

Soteriological Insights in St Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*

Philip Kariattlis, ThD

Senior Lecturer and Academic Director

St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College

Abstract: *On the Incarnation* is often interpreted in such a way that sees the event of Christ's condescension as sufficient for salvation. Whilst his well-known apophthegm "He [the Son] became human so that we might be made God" might easily suggest this, the work as a whole contains a rich tapestry which comprehends salvation achieved only through the entire salvific economy – namely, his incarnation together with all the saving actions whilst on earth including his death on the cross and his incorruptible resurrection. In attempting to present St Athanasius' multifaceted vision of salvation, the paper hopes to make a contribution on modern understandings of salvation in systematic theology which tend to isolate different moments.

In the history of Christian theology one can detect quite different, but not necessarily opposing emphases in the understanding of salvation. Whilst central to Western treatments of soteriology is the sacrifice and redemptive death of Christ¹ – notwithstanding the variety of models

¹ Indicative of this identification is the title of the following important work on soteriology by John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992). Cf. also Paul S. Fiddes, 'Salvation,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 178: "[...] perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Christian understanding of salvation is 'atonement.' [...] and for Christian believers atonement happens because of the death of Jesus in a Roman execution one Friday afternoon [...] they see the cross as not only a disclosure of the process, but as a point which is somehow decisive for salvation, and from which all else stems."

within this hermeneutical framework expressed at times in terms of 'penal substitution'² or 'satisfaction'³ to name only two⁴ – the East, it is claimed, has tended to link its discourse of salvation to the event of Christ's incarnation making possible the deification of the human person.⁵ And so,

² In a chapter on penal substitution, Schreiner defined it in the following way: "I define penal substitution as follows: The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy God's justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The punishment and penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that in the cross both God's holiness and love are manifested." Thomas R. Schreiner, 'Penal Substitution View,' in *The Nature of the Atonement*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 68.

³ In his presentation of the Christian understanding of salvation, Fiddes noted: "something in God requires to be satisfied before forgiving love can be put into effect: Anselm proposes this to be God's honour, and Calvin maintains it is also God's law. Because human beings are guilty sinners, it is presumed that a debt has to be paid to justice before they can be forgiven." P. Fiddes, 'Salvation,' 179.

⁴ These two models are by no means exhaustive. In his work on soteriology, for example, McIntyre identified at least eleven such models: some of these include: ransom, redemption, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, atonement, reconciliation, punishment, satisfaction and liberation. Cf. J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, 29-52.

⁵ The literature here is immense. Some classic works include: Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, Foundations Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009) and by the same author, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Georgios Patronos, *The Deification of the Human Person* [in Greek] (Athens: Domos, 1995), Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), Georgios Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984) and Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul Onica (Anaheim, California: A&C Press, 2002). Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (eds.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2006) and Vladimir Kharlamov (ed.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011). It must be pointed out that even though the idea of *theosis* has been more familiar in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is most welcome to see its increasing place in western theology. Some recent works include: Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and*

when seen from within such opposing dialectical terms, those in favour of the former approach, for example, are quick to point out that connecting salvation solely with the event of the incarnation without references to the death of Christ can easily lead to the process of salvation being understood in a mechanical way resulting in what Ormerod called a “type of *deus ex machina*, the automatic outcome of the incarnation itself.”⁶ The deficiency of both approaches, however, is that different moments of Christ’s life are isolated resulting in the inner coherency of the entire salvific economy of Christ – which would include not only his death on the cross together with his incorruptible resurrection, but also his incarnation and indeed his entire earthly ministry – being overlooked if not totally discarded. There exists today little by way of scholarship concerned with a presentation of a truly comprehensive or unified treatment of soteriology accounting for an inherent connection and mutual relationship of Christ’s entire salvific economy. It is the contention of this paper that St Athanasius’ treatise *On the Incarnation* is especially significant in this regard in that it presents a multidimensional vision of salvation with clarity and potency thus opening up new horizons for a more holistic and inclusive vision of soteriology for

Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007). Also, the following representative articles betray the growing acceptance of the term in Western soteriologies: Myk Habets, “‘Reformed Theosis?’ A Response to Gannon Murphy,” *Theology Today* 65 (2009): 489-498; Bernie A. Voon De Walle, “‘How High of a Christian Life?’ A. B. Simpson and the Classic Doctrine of *Theosis*,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43.2 (2008): 136-153, and S. T. Kimbrough, ‘Theosis in the Writings of Charles Wesley,’ *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52.2 (2008): 199-212.

⁶ Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace and Redemption*, Theology in Global Perspective Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 94. As will be shown throughout this paper, St Athanasius spoke of salvation not solely within the context of the incarnation; and so imputations to him that his vision of salvation is mechanical or automatic do not stand. These were charges firstly brought forward against St Athanasius in the early nineteenth century by Adolf von Harnack – and continued by others, for example Hanson – who believed that the Athanasian framework of salvation had no need of Christ’s atoning death. Cf. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 3 (New York: Dover, 1961), 165.

systematic theology today, indeed one marked by an unexpected radical inclusiveness.⁷

Soteriological Emphasis of *On the Incarnation*

St Athanasius the Great⁸ has long been recognised as one of the greatest Christian thinkers of the early church. That his impact has extended throughout the ages is evident from the fact that the Athanasian legacy continues to be reflected upon in scholarship to this day.⁹ His role in shaping the identity of the Nicene faith and ushering in a new and decisive wave of reflection on the core teachings of the Christian mystery is by and large unquestioned by modern scholarship irrespective of the assessment of his character being presented in a more or less favourable light.¹⁰ With regards to his theological contribution, Gwynn noted that “no history of Christian doctrine may omit the name of Athanasius of Alexandria [...] his doctrinal influence grew stronger as the century progressed and laid the foundations for later generations of theologians.”¹¹ Beyond its formative element for

⁷ It must be stated from the outset that it remains for a further study to examine more closely the way the different ‘moments’ of Christ’s life functioned together into an integrated whole in St Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*.

⁸ This is the way he is referred to in the Eastern Orthodox liturgical tradition celebrated together with another great Alexandrine, St Cyril of Alexandria on 18 January.

⁹ Beyond the classic work on St Athanasius by Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), some more recent works include: Thomas Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius, Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011) and David Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, *Christian Theology in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ For a brief yet insightful summary of the scholarship dealing with St Athanasius’ character, see D. W. H. Arnold, *The Early Episcopal Career of Athanasius of Alexandria* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 9-22.

¹¹ D. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, 55. Cf. also Behr’s note: “*On the Incarnation*, in particular, had a massive impact on later theology. It could almost be described as the defining exposition of Nicene theology, certainly as understood by the later Byzantine tradition.” John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*,

Christian doctrine, the Athanasian corpus as a whole is soteriologically focused, primarily concerned with demonstrating the existential and salvific implications of the Christian message. More specifically, it could be said that St Athanasius framed most if not all his theological writings in a manner which was most concerned to underpin the salvific significance of the Christ event. This is especially seen in one of his earliest major works, *On the Incarnation*,¹² upheld today as a classic of Christian literature, where more explicitly than anywhere else the soteriological sensibilities are evident. In this regard, Pettersen noted: “his [namely St Athanasius’] main interest is God’s wholly gracious salvation of humanity secured through the Incarnation.”¹³ Indeed, it is precisely this salvific construal which best captures the overall intention and occasion of the work as well as the lineaments of the text’s particulars. Already in the opening chapter, this is made explicitly clear by St Athanasius where the incarnation is directly linked with salvation: “by the love for humankind and goodness of his own Father he appeared to us in a human body for our salvation” (διὰ τὴν ἡμῶν σωτηρίαν, ἐν ἀνθρωπίνῳ σώματι πεφανέρωται).¹⁴ From a most general perspective, the work is orientated towards demonstrating how the salvation of the human person and the created world more generally was made possible through the incarnate life of the only begotten Son of God. Accordingly, the major theme pervading the entire text is the centrality of the incarnate Word’s life on earth as the occasion *par excellence* which not only disclosed the salvific power of the incorruptible Word, but also

part 1, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 168-9.

¹² There is much debate regarding the precise date when *On the Incarnation* was written. Whilst formerly it was generally agreed that the treatise was written in the early 320s, namely before his episcopal elevation, there is a growing consensus today dating the letter in the mid 330s. For an overview of the literature, see Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 27-9. The dating of this treatise, however, does not affect the argument presented in this article.

¹³ Alvyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: G. Chapman, 1995), 109.

¹⁴ *On the Incarnation*, 1 (PG 25, 97C). Unless otherwise stated the English translation of the original text of *On the Incarnation* is that of John Behr from St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011).

enabled the world to receive and participate in the divine life of God. The treatise is therefore best understood when seen from the possibility of salvation that the incarnation – indeed, the entire life of Christ – engendered by bridging the ontological divide between the created and uncreated realms.¹⁵

The overarching soteriological concern underpinning the entire text is famously encapsulated in the phrase: “He became human that we might become divine” (αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν).¹⁶ Whilst this may at first glance be suggestive of the sufficiency of the incarnation alone for salvation, a careful reading of the treatise as a whole does not allow for such an interpretation. In reflecting upon the saint’s understanding of the term ‘incarnation’ (ἐνανθρώπησις), for example, Behr insightfully noted that it had to be understood from a broader perspective which would include not only the conception and birth of the Son of God from Mary but also his suffering on the cross. Undoubtedly, this has important implications for soteriology today as it rises above modern discussions in this doctrine which are inclined towards wanting to single out certain moments of Christ’s life – whether this be his conception and birth or his suffering and crucifixion or for that matter his resurrection – as exclusively determinative for salvation. Interestingly, however, Behr seems to place much emphasis on those passages dealing with the cross giving the impression that the Athanasian soteriological vision is tied exclusively and solely related to the cross.¹⁷ It is the contention of this paper that the Athanasian vision is more holistic. Whilst one can appreciate the emphasis on the cross passages in Behr – namely, wanting to demonstrate their

¹⁵ The structure of the treatise highlights its salvific purpose: after two introductory chapters, we find two extensive sections on the salvific implications of the incarnation (chs. 3-10 and 11-19). Only then does the saint direct his readers’ attention to two specific salvific actions: namely, Christ’s suffering and sacrifice on the cross (20-26), followed by his resurrection (26-32). This is followed by two rather sizeable sections which are an apology upholding the rationality of Christ’s salvific plan directed specifically towards the Jews (33-40) and the Gentiles (4-55) respectively.

¹⁶ *On the Incarnation*, 54 (PG 25, 192B).

¹⁷ J. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 184-207.

significance especially against Harnack, Hanson *et alii* who charged the saint with making salvation a mechanical process without any need for the saving act of Christ on the cross – nevertheless, 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.¹⁸ Our attention is now turned to some of the specific passages which present an integrative vision of salvation.

Soteriology and its Relation to the Entire Economy of Christ’s Life

In the first chapter of *De Incarnatione*, we see that the incarnation and the cross – and indeed Christ’s entire life – are inextricably linked and therefore equally important for salvation:

Come now, blessed one and true lover of Christ, let us, with the faith of our religion, relate also the things concerning the incarnation of the Word [τὰ περὶ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως τοῦ Λόγου] and expound his divine manifestation to us [τῆς θείας αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπιφανείας], which the Jews slander and the Greeks mock (cf. 1 Cor 1:23), but we ourselves venerate, so that, all the more from his apparent degradation [ἐκ τῆς δοκούσης εὐτελείας], you may have an even greater and fuller piety towards him for [...] what human beings through sophistry laugh at as merely human these by his power he shows to be divine, overturning the illusion of idols by his own apparent degradation through the cross [τῇ νομιζομένη ἑαυτοῦ εὐτελείᾳ διὰ τοῦ σταυροῦ], invisibly persuading those who mock and disbelieve to recognize his divinity and power.¹⁹

The saint’s salvific vision is presented here with much clarity, coherence and comprehensiveness: salvation was not achieved merely through the conception and birth of the Son of God by Mary, but included Christ’s entire life, namely his “divine manifestation” culminating with the cross

¹⁸ As noted above, it lies beyond the scope of this paper to examine separately the conception, birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ in order to see how these events are incorporated into his soteriology. This will form the basis of a future study.

¹⁹ *On the Incarnation*, 1 (PG 25, 97AB).

and resurrection.²⁰ St Athanasius incorporates the entire life and work of Christ into his soteriological plan thus presenting it in its widest scope. The incarnation initiated the process of salvation by bestowing upon humanity a growing “piety” of Jesus Christ. The cross, on the other hand, acted to persuade those, who did not believe, of the incarnation’s significance. Elsewhere in the treatise, St Athanasius noted that it was through the incarnation that God was made known thereby opening up the way towards knowledge of God, whilst in dying, Christ destroyed death and corruption, under the sway around which the world revolved thereby enabling it to participate in the life of God.²¹ Irrespective of the various salvific ramifications emphasised, the point is clear: St Athanasius was most concerned to integrate all aspects of Christ’s life into his vision of salvation. Consequently, it could be argued that the distinct salvific actions of Christ – whether this be his incarnation, divine manifestation or atoning death on the cross – constituted a unified whole, so that it would be more correct to speak not in terms of different or disparate actions – let alone isolating one single action – but in terms of different expressions of one integrated saving action.

Remaining on the same text in chapter one, it can further be demonstrated that a reductionist understanding which wants to identify the importance only of the cross alone – or for that matter the incarnation – for

²⁰ For this reason, Hanson’s comments that St Athanasius’ doctrine of the incarnation “almost does away with a doctrine of the atonement” (R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, 450) do not stand. In fact Hanson went further in stating that St Athanasius’ “doctrine of the incarnation has almost swallowed up any doctrine of the atonement, has rendered it unnecessary.” R. Hanson, *The Search*, 450.

²¹ Cf. *On the Incarnation*, 8: “Although being himself powerful and the creator of the universe, he prepared for himself in the Virgin the body [σώμα] as a temple, and made it his own, as an instrument, making himself known [ἐν αὐτῷ γνωριζόμενος] [...] delivering it over to death on behalf of all, he offered it to the Father, doing this in his love for human beings, so that, on the one hand, with all dying in him the law concerning corruption in human beings might be undone [...] and, on the other hand, that as human beings had turned towards corruption he might turn them again to incorruptibility and give them life from death [καὶ ζωοποίησθαι τοὺτους ἀπὸ τοῦ θανάτου] [...] banishing death from them as straw from the fire” (PG 25, 109CD).

salvation is untenable. St Athanasius considers the incarnation and the cross together precisely in order to show that they could not be separated. The text under examination introduces the event of the incarnation drawing upon biblical imagery specifically deployed by St Paul with reference to the cross. By referring to the incarnation as an event which “the Jews slander and the Greeks mock,” St Athanasius intentionally would have wanted to connect the incarnation with the cross in this way emphasising their inseparability for salvation. Moreover, St Athanasius’ use of the term “degradation” (εὐτέλεια) twice in such close proximity, first with reference to the incarnation and secondly to the cross further makes the connection and interdependence between the two events even clearer. It was this juxtaposition of the events of the incarnation and the cross respectively that made all the more emphatic with the same descriptive qualifier – namely, the word “degradation” – which led Behr correctly to conclude that the term ‘incarnation’ did not “simply refer to the birth of Jesus from Mary [...] but rather [...] to his birth when seen from, and then described in, the perspective of the cross.”²² According to Behr, it was the cross which shed light upon, and gave meaning to, the full salvific implications of the incarnation. In other words, salvation, according to the Athanasian vision, is best appreciated when the incarnation and the cross are seen together. This is further explained elsewhere in the treatise where St Athanasius underscored the importance of Christ’s earthly ministry in terms of giving witness to, and confirming his divinity, and thus indispensable for soteriology. In chapter 18, St Athanasius, for example, reminded his readers that Christ “purified lepers, made the lame to walk, opened the hearing of the deaf, made the blind to see again [...] from which anyone could see his divinity” (τὴν θεότητα θεωρεῖν).²³ The same idea regarding the importance of Christ’s earthly ministry is expressed several chapters before:

For this reason, not immediately upon coming did he complete the sacrifice on behalf of all, delivering the body to death and resurrecting it, making himself thereby invisible. But by means of it [namely, the body] he made himself visible, remaining in it

²² J. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 185.

²³ *On the Incarnation*, 18 (PG 25, 128C).

and doing such works and giving signs which made him known to be no longer a human being but the God Word.²⁴

According to St Athanasius, had the Son of God, upon becoming incarnate, immediately been crucified, this would not have given the opportunity for the created realm to discern gradually the divine qualities of the incarnate Christ. Consequently, it was precisely in becoming and remaining human in order to fulfil all the signs expected of the Messiah as depicted in the Old Testament Scriptures that the world could recognise the divinity of Jesus and thus be open to salvation.

Having emphasised St Athanasius' vision of salvation as containing a rich tapestry which understood salvation from within the perspective of Christ's entire salvific economy, this is not to undervalue the importance of the cross. Already in this introductory chapter under examination, the cross was shown to be highly significant because it made manifest the divinity of Christ in a most perfect way. According to the saint, the more humiliating the events relating to Christ's life were, the clearer it paradoxically became to discern the glory and divinity of Christ – a glory and divinity which he had from all eternity with the Father. Therefore, seen in this light the cross became the most perfect act of salvation since it was surely the most humiliating event of Christ's earthly ministry. And so, whilst the cross was highly significant for salvation, according to St Athanasius's understanding, it nevertheless had to be seen within the entire salvific economy. It is in this light that St Athanasius' description of Christ's sacrifice on the cross as 'apparently' degrading – again a descriptor used twice both with reference to the incarnation and the cross – ought to be approached. Far from being understood in any docetist way, these two events in particular are described as being degrading only in appearance because of their underlying salvific importance beyond the outward appearance of these events. Elsewhere the treatise affirms in no uncertain terms the reality of the incarnation and the cross. And so, for example, in the eighth chapter, St Athanasius wrote:

He takes on himself a body and that not foreign to ours. For he did not wish simply to be in a body, nor did he wish merely to appear,

²⁴ *On the Incarnation*, 16 (PG 25, 124D).

for if he had wished only to appear he could have made his divine manifestation through some other better means.²⁵

Accordingly, whilst on the surface level these were in reality truly humiliating, on a more profoundly theological level it was precisely these events by which the world was saved since it was in these that Christ showed himself to be none other than the true Son and Word of the Father. In this way, by describing the incarnation and the cross as ‘apparently degrading,’ St Athanasius would have wanted his readers to appreciate the salvific significance of these events together. Consequently, the Athanasian soteriological vision all in all included the entire life of Christ: his incarnation understood properly from the perspective of the cross, his earthly life together with his sacrifice on the cross as genuine signs of his “divinity and power.”

An Unending Soteriological Narrative

The pattern established by St Athanasius in the opening chapter – namely, of salvation procured by the entire economy of Christ’s earthly life – is reiterated throughout the treatise. And so, immediately following his well-known aphorism involving the incarnation opening up the possibility to share in the divine life of God, St Athanasius argued that Christ’s salvific work and its effects were in fact marked by such profusion that they were impossible to enumerate:

[...] He manifested himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father [του ἀοράτου Πατρός ἐννοϊαν]; and He endured the insults of human beings, that we might inherit incorruptibility [...] And, in short, the achievements of the Savior, effected by his incarnation, are of such a kind and number [τοιᾶντα καὶ τοσαῦτα ἐστίν] that if anyone should wish to expound them he would be like those who gaze at the expanse of the sea and wish to count its waves.²⁶

²⁵ *On the Incarnation*, 8 (PG 25, 128BC).

²⁶ *On the Incarnation*, 54 (PG 25, 192BC).

Again, the point stressed here is the importance of Christ's entire life for salvation. The whole cause and rationale for the incarnate Christ's earthly ministry is explained in terms of providing an opportunity for the created realm to attain knowledge or an "idea" of the Father and in this way "inherit[ing] incorruptibility." Yet in this process, far from isolating certain events, St Athanasius went further by pointing out that Christ's salvific work was so far reaching and extensive that it could not be solely identified only with one event since what was being emphasised is Christ's work "as a whole" (τὰ ὅλα).²⁷ Again, this points to the importance of incorporating all the events and work of Christ's earthly ministry into soteriology since all that Christ did, He did for the salvation of the created realm. In an earlier chapter, the saint already explained why it was impossible to quantify the salvific works of Christ:

Although being himself powerful and the creator of the universe, he prepared for himself in the Virgin the body as a temple, and made it his own, as an instrument, making himself known and dwelling in it [...] delivering it over to death on behalf of all, he offered it to the Father, doing this in his love for human beings, so that, on the one hand, with all dying in him the law concerning corruption in human beings might be undone (its power being fulfilled in the lordly body) [ἄτε δὴ πληρωθείσης τῆς ἐξουσίας ἐν τῷ κυριακῷ σώματι].²⁸

The significance of the undoing of corruption being fulfilled (πληρωθείσης) in the "lordly body" might easily be missed as it is only said in passing and not extensively developed. Yet, arguably it takes his all-inclusive soteriological vision to another quite unexpected level. In a nutshell, not all that Christ did during his earthly ministry was important for salvation, but indeed all that He continues to do in his "lordly body." Whilst the phrase, "the lordly body" could be open to different interpretations – an analysis of which does not concern us here – one which cannot be entirely dismissed is that it is a reference to the church. The point simply being put forward here – one which does not detract from the overall argument – is that such an ecclesial framework would not run contrary to the soteriological

²⁷ *On the Incarnation*, 54 (PG 25, 192C).

²⁸ *On the Incarnation* 8 (PG 25, 110C). It is noted that Behr translated the Greek word 'πληρωθείσης' with the word 'expended.'

narrative of St Athanasius; on the contrary it would complement the saints' vision of salvation. Accordingly, if accepted, the meaning of the text could be interpreted to mean that Christ's work of salvation did not end with his earthly ministry but continues to this day within the church, which is his body. Such an understanding would clarify St Athanasius' reference to the vast extent of Christ's saving work and would simply be in accordance with the Pauline use of the 'body' imagery as a referent to the church. Even if such an ecclesiological reading were to be dismissed in favour of a more literal one – namely, that the phrase simply signified 'the body belonging to the Lord' – this does not affect the conclusions being proposed here, namely, that the Christ's work of salvation continues throughout the ages. In this, St Athanasius would be seen to have expressed a remarkably inclusive and comprehensive vision of salvation, one whose constituent acts could not be counted since they continue to be fulfilled to this day. Notwithstanding such an interpretation of this passage, the work of Christ which continues to be carried out does indeed underscore the innumerable salvific actions accomplished by Christ – or more correctly, being accomplished by Christ throughout the ages within the church – thus further demonstrating the extent of his comprehensive vision of salvation. Consequently, far from being focused on one action in time, St Athanasius wonderfully put forward a vision of salvation which transcended time by including the past, present and future work of Christ.

Concluding Remarks

The paper explored the Athanasian vision of salvation and in so doing demonstrated its comprehensive hallmark. Indeed, throughout the text, it was shown that one was able to sense a profound sub-text, namely that it was precisely the power of radical inclusion that became the criterion of his soteriology. Unlike modern understandings which tend to identify isolated moments in Christ's life as decisive for salvation, for St Athanasius, it was shown that salvation was achieved through Christ's entire salvific economy – including all that He did through his 'physical' body but also all that He continues to do in his 'lordly' body, the church. By becoming human, living in the world, sacrificially suffering and dying, Christ was

able to destroy death by death and through his bodily resurrection to restore incorruption and to give the created realm throughout time the opportunity within the ecclesial context to participate in the life of God. His all-inclusive vision of salvation therefore offers the faithful today a 'life in Christ,' empowering them to live as Christ, to love as Christ, to serve as Christ and to be one with Christ.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.