atonement thinking expressed in Hebrews, is that Jesus Christ who was of the same nature as God himself, superior to all created things, united himself with man, and by living and dying as man was able to offer up his own body and blood to the Father as a sacrifice of atonement. The sacrifice was offered in the heavenly realm to the Father and was consequently more perfect than any sacrifice that man could offer himself in the earthly realm, and therefore abrogated the need for any further temple sacrifices. The Son once and for all made atonement for humanity, opening a way for humanity to be united with God the Father via obedience to God's will, which was made known through the lived example of the Son.

⁴⁷ Finlan (2007) p.52

⁴⁸ Hebrews 4:15

⁴⁹ Finlan (2007) p.49

⁵⁰ Hebrews 6:1

⁵¹ Hebrews 5:9

Atonement language in the Gospels:

The Gospels all emphasise the Passover context of Christ's passion, and the Synoptic Gospels allude to the importance of Christ's blood sacrifice. We find most atonement language in the passages of eucharistic institution.⁵²

Mark says that "the Son of Man Himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many,⁵³" Matthew uses an almost identical phrase in Mathew 20:28. This is not only a clear allusion to Isaiah 53, but also portrays Jesus' death as making a ransom payment of some kind for humanity. It has been argued that Mark is paralleling Jesus' death with the exodus from Egypt, and that actually his whole narrative "shows that the ransom is from sin and its consequences.⁵⁴" Both of these Gospels also include Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross.⁵⁵ In this cry Bolt argues that "we hear Jesus crying out in solidarity with our own Godforsaken mortality. His death is an inclusive place-taking death, in that he shares the 'flesh and blood' of our mortality. But his death is also an exclusive place-taking death, in that he is the one who dies for the many.⁵⁶" Matthew and Mark therefore, view Jesus as the fulfilment of the suffering servant text of Isaiah 53, and also believe his death has ransomed humanity from sin; they do not expand on their thinking with regard to this but the notion is clearly present.

The Synoptic Gospels during their eucharistic institution passages have Jesus telling the disciples that his blood is "poured out for many⁵⁷" and is "the new covenant.⁵⁸" Matthew and Mark actually omit the word "new" when referring to the covenant and it has been suggested that this "recalls Exodus 24:8, where the covenant established by God at Mt Sinai is said to have been sealed by means of animal sacrifice.⁵⁹" Luke deviates slightly from the blood sacrifice theme by using the phrase "New Covenant" and thus suggesting "that Jesus had in view the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-4." This gives Jesus' death a more permanent significance,

⁵² Finlan (2007) p.37

⁵³ Mark 10:45

⁵⁴ Peterson (2009)

⁵⁵ cf: Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46

⁵⁶ Bolt (2004) p.141

⁵⁷ Mark 14:24

⁵⁸ Luke 22:20

⁵⁹ Peterson (2009)

because “Jeremiah pointed to a definitive and permanent solution to the problem of Israel’s sin as a basis for the renewal of God’s relationship with his people,” rather than a blood sacrifice. Finlan has pointed out that “Covenant blood... marks the formation of a community agreeing to the covenant⁶⁰” and therefore, it could be argued that this is the authors’ way of showing that a new community has been established by Christ’s blood, through which salvation will be attained. Nevertheless, for some of the Gospel writers, it is clear that they view a blood sacrifice or payment, as a necessary part of forming a new relationship with God and of atoning for humanity’s sins, and whilst Luke seems to deviate from this slightly, he still places humanity’s salvation firmly within the death of Jesus.⁶¹

Finally, Passover plays a central role in the gospel narratives leading to Jesus’ death. The authors refer to the coming of the Passover feast to help explain the chronology of events. As well as this, their repeated emphasis that the death of Jesus took place within the context of a Jewish people who were recalling their relationship with God, allows them to depict Jesus as the longed-for messianic figure. John’s Gospel goes further, and has John the Baptist saying of Jesus, “There is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world,⁶²” clearly representing Jesus’ body as a sacrifice given by God to be killed and therefore make atonement for humanity.

Overall, the predominant theme of atonement in the Gospels is that Christ is presented as the promised messiah who came to fulfil the law and make a permanent atonement for humanity. There are hints that this atonement took the form of a ransom, but this is no more than one word used as part of a phrase in two of the Gospels, and is nowhere explained more fully. One would argue the author’s meaning was ransom from sin and death, not from an evil power. It is evident that the notion of a blood sacrifice and a covenant agreement remains a central motif for the authors, as in Paul and Hebrews. Finally, the cry of dereliction in Mark and Matthew gives prominence to that fact that Jesus the Son of God truly died as man for all, and that on the cross he felt the weight of humanity’s separation from God in the light of sin.

⁶⁰ Finlan (2007) p.39

⁶¹ cf: Luke 22:19

⁶² John 1:29

Atonement and Redemption in the Second and Third Centuries:

The second and third centuries were a time of Christian persecution, martyrdoms and battles against heresies, particularly the heresy of Gnosticism. The Christian writers were forced to continually defend their faith to a Pagan audience whose cosmological understanding was wholly different from theirs, and who also had little understanding of the Jewish scriptures. As a result, they endeavoured a more in-depth discussion of the created universe and of God than the apostles had done previously, and included Greek terminology that their audiences could understand in order to articulate the faith. Harnack argued that this was a time when the Gospel became Hellenized, and that its simple teaching was lost and corrupted.⁶³ The works of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Origen will now be analysed to see what contribution they made to atonement and redemption discussion before Athanasius. These three writers have been chosen because they make the largest contribution to this area of Christianity in their writings compared to other second and third century writers.

⁶³ Harnack (1961)

Justin Martyr:

Justin, writing in the second century, has been termed “the most important apologist.⁶⁴” His three surviving works reveal Justin’s rich philosophical understanding as well as his steadfast belief in Christianity as the ultimate truth, which had been fully revealed to the world via the person of Jesus Christ. In seeking to defend the reasonableness of Christianity to a Pagan and Jewish audience, Justin cleverly combines Greek philosophy and the Scriptures, to argue that all that had gone before was now “consummated in the Christian message.⁶⁵” He used the familiar Greek idea that there was one transcendent, unchangeable God and another active being that was responsible for creation.⁶⁶ He identified Jesus Christ as this active being, the Logos, of the transcendent God, and argued that the Logos formed and continues to sustain creation, and had acted throughout history to enlighten mankind to the truth of God. It is for this reason that Justin can claim that any truth the Pagan philosophers had grasped came originally from the Logos.⁶⁷ Justin’s Platonic cosmology has been argued to lead to a subordinationism of the Son to the Father,⁶⁸ but Justin has been lauded for his focus on and “use of the soteriological significance of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.⁶⁹”

The anthropology found in Justin’s writings shows a traditional tripartite understanding of man; body, reason and soul,⁷⁰ and Justin explains that God created all things, including man, through his divine Logos who existed with God.⁷¹ All created beings, according to Justin, are “capable of vice and virtue,⁷²” and Justin blames the fall of man on the choice for vice amongst the angels commissioned to watch over mankind at the beginning of creation.⁷³ Justin explains that a consequence of their transgression was that mankind lost the full truth of their creator, and despite possessing a “seed of reason [which had been] implanted in every race of men⁷⁴” by

⁶⁴ Hall (2005) p.48

⁶⁵ Hall (2005) p.50

⁶⁶ Hall (2005) p.52

⁶⁷ Justin Martyr *First Apology* ch.59

⁶⁸ Vermes (2013) p.181

⁶⁹ Kharlamov (2006) p.68

⁷⁰ Behr (2001) pp.109-110

⁷¹ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.6

⁷² Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.7

⁷³ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.5

⁷⁴ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.8

the Logos, mankind now only had the potential to know God fully, and were being tricked by demons into worshipping false Gods. For Justin, the incarnation of the Logos then, was “for the sake of believing men, and for the destruction of demons.⁷⁵” Justin describes this hopeless situation of humanity as those people “found to be under a curse,” meaning corruption and death, and argues that the purpose of the Logos’ incarnation, “body, reason and soul,⁷⁶” was to break this curse, “that by dying and rising again, he might conquer death.⁷⁷” He states that “the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise Him up.” Justin emphasises the complete similarity of Jesus’ humanity with our own, and whilst not analysing the Word’s relationship with the body, there is still a hint that Jesus’ becoming a complete man “body, reason and soul,⁷⁸” was an important factor in his ability to break the curse and suffer death for humanity. Justin sees this death of Christ as sacrificial in nature, comparing it with the Passover sacrifice, stating that it is “the blood of Christ [that] will deliver from death those who have believed.”

Behr has argued that this conquering of death was not actually the central focus of Justin’s writings about the incarnation, and that “for Justin, Christ is primarily the teacher.⁷⁹” Justin does explain that Jesus, the incarnate Word, came to teach humanity that they no longer needed to offer “streams of blood and libations and incense⁸⁰” to God, but must now unite themselves fully to Jesus Christ who has revealed himself to be “the Son of the true God.⁸¹” One would argue, against Behr, that Justin recognises absolutely that Jesus’ teachings only make sense in the light of his sacrificial death and resurrection, and does give equal importance to this purpose later in his apologies.⁸²

It is clear Justin believes that humanity, because of a transgression, lost full knowledge of their creator; they were worshipping false Gods and remaining in a state of corruption. It is also evident that, as in the Old Covenant Justin sees a blood sacrifice

⁷⁵ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.6

⁷⁶ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.10

⁷⁷ Justin Martyr *First Apology* ch.63

⁷⁸ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.10

⁷⁹ Behr (2001) p.105

⁸⁰ Behr (2001) p.105

⁸¹ Justin Martyr *First Apology* ch.13

⁸² Justin Martyr *First Apology* no. 13

as the means by which humanity is able to be reunited with God. This blood sacrifice being given and sent by God, and being the incarnate Word of God himself, is seen as the final sacrifice that was signified by practices found within the Old Testament.⁸³

Although there is no analytical Christology within Justin's writings, that would allow us a deeper insight into how Justin believed Christ's death was able to ultimately conquer death, he does state that because of the incarnation and the cross, men have the potential to become a new creation. Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, is the first time we find the phrase *theos gignomai*, meaning to become God, being employed to describe the holy life and redemption of Christians.⁸⁴ It has been argued that Justin's redemption theory can be summed up as a moral rather than ontological "process of immortalization."⁸⁵ Justin says that to gain eternal life, "there is no other [way] than this - to become acquainted with this Christ, to be washed in the fountain spoken of by Isaiah for the remission of sins; and for the rest, to live sinless lives."⁸⁶ For Justin, the incarnate Logos' participation in our sufferings brought healing to all of humanity,⁸⁷ and humanity in order to receive this healing must now imitate and participate in his holy life. To initially become an acquaintance of Christ and begin one's holy life, Justin states the necessity of the sacraments. Baptism is seen as a vital first step⁸⁸ and is "depicted as an ablution for the remission of sins."⁸⁹ Eucharistic participation, which "is identified as the nourishment of the faithful by the flesh and blood of Christ,"⁹⁰ is also seen as an essential part of the Christian life.⁹¹ It is clear, that in his theory of redemption, Justin "remained all the time a churchman, with his feet firmly planted in the Church's living, liturgical and Scriptural tradition."⁹²

Overall, the atonement understanding of Justin Martyr is not clear cut in any one direction, and one could find evidence from his writings to support equally, a substitutionary form, a moral influence form, as well as a Christus Victor form of atonement. Irenaeus' famous recapitulation atonement theory later systematises

⁸³ Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* ch.111

⁸⁴ Kharlamov (2006) p.72

⁸⁵ Kharlamov (2006) p.69

⁸⁶ Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* ch.44

⁸⁷ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.13

⁸⁸ Justin Martyr *First Apology* ch.61

⁸⁹ Vermes (2013) p.181

⁹⁰ Vermes (2013) p.181

⁹¹ Justin Martyr *Second Apology* ch.66

⁹² Kelly (2004) p.170

some of Justin Martyr's thinking, and interestingly, Irenaeus actually attributed his recapitulation theory to Justin.⁹³ The works of Justin Martyr do show however, an innovation in the discussion of theology with regard to the person and work of Christ. He furthered the discussion of the Apostolic Fathers before him, on the popular idea of enlightenment,⁹⁴ and provided "theological speculation with philosophical foundation."⁹⁵ Justin certainly "opened a new chapter in Christian thought⁹⁶" and moved theologians one step closer to analysing Christ incarnate in more detail.⁹⁷

⁹³ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* IV.6.2

⁹⁴ Kelly (2004) p.169

⁹⁵ Vermes (2013) p.177

⁹⁶ Behr (2001) p.189

⁹⁷ Behr (2001) p.110

St. Irenaeus:

Irenaeus was writing at a time when heresy was threatening the unity of the Church. His greatest work “Adversus Haereses” was written particularly against Gnosticism, and throughout his writings, Irenaeus clearly “tried to identify and stabilise true Christianity.⁹⁸” He believed firmly in the rule of truth, which he argued was safeguarded by apostolic succession, and he held the rule to be an absolute necessity for the correct reading of Scripture.⁹⁹ Irenaeus was heavily influenced by the writings of St. Paul and St. John,¹⁰⁰ and his recapitulation understanding of atonement and redemption can be seen to stem from the writings of St Paul.¹⁰¹ As well as seeking to unify Christians in true teaching, Irenaeus sought to maintain the unity of God, he felt that “Logos-speculation, like the two Gods of Marcion and the junior Demiurge of the Gnostics, undermined the absolute unity of God.¹⁰²” Although Irenaeus did little more in depth analysis with regard to Christology than those who had gone before him, it has been said that he “crowned this restatement with a masterly vision of the oikonomia, the economy or order of the redemptive work of Christ.¹⁰³” In Irenaeus’ work one glimpses the beginnings of a more elaborate trinitarian view of redemption, and one of his most important insights is the recognition that one’s Christological understanding directly impacts all other aspects of theological speculation.¹⁰⁴

According to Irenaeus, creation and redemption are one single work of God who is immediately present to his creation.¹⁰⁵ Anatolios has argued that this immediacy is “the hermeneutical key to Irenaeus’ conception of redemption in Christ through his incarnation.¹⁰⁶” Rather than seeking to protect the transcendence of God by keeping the Godhead so removed from creation and focussing God’s acting in the world through the Logos, as Justin did, Irenaeus centres his theology upon the very convergence of divine immanence and transcendence;¹⁰⁷ “God is conceived of as

⁹⁸ Hall (2005) p.59

⁹⁹ Hall (2005) pp.61-63

¹⁰⁰ Kelly (2004) p.147

¹⁰¹ Behr (2001) p.123

¹⁰² Hall (2005) p.63

¹⁰³ Vermes (2013) p.195

¹⁰⁴ Vermes (2013) p.199

¹⁰⁵ cf: Scrivener (2017) p.11

¹⁰⁶ Anatolios (1998) p.83

¹⁰⁷ Anatolios (1998) p.22

‘towards creation,’ and creation is conceived as ‘towards God.’¹⁰⁸ Irenaeus frames God’s decision to make Himself knowable as a gift given to humanity in love.¹⁰⁹ His ability to be known in no way changes God, but allows humanity to partake in His glory.¹¹⁰

Irenaeus states that from the beginning, humanity was created with a natural receptivity to God, which was later destroyed by sin.¹¹¹ Holding an historical as well as a cosmic understanding of Adam’s disobedience, Irenaeus argues that the sentence of death for this disobedience was actually a remedial act by the Father, who was still working through his Son to ultimately bring humanity to Himself.¹¹² God’s purpose in sending His Son was in order that “what we had lost in Adam – namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God – that we might recover in Christ Jesus.¹¹³” The divine-human communion in the person of Jesus Christ is absolutely insisted upon by Irenaeus.¹¹⁴ Finch states that, “Irenaeus established the metaphysical possibility of human participation in an ever transcendent God on the Christological distinction between the uncreated, eternal Son and the created humanity to which He was united by the Holy Spirit through the flesh assumed at the incarnation.”¹¹⁵ Some scholars have accused Irenaeus of placing too much emphasis on the incarnation of Christ as the moment of recapitulation at the expense of Christ’s passion and death, or Parousia,¹¹⁶ but this seems an unfair accusation. Irenaeus is very clear that death was the consequence for sin, and that God’s plan all along was to send his Son for humanity to bring mankind once and for all unto himself. He is also equally forthright about the fact that humanity is redeemed because in Jesus “death was abolished,¹¹⁷” he “redeemed us with His blood,¹¹⁸” and that God’s glory will be revealed when he comes again “in the same flesh in which he suffered.¹¹⁹” It is evident that Irenaeus sees redemption as one long narrative and work of God, that began with creation and ends

¹⁰⁸ Anatolios (1998) p.20

¹⁰⁹ Anatolios (1998) p.20

¹¹⁰ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* IV.14.1

¹¹¹ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* V.1.3

¹¹² Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.20.1

¹¹³ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.18.1

¹¹⁴ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.18.7

¹¹⁵ Finch (2006) p.96

¹¹⁶ Finch (2006) p.101

¹¹⁷ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.16.1

¹¹⁸ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.16.9

¹¹⁹ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.16.8

in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ's coming again. Humanity is made once more at-one with God through the establishment of a relationship found within the Son, just as it was at creation.

When discussing humanity's appropriation of this redemption, Irenaeus explains that the new relationship between humanity and God is such that man now has the possibility of being a "partaker of God¹²⁰" and receives filial adoption.¹²¹ The redeemed person's life is to be one of participation in the divinely ordained plan, and assimilation into the likeness of Christ's glorified body which no longer fears death. Ysabel de Andia argues that what sets Irenaeus' work apart is his resolve that salvation necessitates humanity's participation in God,¹²² and Finch has summed up Irenaeus' understanding as a "Christocentric doctrine of divinisation." It is with remarkable skill that Irenaeus links humanity's redemption and participation in the divine life with his understanding of the one God acting in relation to himself within his very being. Humanity can participate in the divine life of the Father, because of the Incarnate Son's economic relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit.¹²³ Irenaeus discusses the Spirit now dwelling in people who believe in Christ, "working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ."¹²⁴ The one will of God is clearly emphasised here, active within creation, bringing about one plan of salvation. For Irenaeus, the activity of God continues to be seen most clearly in the Church's sacraments, particularly the Eucharist which announces "consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and Spirit."¹²⁵ This tangible participation gives the faithful, "the hope of resurrection to eternity."¹²⁶

Irenaeus clearly marks a turning point in Christian thought, whilst his main atonement theory, recapitulation, is Pauline in origin, his theology and cosmology marks a break from the Platonic understanding of the apologists before him. He succeeds in guarding divine transcendence without having to endorse the notion of a second God or mediator who was somehow less divine, and as such is able to argue

¹²⁰ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* IV.28.2

¹²¹ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.19.1

¹²² cf: Finch (2006) p.92

¹²³ cf: Finch (2006) p.96

¹²⁴ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* III.17.1

¹²⁵ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* IV.18.5

¹²⁶ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* IV.18.5

concretely for the divine and human natures within the person of Jesus Christ. Around this Christology he was then able to show a complete narrative of salvation history beginning with creation, continuing in the incarnate Word and concluding at the end of time. He also contributed to the Christian understanding of the Church, as continually led by Christ and safeguarded in truth by the Holy Spirit.¹²⁷ His emphasis of a good God who is loving and is glorified in making himself known had a lasting impact on later theologians, and his trinitarian understanding of redemption would aid those Fathers in later centuries defending the unity of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

¹²⁷ Origen *Contra Celsum* IV.15

Origen:

Despite some of his teachings being anathematised by the Church in later centuries, Origen was, nevertheless, one of the greatest theologians of early Christianity. He made a monumental contribution to theological discussion, even coining new Greek words to aid him in his explanation of the relationships between the persons of the trinity, for example, *ousia*, and *physis*.¹²⁸ These terms would be heavily debated and utilised over the next few centuries as the Church became more concerned with dogmatic formulae. Origen was also “a pioneer in every aspect of biblical scholarship,¹²⁹” and it has been argued that “there are few teachers in the history of the Church to whom more is owed.¹³⁰” His atonement and redemption discussion, though coloured with a rather unique cosmology, and though seemingly complex and contradictory, firmly laid the ground work for later theologians to continue Christological and soteriological discussions.

Origen, like Irenaeus, saw redemption as one long narrative, and recognised the harmony between the OT and the NT. However, whilst he believed that Christ’s death was crucial for the removal of sin from humanity, he shifted his emphasis away from the Irenaean, physical understanding of atonement, towards the revelatory aspect of the Word’s incarnation.¹³¹ The Word’s becoming flesh was less to do with assuming sinful flesh for Origen, as it was a way that the Logos directly illuminated humanity with knowledge of God, as he had done in the past indirectly through Moses and the prophets.¹³² Origen is following the train of thought of his teacher Clement, whose twofold vision of the work of Christ saw the divinity of Jesus as the forgiver of sins, whilst the humanity of Jesus acted as a teacher, that man “mayest learn from man how man may become God;¹³³” here the emphasis is likewise on the redemptive aspect of the knowledge of God rather than on the death of Christ. Kelly believes that “a mysticism close to this permeates Origen’s thought.¹³⁴” This emphasis on the

¹²⁸ D’Ambrosio (2015) p.93

¹²⁹ D’Ambrosio (2015) p.95

¹³⁰ D’Ambrosio (2015) p.101

¹³¹ Kelly (2004) p.188

¹³² Origen *De Principiis* I Preface 1

¹³³ Clement of Alexandria *Exhortation to the Heathen* ch.1

¹³⁴ Kelly (2004) p.184

revelatory aspect of Christ's work, is due to Origen's cosmology and his understanding of what happened at the fall.

Origen understood the fall of man as a cosmic myth. He believed that intelligent essences, or souls, were created by God in the beginning, and that they fell away from God through disobedience whilst in the transcendental plane.¹³⁵ As a result, Origen says that each soul was united with a body and came to inhabit the created earth.¹³⁶ It is unsurprising then that we find him in favour of the Church's practice of baptising infants to remove the original stain of sin.¹³⁷ The children's "wickedness is the legacy of their own misguided choices in the transcendental world and has nothing to do with the disobedience of any one first man."¹³⁸ It has been argued that Origen saw "theosis in the manner of the soul's return to its unfallen condition"¹³⁹ and that he "elevated the soteriological theory of theosis to new heights."¹⁴⁰ It is then, the souls of humanity, according to Origen, that need purifying; they need to be given the knowledge of their creator again, so that they can contemplate God, as was their intended purpose.

The coming of the Logos as man is still crucial for Origen, as he believes that it is by this means that humanity is able to partake in the divine life. Christ's soul, one of those made at the beginning, he insists was fully united to the Logos because of its loving and virtuous nature.¹⁴¹ This soul became "intermediate between God and the flesh"¹⁴² of the God-man. Whilst recognising both the divinity and humanity of Christ, Origen insists that the Word incarnate is a composite being, "with respect to His mortal body, and the human soul which it contained, we assert that not by their communion merely with Him, but by their unity and intermixture, they received the highest powers, and after participating in His divinity, were changed into God."¹⁴³ Origen's understanding of atonement is that, the Word by becoming incarnate and dying, has made a relationship with God possible once more, and it is now by

¹³⁵ Origen *De Principiis* II.9.6

¹³⁶ cf: Jerome *Letter 124* 2-3

¹³⁷ cf: D'Ambrosio (2015) p.94

¹³⁸ Kelly (2004) p.181

¹³⁹ McGuckin (2007) p.100

¹⁴⁰ McGuckin (2007) p.97

¹⁴¹ Origen *De Principiis* II.6.4

¹⁴² Origen *De Principiis* II.6.3

¹⁴³ Origen *Contra Celsum* III.41

participation and union with divinity that the human nature may become divine. How this death accomplishes a relationship with God is not fully explained by Origen and some of his ideas seem irreconcilable. He speaks of a ransom paid to the devil, of Christ's death as vicarious substitution, and also of it taking the form of a propitiatory sacrifice to God.¹⁴⁴ Origen does make a breakthrough, is that whilst explaining this participation theory, he recognises that the Word's participation in the Father and the Holy Spirit is a different kind of participation than humanity has with God. The trinitarian relationship of the Godhead he says consists of three hypostases,¹⁴⁵ and he insists that they are different from one another each having their own subsistence, but rejects the term *homoousios* to define their relationship.¹⁴⁶ Whereas, humanity in becoming gods, only do so through the ministry of the Son who "drew from God in generous measure that they should be made gods, and He communicated it to them according to His own bounty. The true God, then, is The God, and those who are formed after Him are gods, images, as it were, of Him the prototype. But the archetypal image, again, of all these images is the Word of God, who was in the beginning, and who by being with God is at all times God, not possessing that of Himself, but by His being with the Father, and not continuing to be God."¹⁴⁷ Here we start to see the determination of Origen to defend the transcendence of the Father and it is clear that Origen did hold a view that the Son and the Spirit were somehow less divine than the Father.¹⁴⁸ Despite this, Origen clearly has added an understanding about what it means for humanity to gain a share in the divinity of the Son, because of his becoming incarnate and his works in the flesh. The new Greek words he coined as well as his participatory understanding of the relationships within the trinity and between God and man, were an innovation, and allowed the discussion of Christology and soteriology to deepen in the succeeding centuries.

Overall, Origen was "one of the certifiable geniuses of Church history."¹⁴⁹ This short assessment of his atonement understanding shows a development in the third century with regard to the terminology employed to discuss the Godhead, as well as to

¹⁴⁴ Kelly (2004) p.186

¹⁴⁵ Origen *Commentary on John* II.6

¹⁴⁶ Behr (2001) p.200

¹⁴⁷ Origen *Commentary on John* II.2

¹⁴⁸ Hall (2005) p.106

¹⁴⁹ D'Ambrosio (2015) p.91

describe the process of redemption. Although, the cross seems to have been given less emphasis by Origen, it is clear he still holds it as a necessary event to make redemption possible, it just forms only one part of his grand schema rather than taking so central a role as it had done for those before him. Origen discusses the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice, an offering to the Father like those before him,¹⁵⁰ but these factors almost get lost in his theology and cosmology because Origen's "sacrificial views, if taken in their literal sense, cannot logically be harmonised with the rest of his system."¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Kelly (2004) p.187

¹⁵¹ Kelly (2004) p.187

Atonement discussion before Athanasius:

Following this assessment of some of the key texts and authors who discussed atonement prior to the fourth century, it can be seen that there are a variety of ideas and theories used which seek to explicate who Jesus was and what he had done for humanity. The most recurrent themes being those of; a blood sacrifice, a fulfilment of the Old Covenant, and a new Adam theory of atonement. As the centuries progressed, and the Gospel message was spread into the Pagan world, explanations of the person and work of Christ were reframed by the apologists to help the audience to whom they were speaking understand. The sacrificial blood ideas were maintained, but they were now placed within the context of a Logos theology. This theology, that was not yet systematic enough to protect itself from the accusation of espousing multiple Gods, or subordinationism with the persons of God, was, nevertheless, a key starting point for later trinitarian discussion. An important development was made during the era of the apologists though, with the idea of humanity becoming godlike in their new life with Christ. This built on the call to holiness found in the Gospels,¹⁵² and on the Pauline concept that man was now a new creation.¹⁵³ In the third century, the challenge of heresies forced a deeper analysis into the person and work of Jesus Christ. Irenaeus furthered the apologists' idea about redemption by participation in his recapitulation discussions, and Origen, in the same context, coined new terms with which to discuss this participatory understanding, many of which would become credal in the following century. The third century Christological distinction between the Word participating eternally in God and the actions of the Word incarnate participating within creation, made evident the fact that one's Christology significantly impacted one's understanding of theology, cosmology and importantly soteriology.

It is apparent that before Athanasius, atonement was continually seen as a divine work, in which the Word of God came to save humanity from death. By the spilling of his blood as man, Jesus, the Word incarnate, fulfilled the consequence of death that humanity had brought upon itself. Christological discussions had commenced, to try and explain this further, but they were not in any way systematic, and as a result no really detailed understanding of atonement was formulated. The

¹⁵² cf: Matthew 5:48

¹⁵³ cf: 1 Corinthians 5:17

idea of some form of sacrificial death taking place upon the cross is the most consistent thread which runs through the atonement discussion at this time. One would argue, that the sacrifice discussions overall, present an expiatory, rather than a propitiatory form, and the evidence for this is the constant linking of Christ's sacrifice with Passover and the Day of Atonement Jewish feasts. Any ransom or payment understandings appear only sporadically and are often employed to make a specific point rather than recurring as a common theme. Origen's supposed support of ransom theory, is a product of his cosmological understanding, and as a result weakens his contribution to this discussion. By the end of the third century, it had been established that for atonement to have taken place at all, it was an absolute requirement for Christ to be somehow both human and divine, and also that God's transcendence needed to be guarded during discussions of his activity within creation.

Atonement and Redemption in St. Athanasius' *De Incarnatione Verbum Dei*:

De Incarnatione Verbi Dei is the second part of a double treatise written by Athanasius at the start of the fourth century. The exact date of the work is debated; some argue it was written as early as 318AD,¹⁵⁴ and others place its composition as late as the middle of the fourth century.¹⁵⁵ Kannengeisser has argued for its compilation during Athanasius' first exile, but this has been mostly dismissed by scholars.¹⁵⁶ Ultimately, one can only suggest a date based on the text and its apparent omissions. Anatolios makes a very compelling argument to date this work between 328-335AD, after Athanasius' election as Bishop, but before his first exile, and after the condemnation of Arius.¹⁵⁷ The ease with which Athanasius uses the scriptures and his clear exhaustive knowledge of them would certainly suggest that it is a product of many years of study with Bishop Alexander, and so could not have been compiled much earlier, but the lack of any mention of the great Council of Nicaea could indicate an earlier date within the years 320-325AD. The debate is worth highlighting for the context of this thesis, and given the in-depth study Anatolios has undertaken in this area, one will assume his dating.

The main focus of the double treatise is the relationship that exists between creation and its creator. Important themes, for example, Christology, anthropology and soteriology, are also discussed, but they are very much set within the context of Athanasius' cosmological understanding. It is logical then that Athanasius devoted the entire first half of the treatise, entitled "Contra Gentes," to an explanation of creation and the fall of man. Athanasius appears wholly convinced that only with true cosmological understanding can one fully appreciate the necessity and importance of the incarnation; Origen before him had employed a similar structure in his work, *De Principiis*.¹⁵⁸ Athanasius perhaps also had in mind the desire to combat the abiding Gnostic dualism that had not been fully routed despite Irenaeus' efforts.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Fitzgerald (2003) p.2

¹⁵⁵ Noordberg (1961)

¹⁵⁶ Anatolios (1998) p.26

¹⁵⁷ Anatolios (1998) p.29

¹⁵⁸ Origen *De Principiis*

¹⁵⁹ Van Winden (1975) p.294

Importantly, Athanasius did not claim that his cosmology was adding anything novel to the Scriptural message, he simply wished to impart the authoritative interpretation of Scripture which the Church had guarded since the apostolic era.¹⁶⁰

DIVD will be analysed in the following section, which will demonstrate that Athanasius' atonement understanding was wholly in keeping with the ideas that existed before his time. It will become clear that his great mind systematised the ideas of those who came before him into one theory, and the only places where his understanding appears to err are in dealing with issues that had not yet come to the fore in the Church's theological discussion, particularly with regard to analytical Christology. It will be argued that some reproachful accusations of Athanasius' atonement theory in DIVD are unjustified, and either come from taking his phrases out of context, or reading back into Athanasius' work with too much theological hindsight. In order to accurately analyse Athanasius' atonement theory, an appreciation of Athanasius' cosmological and anthropological understanding must come first.

Athanasius' Cosmological understanding:

At the start of the fourth century Alexandrian scholars were considering how the Logos related to the created world,¹⁶¹ and within DIVD Athanasius enters the discussion and seeks to show how the Logos can be essentially divine and transcendent, whilst at the same time being an active participant within creation. Athanasius had already established in CG that creation was made by one God not many, and that the Word of this one God is through whom all was made.¹⁶² In explaining the divinity of the Word without resorting to the confession of two Gods, Athanasius explains that the Word is the "true son, He is the Father's Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation, nor as if these qualities were imparted to Him from without, as they are to those who partake of Him and are made wise by Him, and receive power and reason in Him; but He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father, very Light, very Truth, very Righteousness, very Virtue, and in truth His express Image, and Brightness, and Resemblance. And to

¹⁶⁰ Ernest (2004) ch.6

¹⁶¹ Meyer (1998) p.148

¹⁶² Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 40-42

sum all up, He is the wholly perfect Fruit of the Father, and is alone the Son, and unchanging Image of the Father.¹⁶³” The distinction between the Word being God by his very nature and not by participation, immediately makes creation ontologically different from God. Gavrilyuk describes this as Athanasius’ “central conceptual breakthrough...[he] saw with extraordinary clarity and argued tirelessly that the Son, although he was generated, belonged to the sphere of the uncreated Godhead.¹⁶⁴” Wilgenburg also has noted that within Athanasius’ work we see the beginnings of an early trinitarian doctrine of creation.¹⁶⁵ As we shall see Athanasius had a trinitarian understanding of redemption too, and in this way is similar to Irenaeus, in viewing salvation as one ongoing work of God.¹⁶⁶ After creation was completed, Athanasius states that the Word of God did not just “leave it to be tossed in a tempest... but because he is good He guides and settles the whole of creation by His own Word, who is Himself God.¹⁶⁷” This emphasises the fact that while God’s power sustains that which is created, the Word remains nevertheless, of the same essence as the Father and ontologically divided from it. Gwynn states that this complete ontological division is absolutely fundamental to Athanasius’ theology and that his deification theory is reliant upon it.¹⁶⁸ The convergence of God’s immanence and transcendence Athanasius finds in the goodness of God’s nature and his divine condescension,¹⁶⁹ and this becomes crucial to his incarnational arguments later in the work. Athanasius’ cosmology as a whole, sets the scene for his anthropology by highlighting all of creation’s radical dependence upon God,¹⁷⁰ and in DIVD he roots his atonement understanding within this doctrine of creation.¹⁷¹ Athanasius even begins DIVD with a rebuttal of three alternative accounts of creation, to remind his readers ultimately, that the world was made and is sustained by God’s Word, before proceeding to discuss the main topic of this work, the incarnation.¹⁷²

¹⁶³ Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 46

¹⁶⁴ Gavrilyuk (2013) p.32

¹⁶⁵ Wilgenburg (2010) p.330

¹⁶⁶ Scrivener (2017) p.1

¹⁶⁷ Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 41

¹⁶⁸ Gwynn (2012) p.67

¹⁶⁹ Anatolios (1998) p.41

¹⁷⁰ Anatolios (1998) p.54

¹⁷¹ Ortlund (2012)

¹⁷² Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 1-2

Athanasius' Anthropological understanding:

Having established that all of creation was radically dependent on God, Athanasius says that humanity was set apart from the rest of creation and given “an added grace, not simply creating men like all irrational animals on the earth, but making them in his own image and giving them also a share in the power of his own Word.”¹⁷³ This, Athanasius states, was a conditional grace and was not something they had by their own nature,¹⁷⁴ which was given to man because God, “having pity on the human race... did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of himself.¹⁷⁵” When using the Word image here, Athanasius is careful to write that man is made in the Word’s image, who as he has explained in CG, is the image of the Father,¹⁷⁶ similar to Origen’s thoughts,¹⁷⁷ but Anatolios showed how Athanasius’ understanding here is actually a departure from that of Irenaeus and Origen, because Athanasius makes no distinction between the terms image and likeness as they did.¹⁷⁸ He argues, this is because of Athanasius’ determination to find similarities between man at the point of creation and man having been redeemed by the incarnate Word.¹⁷⁹ Meijering agrees with Anatolios and writes that for Athanasius, “Adam was created perfect right from the beginning,¹⁸⁰” which he states was different from Irenaeus’ idea that, “man was the only living creature not to have been created perfect.¹⁸¹” Due to his contrasting mankind’s essential nature with mankind’s nature imbued with divine grace, Kelly has summarised Athanasius’ understanding of man as “a blend of Platonizing metaphysics and the Genesis story.¹⁸²” In summary, according to Athanasius, mankind was clearly made to know God, and is significantly different from the rest of creation. Humanity was given free will to choose whether to “remain in incorruptibility,¹⁸³” or to turn

¹⁷³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 3

¹⁷⁴ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 3

¹⁷⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 11

¹⁷⁶ Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 2

¹⁷⁷ Origen *Commentary on John* II.3

¹⁷⁸ Anatolios (1998) p.57

¹⁷⁹ Anatolios (1998) p.57

¹⁸⁰ Meijering (2010) p.178

¹⁸¹ Meijering (2010) p.178

¹⁸² Kelly (2004) p. 346

¹⁸³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 4

“from the understanding of God, [and receive]... the condemnation of death.¹⁸⁴”

Athanasius’ explanation of the fall needs to be analysed with this in mind.

Athanasius’ explanation of the fall:

As we have seen above, Athanasius believed Adam was created perfect, Brakke says, “according to the young Athanasius, Adam in his ideal state was a contemplative ascetic.¹⁸⁵” Unlike the rest of creation though, humanity is “not only protected and maintained by the Word, but also as charged with the task of consciously assenting and clinging to this protection and maintenance.¹⁸⁶” By contemplating God, Athanasius says that man “would have blunted his natural corruption and would have remained incorruptible.¹⁸⁷” The idea of humanity preserving their relationship with God via their rational mind was a notion previously found in Origen’s works, however, for Origen, this communion took place before human souls were contained within bodies,¹⁸⁸ whereas for Athanasius the body plays a central role before the fall. In order for Adam’s soul to remain pure and contemplate the divine, Athanasius says that the body’s desires had to be controlled.¹⁸⁹ This is because the soul is described as mobile within the body, and “it can just as well incline to the good as turn away from the good.¹⁹⁰” At the fall, Athanasius says that mankind “were deprived of the understanding of God... [and] then they were also deprived of eternal existence.¹⁹¹” Mankind is described as turning away from the good and “forgetting that it was made in the image of the good God, the soul no longer perceived through its own power God the Word, in whose form it had been created, but turning outside itself it regarded and pictured non-existent things.¹⁹²” Athanasius means here that man became focussed on things created from nothing, that were not eternally existent, but were corruptible. Humanity, being created from nothing was also by nature corruptible, and thus Athanasius says, by separating himself from the

¹⁸⁴ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 4

¹⁸⁵ Brakke (1995) p.146

¹⁸⁶ Anatolios (1998) p.59

¹⁸⁷ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 4

¹⁸⁸ Jerome *Letter 124* 2-3

¹⁸⁹ Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 2

¹⁹⁰ Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 4

¹⁹¹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 4

¹⁹² Athanasius *Contra Gentes* 8

given grace and the Logos, they “would suffer the natural corruption consequent on death.¹⁹³” Arsenal has accurately stated that “this power is not legislative or juridical in nature, and is better thought of as a natural consequence of separation from the Logos.¹⁹⁴” Fitzgerald agrees that for Athanasius, “death was not external to human nature but was intrinsic to it¹⁹⁵” Athanasius, is highlighting that redemption therefore, could not be attained by a divine fiat.

How novel was Athanasius’ understanding?

Athanasius, in his cosmology, anthropology and hamartiology, has kept some of the ideas of those before him, and systematised them within the theme of created versus creator, and corruption versus incorruption. Athanasius has maintained Justin Martyr’s tripartite understanding of man, as body, reason and soul, and has also likewise stated that after the fall, man was left in a state of corruption and death. To some extent, he has also maintained the idea that a form of knowledge was lost at the fall as humanity forgot to contemplate God, and thus forgot in whose image they were made. With regard to Irenaeus’ work, Athanasius has utilised the idea that in the beginning mankind had a gift from God that gave him receptivity to know God. He has also taken further Irenaeus’ Christological discussion of the created incarnate Son and the uncreated Word, and employed this to explain God’s action in the world and the created world’s natural proclivity towards corruption, without the Logos’ intervention. Finally, Athanasius moved away from Origen’s idea of the body being a punishment for sin, but has, somewhat, kept the notion of the soul being the means by which a person can fully contemplate God, linking the lack of apprehension of God to the defilement of mankind’s soul.¹⁹⁶ By centring his theology around the ontological distinction between the Creator and the created, he has also replaced Origen’s hierarchy of spiritual and material.¹⁹⁷ Clearly, that Athanasius has systematised the ideas of those theologians in the centuries before him, and has added depth to their explanations, framing them around the difference between the created world and the Creator. His

¹⁹³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 3

¹⁹⁴ Arsenal (2018) p.3

¹⁹⁵ Fitzgerald (2003) p.15

¹⁹⁶ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 11

¹⁹⁷ Brakke (1995) p.145

cosmological and anthropological views were not unconventional or without precedence, but were a direct result of his desire to show that God was by nature good, and that ever since the very beginning, God had condescended to make himself known to humanity, laying the groundwork for his defence of the full divinity of the person Jesus Christ in DIVD.

The solution in the incarnation:

Athanasius understood that the consequence of mankind's separation from the Logos was a return to the nothingness from which it was created, a sort of de-creation. He states that it was monstrous that those which had once shared in the nature of the divine Word should perish and turn back to corruption.¹⁹⁸ A divine action was needed as only God can create, but God could not go against his own declaration that man in this situation would die. Athanasius describes this as a divine dilemma.¹⁹⁹ The solution could only be found he argues, in the incarnation of the Word who, "had pity on our race, and was merciful to our infirmity... he took to himself a body, and that not foreign to our own... that as all die in him, the law concerning corruption might be abolished."²⁰⁰ Athanasius' emphasis here is that the Word became flesh, *for mankind*, and that creation was to be renewed by the same agent, the Word, who made it in the beginning. God's ongoing mercy towards humanity is evident, just as at the beginning they received a special grace, now they are to be recreated in the image of the Word by God's action. Wilgenburg states that "Athanasius justly believed that the essence of Christianity is founded on God's condescension, which is the only cause of our divinization."²⁰¹ This notion of creation and recreation clearly mirrors Irenaeus' recapitulation understanding of one salvific act of God. It also provides the foundation for Athanasius' atonement understanding, that man had somehow to die for the law of death of be fulfilled, and that knowledge of God needed to be given again to humanity. Who else could do both of these works but the Word as man, truly incarnate?

¹⁹⁸ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 6

¹⁹⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 13

²⁰⁰ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 8

²⁰¹ Wilgenburg (2010) p.317

Nowhere in this text does Athanasius attempt an in-depth analysis of the God-man. His entire focus is on showing that it was truly the divine Word, through whom all had been created, that had really become incarnate as man. Scrivener has argued that for theologians like Irenaeus and Athanasius, “Christ and his work was not a metaphysical conundrum to be solved... instead the Word-became-flesh was the rock upon which they built.²⁰²” Athanasius was much more determined to show that the divine Word of God could become incarnate without his divine nature being compromised. Athanasius states that, from the very beginning, the Word had never been far from the created universe, which he describes as a body. He had always been sustaining it and revealing himself through it, therefore, it is not any less fitting for him to appear in a human body, and to teach and work through that.²⁰³ Athanasius also says that at the incarnation the divine Word did not become “enclosed” by the body, and so did not cease directing the universe.²⁰⁴ The Word’s divine nature consequently remains unchanged. He continues his work of sustaining the universe, but now has entered into the universe in a new way, as man to re-reveal the Father to humanity.

Athanasius’ Christological understanding:

Some of the phrases Athanasius employs to describe the Word’s becoming man, have caused debate amongst scholars. When describing the Word becoming flesh, Athanasius uses phrases such as, “took to himself a human body,²⁰⁵” “dwelt in a body²⁰⁶” and “submitted to being revealed through a body.²⁰⁷” This has led to the accusation by some, that he conformed to a Logos-Sarx Christology.²⁰⁸ Kung has argued that according to Athanasius, “the sarx is merely the organon, the tool of the Logos.²⁰⁹” Grillmeier agrees that “the Logos-Sarx framework is built into the Athanasian Christology,²¹⁰” and Hanson has even used a spacesuit analogy to describe

²⁰² Scrivener (2017) p. 2

²⁰³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 41

²⁰⁴ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 17

²⁰⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 8

²⁰⁶ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 9

²⁰⁷ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 16

²⁰⁸ cf: Grillmeier (1975), Kelly (2004), Kung (1987)

²⁰⁹ Kung (1987) p.517

²¹⁰ Grillmeier (1975) p.325

Athanasius' Christological understanding.²¹¹ Whilst it is true that Athanasius, like theologians before him, began his discussions of the person of Christ with the idea of indwelling,²¹² it is nevertheless evident from the entire work of DIVD, that "for Athanasius the incarnational 'becoming' is defined by its terminal incarnational 'is.'²¹³" Anatolios explains that the reason Athanasius focuses so much attention on the flesh of the Word is in order to emphasise "the extreme condescension of the Word's coming to us,²¹⁴" in fallen corruptible flesh like ours. The closest created thing to a human is their own body, and Athanasius wants to show that the Word had truly condescended and become that which is closest to humanity in order to reveal himself.

Those scholars who claim a Logos-Sarx Christology in Athanasius' work, frequently point to Athanasius' use of the word organon, meaning instrument,²¹⁵ when referring to Christ's body, as evidence that Athanasius "simply allowed no room for a human mind" in Jesus Christ.²¹⁶ It is true that nowhere in DIVD does Athanasius speak of a human soul within the God-man, but nor does he deny that Jesus had one. His silence on this matter in DIVD did open the door for those like Apollinarius after him to exaggerate the idea,²¹⁷ but given Athanasius' lack of denial of something that had always been attributed to Christ by major figures before him,²¹⁸ one would argue, that to be denying a soul in Christ would have been such a change in theology that Athanasius *would* have discussed it as part of his argument. Also, there are other important works later in the century where Athanasius specifically mentions the soul of Christ.²¹⁹ Meyer has argued that Athanasius' discussion of the two wills in Christ is enough evidence to suggest that Athanasius presumed a human soul in Jesus.²²⁰ It is much more likely that the reason Athanasius avoided mention of Christ's soul, was because he believed it would be viewed as the subject of the Word's human experiences, and though this would protect the divinity of the God-man, he believed

²¹¹ Hanson (1988) p. 448

²¹² Grillmeier (1975) p.327

²¹³ Weinandy (2018) p.87

²¹⁴ Anatolios (1998) p. 73

²¹⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 17

²¹⁶ Kelly (2004) p.287

²¹⁷ Kelly (2004) pp.28-289

²¹⁸ Meyer (1998) pp.154-159

²¹⁹ cf: Athanasius *Letter 59* and Athanasius *Tomus ad Antiochenos*

²²⁰ Meyer (1998) p.154

the reality of the incarnation would be eliminated.²²¹ Athanasius says that all of the experiences of the incarnate Word, can be said to have happened to the Word, “because the body which ate and was born and suffered was no one else’s but the Lord’s.²²²” He uses the predication of attributes to describe the actions of the Word incarnate, but whether divine or human actions, the all-encompassing message is that all of these are predicated of one grammatical subject, the Word truly incarnate.²²³

One would disagree very strongly with Harnack’s assessment that Athanasius is “the very man in whose Christology almost all the traces of the Jesus of history have disappeared.²²⁴” Giving too much focus to the humanity of Jesus at the expense of the divine, or indeed vice versa, is exactly what Athanasius is trying to avoid. Athanasius finds a unity in distinction and believes that just as God and the world can be united by participation, so too can the two natures within Christ Jesus. Indeed, “the hermeneutical key to understanding Athanasius’ Christology is the paradoxical relationship between God and the world whereby the total otherness between the two natures is ‘bridged over’ by the initiative of divine grace.²²⁵” What is most important to Athanasius in DIVD is not an analytical Christology. These discussions would come later in the fourth and continue into the fifth century, but a complete affirmation that Jesus Christ, was truly the divine Word and truly man and because of this he was able to be the cause of mankind’s redemption.

Athanasius’ Atonement understanding:

As we have seen, according to Athanasius, mankind had a two-fold problem preventing it from participating in the life of God; it was in a situation of corruption and death and it had lost the knowledge of its maker. Athanasius states that the need to stop mankind’s death was “the primary cause of the incarnation,²²⁶” the second cause being that men “might be again renewed in the image.²²⁷” Because Athanasius

²²¹ Weinandy (2018) p.92

²²² Athanasius *De Incarnatione* no.18

²²³ Anatolios (1998) p.80

²²⁴ Harnack *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte vol 2* p.223 quoted in Meijering (2010a) p.285

²²⁵ Anatolios (1998) p.83

²²⁶ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 10

²²⁷ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 13

states the two different causes of the coming of the Word so distinctly, some scholars have interpreted Athanasian atonement as Christ providing “objective solutions to objective problems,²²⁸” meaning that they assess separately how Christ dealt with corruption, and then how he revived mankind,²²⁹ rather than seeing the Word’s incarnate life, death and resurrection as one ongoing work of God, as Athanasius did. This has caused many debates amongst theologians who disparately claim that Athanasian atonement theory either focusses too much attention on the birth of Jesus, on the death of Jesus, or upon his resurrection. By separating the incarnational event into parts, they misunderstand the message of the treatise as a whole, and disregard the position of the author. Athanasius, as we have seen, is writing about a loving God who from the very beginning, chose to condescend to mankind’s level and give them grace in order that they might know him eternally, even though it was not within their nature to do so, and they had done nothing to warrant such a gift. The condescension of the Word is the ultimate act of God for mankind, and Athanasius believes that what makes humanity at one again with the Father is the entirety of this incarnation event. Athanasius’ atonement theory is grounded in the joyful and primary message that God has come *for* mankind. It is only when one forgets this overarching message of the one action of the loving God, and separates Christ’s individual actions, that problems appear to arise in Athanasius’ soteriology.

The Incarnation:

There have been many scholars who have criticised Athanasius for holding to a physical theory of atonement in DIVD.²³⁰ The physical theory argues that at the point of the incarnation, the union of human and divine natures somehow automatically sanctified all of humanity and restored the image they had lost of their creator. Beeley emphatically states that Athanasius presents salvation “at the point of the incarnation rather than in the passion and resurrection,²³¹” and Hanson agrees with this assessment of Athanasius’ soteriology.²³² To read Athanasius thus, is to do a total

²²⁸ Arsenal (2018) p.11

²²⁹ For example, Fitzgerald (2003)

²³⁰ cf: Gregg and Groh (1981)

²³¹ Beeley (2012) p.137

²³² Hanson (1988) p.450

injustice to his work. In DIVD, Athanasius emphasises the problem of corruption facing humanity before moving on to discuss the death of Christ in detail. Athanasius states that, corruption could not be got rid from mankind except through death,²³³ and that the Logos by, “surrendering it [his body] to death... rid them [mankind] of death.”²³⁴ It is clear that Athanasius, believed that the death of all had to be fulfilled if there was any chance of atonement with God,²³⁵ and that the problem of corruption was not overcome for mankind until after the death of the God-man on the cross. Kariatlis is then justified in saying that those who propose a physical atonement understanding in DIVD, have not read the treatise carefully enough.²³⁶ It is Kariatlis' view that “the Athanasian vision of salvation extends to the entirety of Christ's life and ministry where the various moments of Christ's life need to be seen in terms of one unified narrative.”²³⁷ When Athanasius uses the word “incarnation” in his text, he is actually meaning the entirety of Christ's life and actions, not simply the point at which he was born.²³⁸ A purely physical theory then does not adequately summarise the atonement understanding of DIVD.

The Life of Christ:

The Word of God, according to Athanasius, came not only to deal with corruption, but also to renew mankind “in the image.”²³⁹ For this reason, the Word became man, a physical object, “in order that those who supposed that God was in corporeal things might understand the truth from the works which the Lord did through the actions of his body.”²⁴⁰ These works Athanasius argues were so unique that they could point to no other explanation, than the one working them was indeed the Son of God.²⁴¹ The works to which Athanasius is referring here are the actions performed during Christ's entire life, not just the passion, death and resurrection, and he reiterates throughout this treatise that salvation is brought about via the whole

²³³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 8 and 20

²³⁴ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 8

²³⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 8

²³⁶ Kariatlis (2013) p.27

²³⁷ Kariatlis (2013) p.27

²³⁸ Kariatlis (2013) p.27

²³⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 13

²⁴⁰ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 15

²⁴¹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 15

economy of Christ's earthly life.²⁴² Athanasius believed that the Word's humanity was progressively deified during his life as man, whilst his divinity was manifested to mankind.²⁴³ It has been argued that this focus on the humanity of Christ, "constitutes the positive principle governing his total conception of atonement."²⁴⁴ Christ showed mankind a human life, that was faithful and obedient to God's will, despite suffering in the flesh all that mankind suffers. Athanasius speaks of the suffering of the incarnate Word during his life in reference to his suffering through human passions such as hunger and thirst, not just his suffering on the cross.²⁴⁵ Athanasius quotes Hebrews directly to emphasise that the author of humanity's salvation was made perfect through suffering.²⁴⁶ This progressive deification of the human nature of the God-man gives humanity an example to follow once he has fulfilled the consequence of death, and truly shown once and for all that he is the divine Word, by rising from the dead. In this way the Word's entire earthly ministry was "to heal and teach those who were suffering"²⁴⁷ and thus show them the way to the Father. The incarnate life of the Word then, plays a considerable part in Athanasius' atonement narrative, "everything that Jesus is and does has soteriological ramifications"²⁴⁸ The death of Christ, as we shall see next, made eternal life with God a possibility, and brought about the redeemed fully deified and glorious man. However, without the manifestation of Christ's divinity throughout his life, his teaching and progressive deification of his human nature, mankind could not have hoped to appropriate the salvation that was made available through his death and resurrection.

The Death of Christ:

According to Athanasius, the Word, "put on a body, that coming across death in the body he might efface it."²⁴⁹ Death, he said, was so internal to the body, that it was "combined with the body and dominated it as though joined to it, it was necessary for

²⁴² Kariatlis (2013) p.31

²⁴³ Weinandy (2018) p.97

²⁴⁴ Dragas (2005) p.79

²⁴⁵ Finch (2006a) p.119

²⁴⁶ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 10

²⁴⁷ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 43

²⁴⁸ Morgan (2016) p.106

²⁴⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 44

life also to be combined with the body.²⁵⁰ How Athanasius believed Christ's death on the cross played a part in the atoning work of the incarnation has been explained with the use of a variety of different atonement theories.

Substitutionary Atonement:

Athanasius says that all of humanity was under a curse and that the Word as man had come "to bear the curse which had fallen upon us."²⁵¹ This sounds like Athanasius is suggesting some form of substitutionary atonement. However, Athanasius means much more than just one body was substituted and died for another. What he is stating is that in Jesus' death, the death of all actually occurred, and consequently, the law of death hanging over all was fulfilled.²⁵² Dragas clearly argues this, when shortly after referring to "this substitutionary act,"²⁵³ he clarifies, that this act for Athanasius is more than a simple substitution, and "is not to be traced to an abstract principle of forensic sacrificial transaction but to the headship of the divine Logos in creation whereby he is related to all human beings and as such can act on their behalf as their true representative."²⁵⁴ An important caveat! Many scholars, in trying to fully explain Athanasius' atonement understanding, have debated which terminology appropriately describes his substitutionary meaning. There are those who believe that the term 'vicarious,' to describe the action of the Word in Athanasius' atonement theory, implies too much of an ontological divide between Christ's humanity and ours, and so deem it inaccurate,²⁵⁵ but there are also those who will happily describe the Word in Athanasius' work as, "vicariously acting,"²⁵⁶ and as a "vicarious sacrifice."²⁵⁷ Arguably, Athanasius would approve of those who scrupulously have decided that the term is insufficient to describe Christ's work, given that his entire treatise is seeking to show that while the Word has become true man it is the *Word* accomplishing the work and not just *a* man. It is true to say that for Athanasius it is "in *who* he is rests our salvation."²⁵⁸ There is certainly evidence within DIVD to

²⁵⁰ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 44

²⁵¹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 25

²⁵² Kelly (2004) p.380

²⁵³ Dragas (1991) p.93

²⁵⁴ Dragas (1991) p.93

²⁵⁵ Dalferth (1991) p.320

²⁵⁶ Meyer (1998) p.170

²⁵⁷ Dragas (1991) p.92

²⁵⁸ Dalferth (1991) pp.321-322 (italics mine)

support the argument that Athanasius held, at least partly, a substitutionary atonement understanding, but one would argue overall, that this is a reduction of his thinking in this area, and that substitution only plays a part in his atonement narrative. Christ is more than a substitute, he is the mediator, the true representative who “in his very person presents or mediates God to us and us to God.” One can see a similarity here to the Pauline, “in Christ” motif.

Penal Substitution?

Some have argued that a penal substitution theory of atonement can be found within the work of Athanasius. Ortlund for example, has argued that whilst DVD contains two major themes with regard to the atonement, recapitulation and satisfaction, it nevertheless, “includes the concept of penal substitution.²⁵⁹” Ortlund’s argument to support this is not strong however, and when to evidence this statement he says, “how could it not, when the centrepiece of atonement is substitutionary death, and death is a penal reality?²⁶⁰” One does not believe there is any evidence that Athanasius viewed the law of death as a punishment; he simply saw it as a human’s natural state without their contemplation of the Logos. Peoples has also put forward the argument that a theory of penal substitution is present in Athanasius’ work, stating outright, that “the thought is clearly here in Athanasius.²⁶¹” However, Peoples falls into the category of those theologians who deem Athanasius’ Christology as extreme Logos-Sarx. He even goes as far as saying that Athanasius was, “much too close to the Gnostics in this area.²⁶²” Peoples’ article is a confusing mix of criticism and praise for Athanasius’ contribution to Christianity, and he seems to hold an entirely different understanding of sin than that of Athanasius. Consequently, Peoples misunderstands Athanasius’ message in several key areas, his evaluation of atonement theory as penal substitution being one of them. Overall, it appears that these two assessments of Athanasius’ work are examples of Protestant western theologians attempting, “to read back the insights of the Reformers into the writings of Athanasius,²⁶³” rather than analyse it objectively. Whilst it is true that Athanasius mentions Christ’s death as the

²⁵⁹ Ortlund (2012)

²⁶⁰ Ortlund (2012)

²⁶¹ Peoples (2007) p.7

²⁶² Peoples (2007) p.8

²⁶³ Arsenal (2018) p.10

taking of mankind's debt²⁶⁴ and suffering on our behalf,²⁶⁵ "he does not develop the causal connection between these,²⁶⁶" and is more focussed upon the salvific effects of the cross than the cause of them.²⁶⁷ DIVD does not provide sufficient evidence to suggest that Athanasius believed in any kind of penal substitution. One would argue his cosmology and doctrine of God entirely counter any such claims.

Legal exchange, satisfaction and ransom language:

There are a lot of phrases employed by Athanasius in DIVD which seem, on the surface, to imply that he viewed the death of Christ as a form of exchange or satisfaction. Examples are, "debt owed... had still to be paid,²⁶⁸" and "offered the sacrifice."²⁶⁹ It has been argued that "Athanasius' atonement rationale is rooted in legal exchange language."²⁷⁰ There is indeed a lot of exchange language used throughout DIVD, however, it is important to remember what Athanasius means when he refers to the, "debt owed."²⁷¹ This debt is not the same as the Anselmian idea of a debt owed to God because humanity had dishonoured him, but instead is seen as "a debt owed to death on account of turning away from the Word toward corruption."²⁷² A very different understanding. Death is not for Athanasius, a payment to God as if humanity owed him something, neither is it an evil adversary that needed to be paid off itself, it is simply a law and a consequence that had to be fulfilled. There is no exchange with death as a being, and certainly no mention of a payment to the devil in DIVD. Athanasius does mention the devil, but does so in order to emphasise how far humanity has fallen from its contemplation of the divine, to the worthless contemplation of created things, rather than to describe him as mankind's captor.²⁷³ Young states that Athanasius' use of ransom vocabulary is, "simply as a traditional means of referring to the rescue and salvation from death, sin and the curse... Athanasius never resorts to a theory of ransom to the devil to elucidate his

²⁶⁴ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 20

²⁶⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 20

²⁶⁶ Weinandy (2018) p. 100

²⁶⁷ Weinandy (2018) p.100

²⁶⁸ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 20

²⁶⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 20

²⁷⁰ Arsenal (2018) p.12

²⁷¹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 20

²⁷² Morgan (2016) p.107

²⁷³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 11

meaning.²⁷⁴” When Athanasius states that the Word “died for the ransom all,²⁷⁵” the context and meaning here is clearly a ransoming from death, rather than as a ransom payment of himself. Meyer agrees that, “Athanasius uses the substitutionary expression ‘in the place of’ to refer to the debt owed and not to the person paying the debt.²⁷⁶” One might wonder then to whom the death of Christ was offered? after all Athanasius frequently refers to it using sacrificial language,²⁷⁷ but Dragas argues that in DIVD, “there is no problem concerning the recipient of Christ’s sacrifice, because the identification of him with all three, death, the devil and God, witnesses to different nuances of meaning, all of which are determined by their connection with the divine law concerning death.²⁷⁸” Athanasius himself admits, “since we are talking of the goodness of God, therefore we express the same idea in many ways lest we should seem to omit anything by leaving anything and incur the charge of saying too little. For it is better to be blamed for repetition than to omit any of the things which must be emphasised.²⁷⁹” Overall, Athanasius’ work DIVD does not as a whole support the view of an exchange, a satisfaction or a ransom theory of atonement, however it is true there is included language, that if taken out of context, could seem to imply the contrary.

The Resurrection:

When Athanasius discusses the death of Christ, the greater context is usually the resurrection, which he believes to be as vital for man’s redemption as the cross.²⁸⁰ Athanasius has argued that the works that the incarnate Word performed enabled him to show humanity the Father,²⁸¹ stating that even those who were most firmly set upon worshipping false Gods, “when they saw the resurrection of the Saviour they confessed... that only the Word of the Father was the true Lord, he who has power over death.²⁸²” According to Athanasius, mankind, having recognised the person of the

²⁷⁴ Young (1979) p.203

²⁷⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 21

²⁷⁶ Meyer (1998) p.151

²⁷⁷ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 9, 10, 16, 21

²⁷⁸ Dragas (1991) p.93

²⁷⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 20

²⁸⁰ Morgan (2016) p.108

²⁸¹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 15

²⁸² Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 15

Word in Christ, can now follow the example of his earthly life in order to appropriate the salvation which he has effected; Weinandy says, the “Son becomes the paradigm in whom all human beings can come to share in his perfected humanity.” It can be seen that this soteriology of divinisation is used by Athanasius to explain the work of the incarnate Word, being progressively deified in his humanity, and the life of Christians, who now live in the hope of the resurrection. In the risen Christ, Athanasius sees, “the fulness of human transformation,²⁸³” and “humanity is redeemed, glorified and exalted, in short deified.²⁸⁴” No longer does man’s origin lie in nothingness. Athanasius states that man has been given a new beginning, “for by the sacrifice of His own body he both put an end to the law which lay over us, and renewed for us the origin of life by giving hope of the resurrection.²⁸⁵” Athanasius’ discussion of the resurrection then, shows an Irenaeian influence with the idea of recapitulation coming to the fore. Nevertheless, this is placed firmly within the context of Athanasius’ notion of deification.

The Christian Life and the Appropriation of Salvation:

For Athanasius, the work of the risen Saviour has guaranteed, for all, a resurrection from the dead.²⁸⁶ This is because, during His life He showed mankind the nature of the Father and the image in whom they were created. In His death, all died and the consequence of death, which lay over all men, was fulfilled. Finally, by rising from the dead, His divine personhood was made manifest to all, and His humanity was exalted. This incarnation, meaning the Word’s birth as man, life, death and resurrection, has bridged the ontological gulf that existed between created man and God, and has given man a new beginning. For Athanasius though, an eternal life participating in God is still something that needs to be appropriated by man during his life, and is not an automatic consequence for all. Athanasius urges his readers at the end of this treatise, to live, “a life modelled on the saints,²⁸⁷” maintaining a “pure

²⁸³ Anatolios (1998) p.210

²⁸⁴ Dragas (1991) p.94

²⁸⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 10

²⁸⁶ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 10

²⁸⁷ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 57

soul,²⁸⁸ that they “may receive what has been reserved for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.²⁸⁹” Athanasius’ emphasis on a holy life and reception of the sacraments to keep the grace of the incarnation active within one’s life, can be seen within his later works,²⁹⁰ and has led to his association with ascetism.²⁹¹ Athanasius believed the risen Christ was still active in the world around him, drawing all mankind to the truth. Many examples of this are given as evidence, rejection of idols, conversions and willing martyrdoms.²⁹² Christ’s work is therefore, seen as an ongoing action following his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Kariatlis has argued that Athanasius firmly places this ongoing work of the risen Christ within an ecclesial framework, arguing that Athanasius’ mention of the Lordly body,²⁹³ is a reference to the Church on earth, of whom Christ is the head, and praises the Athanasian “vision of salvation which transcended time by including the past, present and future work of Christ.²⁹⁴”

Recapitulation, Substitution and Deification:

In DIVD, Athanasius presents a recapitulation understanding of atonement. He is absolutely clear that after the incarnation event, humanity had a new beginning and was a new creation. They were no longer made from nothing, but found their origin in the incarnate Word of God, and as a result could hope to share eternal life with him. The ontological divide separating divinity and creation, is the framework within which Athanasius discusses this theory, and Christ is seen as the mediator between God and the created world. The need for a human action, as well as a divine action, is made clear by Athanasius. He repeatedly emphasises that mankind had two problems, corruption, and the fact that they had lost the knowledge of their maker. Somehow, the consequence of death for all mankind had to be fulfilled, an action of humanity, and as only God can re-reveal himself, a divine action was needed too. The need for, and the fittingness of the God-man as the saviour of humanity and the only possible

²⁸⁸ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 57

²⁸⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 57

²⁹⁰ Athanasius’ Festal Letters in particular, point to his understanding of the Sacraments as imparting divine grace, enabling believers to appropriate salvation. An in-depth analysis of these texts can be found in Weinandy (2018) pp.121-132

²⁹¹ cf: Brakke (1995)

²⁹² Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 28-30

²⁹³ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 8

²⁹⁴ Kariatlis (2013) p.33

solution to mankind's problems therefore, becomes the central theme of this great treatise. As a result, the life, death and resurrection of the God-man, all have soteriological implications for Athanasius, and man is made one with God again because the Word of God lived *and* died *and* rose as man. There can be no division of this event, and there is no specific moment of atonement stated within it. There is certainly a substitutionary idea within this work, as Athanasius is adamant that Christ died for us, however, his strong emphasis on the subject of the incarnation being at all times the Word of God, precludes his atonement theory from being seen as purely substitutionary, because that would ignore the rest of the work being undertaken by the God-man during the incarnation which is explained in this treatise. Finally, one cannot ignore the deification idea also present in this work, with arguably Athanasius' most well-known phrase being, "He became man, that we might become divine."²⁹⁵ Christ as the exemplar for Christian life, after his ascension, and the need for study of the scriptures, and a pure mind which enables one to participate in the body of Christ and so become progressively deified, is also a component of Athanasius' atonement understanding. Christ's incarnation has made the atonement possible for humanity, but it is an ongoing work on humanity's part to appropriate the salvation now attainable. Out of all of the atonement theories theologians discuss today, Recapitulation is the most prominent theory within this work by Athanasius, alongside deification, but there is also an element of substitution expressed.

²⁹⁵ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 54

Evaluation of findings:

How novel was Athanasius' atonement understanding in DIVD?

An ontological framework:

Athanasius' atonement discussion in DIVD shows almost complete continuity with the prevailing theories of the authors writing in the preceding centuries. What has shifted is the framework within which he sets the discussion. His doctrine of atonement is clearly grounded within his doctrine of creation,²⁹⁶ and because of this he was able to further Christianity's understanding of the ontological damage brought about by sin.²⁹⁷ Meijering has concluded that Athanasius utilised the Irenaean idea that only God can relate creation to God, and then applied it to the question of the ontological standing of Christ as mediator.²⁹⁸ Athanasius appreciated that an inaccurate ontological understanding of Christ put the whole redemption narrative in jeopardy, and thus frames this treatise around a correct ontological understanding of God and creation. Athanasius' staunch resolve throughout the text, that all that Christ did as man could be predicated of the divine Word Himself, without the transcendence of the Word being impaired in any way, enabled him to frame his atonement discussion in an original way. Consequently, Athanasius gave "systematic expression to this central conception of the convergence of divine transcendence and immanence,²⁹⁹" and it is for this reason, that Finch argues, "Athanasius marks a watershed in the development of Christian soteriology,³⁰⁰" rather than because there was anything novel about Athanasius' atonement understanding.

A new beginning in Christ:

Athanasius argues that a direct result of the incarnation was that mankind was made new, and now had its origin in Christ. Paul uses this new creation motif

²⁹⁶ Ortlund (2012)

²⁹⁷ Meyer (1998) p.164

²⁹⁸ Meijering (2010) p.206

²⁹⁹ Meijering (2010) 205

³⁰⁰ Finch (2006a) p.104

throughout his writings, and frequently refers to Christ as the new Adam. Meyer has argued that, Athanasius is wholly consistent with the four central tenets of Paul's soteriology,³⁰¹ and that "Athanasius' conjunction of expiation, restored moral integrity and the promise of a future resurrection follows Paul's messianic-eschatological interpretation of the OT.³⁰²" Athanasius also incorporates the Irenaeus understanding that recapitulation brought about a superior state of being than that which Adam possessed before the fall,³⁰³ stating that because of the Word's indwelling, all of mankind were now the brethren of the Word incarnate, and human nature had become fully sanctified. Athanasius' description of the situation of humanity following the incarnation corresponds directly with the NT statement that now, "in Him, we live, and move, and have our being."³⁰⁴ The framework of ontology thus remains the only distinct feature of Athanasius' atonement discussion.

Theory of deification:

By focussing upon the humanity of Christ as that which by lived experience was progressively deified, it is apparent that Athanasius possessed an understanding of atonement that was nearer to Irenaeus than Origen.³⁰⁵ Brakke states that, "Athanasius displaced Origen's contemplative ideal from centre stage and instead focussed on control of the body."³⁰⁶ In seeking to discard Origen's notion of pre-existent souls, most Alexandrian theologians in the fourth century also rejected his theory of spiritual progress.³⁰⁷ However, Athanasius does maintain somewhat, the idea that man's spiritual life is a progressive ascent towards the divine, shifting the emphasis of the progression away from the soul, and instead onto a gradually increased participation in the divine life. Athanasius does not in this treatise go as far as explicitly arguing for a complete doctrine of theosis, but his work does, nevertheless, contain a deification narrative. Deification language can be found within the NT itself, and is contained within the works of the earlier fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen,³⁰⁸ meaning it is by no means an understanding unique to Athanasius. Athanasius'

³⁰¹ Meyer (1998) p. 146

³⁰² Meyer (1998) p.166

³⁰³ Meijering (2010) p. 178

³⁰⁴ Acts 17:28

³⁰⁵ Brakke (1995) p.160

³⁰⁶ Brake (1995) p.174

³⁰⁷ Meyer (1998) p.154

³⁰⁸ Finlan and Kharlamov (2006) pp. 2-5

atonement theory in DIVD therefore, stands in agreement with the teachings of the apostles and the earlier Church Fathers.

What can Athanasius' work DIVD contribute to theological discussion today?

A corrective:

Athanasius reminds all theologians today that anything said about God should begin with what was revealed to humanity during the incarnation. The starting perspective should therefore, always be that God came as man in order to bring about salvation for mankind and impart his glory.³⁰⁹ Beginning with a different perspective, will give theologians an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of the person of Christ, and consequently, their Christological and soteriological theories will be flawed. Anatolios argues that “the most urgent use we can make of Athanasius today is in the realm of Christology... [which needs to be] recast in a soteriological mode.³¹⁰” Athanasius' work reminds all scholars that a recognition of the ontological distinction between the divine and the created must be a component of any complete Christological discussion, and thus provides a counterpoint to search for the ‘historical Jesus’ amongst theologians.³¹¹ Where there is the danger of dualism or monism in theological debate, Athanasius' model also provides a remedial argument, by affirming both the transcendence and nearness of God to his creation.³¹² Finally, it has been argued that modern rationalism is an equivalent to the Arianism that Athanasius faced, and that as a result “Athanasius should be read anew to safeguard against current threats.³¹³” A reminder is given to all through the steadfast nature and tenacity of Athanasius, that God will prevail but that we must trust in him and be part of the endeavour.³¹⁴

To live joyfully:

³⁰⁹ Van de Beek (2010) p. 306

³¹⁰ Anatolios (1998) p.209

³¹¹ Anatolios (1998) p.209

³¹² Anatolios (1998) p.209

³¹³ Wilgenburg (2010) p.316

³¹⁴ Davis (2017) p.274

Athanasius' message of God's caring condescension to mankind, in order that he might make Himself known and that we might be able to know Him, is a joyful message of a loving God. Theologians are reminded of the absolute joy of the Gospel message which can be lost within their expositions of the specifics of atonement and salvation. For Paul and for Athanasius, the overarching message is that God came so that mankind might be made at-one with Him again, not out of wrath, or for punishment.³¹⁵ The guaranteed resurrection of all mankind is a joyful hope that must be part of any theological discussion. Kariatlis states that Athanasius provides theologians with a soteriology "marked by an unexpected radical inclusiveness,³¹⁶" and this opens up "new horizons for a more holistic and inclusive vision of soteriology for systematic theology today.³¹⁷" Lastly, Athanasius' description of creation and redemption as one continuing narrative of which we are all a part, provides a framework of hope for all, and by placing the incarnation as the pivotal event within it, Athanasius reminds theologians that it is by living a sacrificial life in relation to those around us, that we become more amalgamated within the divine impassibility, via our union with the humanity of Jesus Christ.³¹⁸ A steadfast reminder that one's actions must live up to one's belief and preaching, as Athanasius concludes this great treatise, "anyone who wishes to understand the minds of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds."³¹⁹

Opportunities for further research:

Firstly, as this thesis has focussed specifically upon Athanasius' work *DIVD*, a deeper insight into his atonement understanding could be gained by an analysis of the atonement language in his other works. The consistency of his thought in this area could then be established and it would give a more complete view of Athanasius' position. Secondly, the predominant atonement theories that have been found within *DIVD*, appear to show great uniformity with the ideas of St Paul and St Irenaeus, therefore further exploration of this similarity may prove worthwhile. Finally, it would

³¹⁵ Meyer (1998) p.170

³¹⁶ Kariatlis (2013) p.23

³¹⁷ Kariatlis (2013) p.23

³¹⁸ Meyer (1998) p.162

³¹⁹ Athanasius *De Incarnatione* 57

be interesting to see how Athanasius links the sacraments to the idea of progressive deification in his later works, given his role as a Bishop of the Church and his belief in its magisterial and sacramental authority.

Abbreviations:

DIVD = De Incarnatione Verbum Dei

CG = Contra Gentes

NT = New Testament

OT = Old Testament

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