

The Problem of Pneumatological Reticence in *Against the Pagans—On the Incarnation*

Although it is commonplace among historians of Christian doctrine to observe that Athanasius mentions the Holy Spirit only a handful of times in *Pagans-Incarnation*, no historical study has dedicated more than a few sentences to exploring the reason for Athanasius's relative silence about the Spirit, and the question remains open.¹ However, despite the apparent lack of scholarly interest in the subject, how we explain the lack of pneumatological content in the double apology can have significant implications for how we narrate the history of Athanasius's doctrine of the Spirit.

On the one hand, if we explain Athanasius's limited remarks on the Spirit as the result of an impoverished doctrine of the Spirit, then *Pagans-Incarnation* may drive our narrative. Indeed, on account of this explanation, we will be inclined to present the history of Athanasius's theology of the Spirit as the story of pneumatological development

1. Athanasius references the Holy Spirit in *Pagans* 7, 14; *Incarnation* 57. For information on translations and critical sources, see the bibliography.

ex nihilo. For example, we might argue that Athanasius did not begin to integrate the Spirit into his theology until he commenced writing *Orations* 1–2 (ca. 340).² If we are particularly skeptical, we might even suggest that until *Serapion* (ca. 359–361),³ Athanasius’s remarks about the Spirit were always ad hoc reactions driven by opportunity and necessity rather than genuine belief and theological integration.⁴

On the other hand, if we take a more cautious view, recognizing that Athanasius’s pneumatological reticence could be due to a number of other factors, then the influence of *Pagans-Incarnation* on our narrative will be quite different. Rather than telling us that Athanasius did not yet have an understanding of the Holy Spirit, *Pagans-Incarnation* will remind us that we must approach the task of narrating Athanasius’s pneumatology with care. According to this view, multiple scenarios can account for Athanasius’s reticence, which would suggest that we should base our narrative on additional evidence, such as Athanasius’s other early works.

Regardless of whether we take a skeptical or cautious position on Athanasius’s pneumatological reticence, it is clear that how we account for Athanasius’s reticence affects how we tell the history of Athanasius’s pneumatology, which in turn shapes the history of Athanasius’s broader thought, its relation to his contemporaries, and the larger history of fourth-century Trinitarian doctrine.

Therefore, this chapter seeks to determine the most likely reason for Athanasius’s relative silence about the Spirit in *Pagans-Incarnation*. By understanding the reason for Athanasius’s reticence, we can determine what, if anything, it indicates about the state of Athanasius’s theology of the Holy Spirit, and we can let this information shape our historical narrative of his pneumatology accordingly. As such, this chapter also begins the first of two chapters dedicated to exploring the pneumatology of Athanasius’s earliest writings (written before 340).

2. On the provenance of the *Orations*, see below, <TS>00.

3. On the provenance of *Serapion*, see below, <TS>00.

4. Indeed, some readers might even argue that Athanasius’s theology of the Spirit in *Serapion* is ad hoc, spurred by necessity and subsequently abandoned. My overarching argument in this book will show, however, that this position is untenable.

Chapter 2 adds weight to the argument of chapter 1 by showing that Athanasius had a theology of the Holy Spirit in works contemporaneous with *Pagans-Incarnation*.

This chapter argues that the absence of pneumatological content in *Pagans-Incarnation* should not be taken as proof that Athanasius lacked a theology of the Spirit at the time he wrote the double apology. The lack of pneumatological content may be explained by the work's literary purpose, which is to provide a defense of the reasonableness of the cross. Athanasius omits subjects that he considers nonessential for his apologetic argument. He regards pneumatology as a subject that is extraneous to his argument about the cross, and thus he omits it. Therefore, I would argue, any claim that Athanasius lacked a theology of the Holy Spirit when he wrote *Pagans-Incarnation* should be based on more than Athanasius's reticence about the Spirit in this cross-centered apology.

Three sections support this perspective. Section 1 explains the double apology's literary purpose in more detail and in light of its historical context and audience. Together, these subjects suggest that Athanasius was primarily concerned with writing a coherent apology of the cross. Athanasius was not attempting to write a systematic or dogmatic account of the doctrine of God. Sections 2 and 3, constituting the majority of the chapter, provide a new account of the literary structure of *Pagans-Incarnation*. This account contends that almost all of the material in *Pagans-Incarnation* contributes to one of two primary apologetic arguments. The first argument, developed mostly in *Pagans*, contends that the cross was necessary because it was the only solution for humanity's loss of rationality and knowledge of God. The second argument, developed in *Incarnation*, complements the first by arguing that only the cross could restore human beings to immortality. These apologetic arguments reflect Athanasius's literary purpose for *Pagans-Incarnation*, and their centrality suggests that they determined the work's theological content and subjects.

1. The Date and Purpose of *Pagans-Incarnation*

Although the argument of this chapter does not depend on assigning a particular date to *Pagans-Incarnation*, the argument is supported by what I consider to be the most probable historical context for *Pagans-Incarnation*. Therefore, this section will briefly address the perennial question of the double apology's date. In the process, I will add a new argument in favor of an early date. Following this, I will consider the related question of Athanasius's audience.

Composition Date

We have no external sources of information on the circumstances surrounding the composition of *Pagans-Incarnation*. Answers to the questions of when, where, why, and to whom the treatise was written must therefore be based solely on internal evidence. Some readers have suggested that Athanasius wrote the treatise while he was very young, perhaps in his early twenties.⁵ The young Athanasius may have written the work “wanting to show he has read the books of his teachers, and wishing to satisfy his φιλομάθεια [love of learning].”⁶ Of course, there are other explanations for the treatise's rather “bookish” tone. If Athanasius was writing during his first exile, he may have wished to highlight his educational credentials in hopes of improving his reputation amid the controversy. However, I find this explanation unlikely. As will be discussed in chapter 4, during Athanasius's first exile, Athanasius focused on systematically creating a narrative about “Arianism,” which he used to shift the focus of his deposition from personal to theological matters. This project required considerable literary output in order for it to be established and maintained, and thus I find it improbable that Athanasius would write the apologetic-focused *Pagans-Incarnation* during this period—especially since the work makes no mention of the “Arians.” Athanasius could have easily

5. See, for example, E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis?* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 108–12.

6. *Ibid.*, 112.

included his conspiracy narrative in *Pagans-Incarnation* by comparing his opponents to pagans,⁷ which would have further reinforced his narrative. Therefore, based on Athanasius's literary style and lack of mention of later controversies, I find it more likely that he wrote the work while he was still a relatively young man—perhaps shortly after his controversial appointment as bishop of Alexandria in 328.⁸

One further piece of evidence for ascribing an early date to *Pagans-Incarnation* has received little attention—the potential social benefits of its composition. Christian apologetic works such as those by Origen and Athanasius's antagonist, Eusebius of Caesarea, were well known and respected in the empire. These works not only provided Christians with counters to various arguments against the faith but also demonstrated the piety and learnedness of their authors. It is not difficult to imagine that Athanasius, recognizing these facts, realized that he could accrue similar benefits by writing an apology of his own. This apology could provide Christians in Egypt and abroad with an alternative to the popular apologetic work of Eusebius of Caesarea, whose separation of the Word from the identity of the one true God conflicted with Athanasius's more inclusive form of monotheism.⁹ By writing his own apology, Athanasius could potentially reduce the chance of Eusebius's works influencing the theology and social views of Egyptian clergy and other learned Christians.

This motive fits particularly well with the initial years of Athanasius's time as bishop. As I have noted, Athanasius wears his learning on his sleeve in *Pagans-Incarnation*. An apologetic work of his own could bring Athanasius recognition as a teacher, quash criticisms of his youth, and further legitimize his claim to the see of Alexandria.

7. For example, Athanasius frequently accuses "Arianism" of following pagan Greek perspectives. See *Orations* 1.18, 1.30, 1.33, 1.34, 2.14, 2.22, 2.28, 2.43, 3.16, and 3.35.

8. Athanasius was born in the last decade of the third century. The date that I suggest for *Pagans-Incarnation* would mean that he wrote the apology when he was in his late twenties or early thirties, which seems more reasonable than attributing the work to his early twenties.

9. In addition to this theological grievance, Athanasius's relationship to Eusebius had also surely been strained by the debates that took place around the Council of Nicaea, since Eusebius supported Arius and Athanasius supported Alexander. On Eusebius of Caesarea as a supporter of Arius at this time, see, for example, Sara Parvis, *Marcellus of Ancyra and the Lost Years of the Arian Controversy 325-345* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40-41, 45-46, 75.

The opening of *Pagans*, where Athanasius explains his reasons for writing the treatise, provides additional evidence for this scenario. Although the truth about God has been revealed through the testimony of creation, Christ, and the Scriptures, Athanasius's audience apparently desires additional written instruction about this matter (*Pagans* 1). Significantly, Athanasius says they are eager "to hear of it from others," and he acknowledges that "there also exist many treatises of our blessed teachers composed for this purpose"; however, after referring to these other works, he makes the interesting claim that "we do not now have the works of these teachers to hand" and thus "we must expound for you in writing what we have learnt from them" (*Pagans* 1).

Studies attempting to determine the provenance of *Pagans-Incarnation* often see Athanasius's statement about lacking books as an indication that he wrote the work while away from Alexandria. This perspective is built on the assumption that Athanasius would have lacked access to books while in exile. However, there are problems with this notion—particularly regarding Athanasius's exiles in Trier and Rome. While in Trier, Athanasius enjoyed a close relationship with the city's most powerful resident, Constantius II, and Trier was a thriving city due its status as an imperial residence.¹⁰ Likewise, when Athanasius fled to Rome, he did so at the invitation of Pope Julius, whom Athanasius befriended. Therefore, against the "no books" theory, it seems likely that if Athanasius had wished to consult particular books, he could have privately gained access to these with the aid of Constantius in Trier and Julius in Rome.

Other studies have interpreted Athanasius's phrase about not having the books at hand as a literary device intended to justify the composition of the work in light of the facts that numerous other apologies already exist and God also reveals himself through the Scriptures and creation.¹¹ This approach is more plausible. It could be,

10. On Trier, see Robert R. Chenault, "Rome without Emperors: The Revival of a Senatorial City in the Fourth Century CE" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 178–82.

11. E. P. Meijering, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes; Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 2–3.

therefore, that Athanasius is downplaying his actual access to books in order to explain why he does not simply summarize or copy parts of these previous works.

Although my larger argument does not depend on assigning a particular date to *Pagans-Incarnation*, an early date seems most likely. Hereafter I will assume that the work was written sometime between Athanasius's appointment as bishop (May 328) and the Council of Tyre (335).¹²

Audience

Although we should not automatically assume that every author has a clear audience and purpose in mind,¹³ in the case of *Pagans-Incarnation* we can see that Athanasius is writing to Christians, whom he wishes to provide with a new defense of the reasonableness of the cross.

Athanasius reveals that his primary intended audience is Christian by addressing the work to a "friend" (μακάριε) who supposedly loves Christ (*Pagans* 1).¹⁴ Several theories about this friend are plausible given the ambiguity throughout *Pagans-Incarnation*. It is possible that this friend is a merely a fictional figure or rhetorical device.¹⁵ Alternatively, Athanasius could be writing to a specific person or community, or even to multiple persons or communities within different geographical and social contexts. Whatever the case may be, Athanasius clearly assumes he is writing to a Christian audience. In addition to his use of φιλοχρίστῳ, Athanasius discloses that he wishes to bolster the recipient's existing faith in Christ, so "you may have an even greater and fuller piety towards him" (*Incarnation* 1).

12. From the Council of Tyre onward, Athanasius became more focused on defending himself from personal charges, which led to the creation of his narrative about Arianism. On this focus, see chapter 4 below.

13. See Michael Frede, "Eusebius' Apologetic Writings," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 234.

14. Μακάριε has sometimes been taken as a reference to a particular person named Macarius, though this has not found widespread support. On the subject of μακάριε see the summary in James Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 51n20.

15. Pierre Thomas Camelot, *Athanasie d'Alexandrie: Contre les païens*, 3rd ed., SC 18 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983), 12.

Athanasius's overt purpose for writing *Pagans-Incarnation* is pastoral. As we have seen, he announces that he is writing the work for the sake of the audience's faith (*Incarnation* 1). After declaring that "knowledge of religion and of the truth about the universe does not so much need instruction from men as it can be acquired by itself" through the works of the Word in creation and in the economy of salvation (*Pagans* 1), Athanasius accedes to his "friend's" supposed request for written instruction on the subject. He agrees to discuss "a little of the Christian faith" and expound the truth of the "sacred and divinely inspired Scriptures." However, despite Athanasius's focus on teaching, *Pagans-Incarnation* is not primarily a catechetical work but rather a pastorally motivated apology. Athanasius makes this clear from the beginning of *Pagans*. He immediately explains the reasons for his exposition—to prove the reasonableness of Christianity, so that "no one may regard the teaching of our doctrines as worthless, or suppose faith in Christ to be irrational. Such things the pagans misrepresent and scorn, greatly mocking us, though they have nothing other than the cross of Christ to cite in objection" (*Pagans* 1). Here Athanasius asserts that the primary reason for disbelievers' objections revolves around Christianity's claims surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection—"the cross" (see 1 Cor 1:23). Consequently, Athanasius's positive apologetic arguments focus on demonstrating the reasonableness of the cross.

With this background in place, we can now briefly examine the primary arguments and perspectives presented in *Pagans-Incarnation* as a whole. I aim to show that Athanasius's pastoral-apologetic purpose most likely determined the subject matter and theology expressed in the double apology, *Pagans-Incarnation*.

2. The Two Core Arguments of *Pagans*

Athanasius reveals the two main arguments of *Pagans-Incarnation* in the work's introduction. He starts out by identifying the cross as the pagans' primary reason for disbelief (*Pagans* 1). He then counters their mockery of the cross by arguing:

It is particularly in this respect that one must pity their insensitivity, because in slandering the cross they do not see that its power has filled the whole world, and that through it the effects of the knowledge of God have been revealed to all. For if they had really applied their minds to his divinity they would not have mocked at so great a thing, but would rather have recognized that he was the Saviour of the universe and that the cross was not the ruin but the salvation of creation. For if, now that the cross has been set up, all idolatry has been overthrown, and by this sign all demonic activity is put to flight, and only Christ is worshipped, and through him the Father is known, and opponents are put to shame while he every day invisibly converts their souls—how then, one might reasonably ask them, is this still to be considered in human terms, and should one not rather confess that he who ascended the cross is the Word of God and the Saviour of the universe? (*Pagans* 1)

This section introduces two main arguments against those who reject the cross. The first argument appeals to the proselytizing effectiveness of the cross, which Athanasius attributes to the cross revealing the knowledge of God. Pagan conversion from the worship of demons to the worship of the Creator provides proof of this revelation. As a result of the revelation of God through the cross, “all idolatry has been overthrown, and by this sign all demonic activity is put to flight, and only Christ is worshipped, and through him the Father is known, and opponents are put to shame while he every day invisibly converts their souls.” In short, this argument claims that the cross is reasonable because it restores human beings to the knowledge of God, which is crucial for salvation because, as we will see, Athanasius believes that it protects human beings from death and corruption.¹⁶ Further, the knowledge of God that is revealed through the cross is not abstract. The Word’s incarnation, death, and resurrection vividly reveals the unfathomable philanthropy of God. God the Father loved humanity so greatly that he was willing to send his beloved Son to the cross for the salvation of human beings. In this way, human beings can once again know God as their loving Creator, who is worthy of praise and obedience.

This argument about the knowledge of God is complemented by a

16. See below, <TS>00.

second argument, which Athanasius alludes to in the paragraph above and then develops at length in *Incarnation*. The second argument claims that faith in the cross is justified because the cross “was not the ruin” of Christ’s created body “but the salvation of creation” (*Pagans* 1). This argument maintains that the cross is reasonable because it brings the restoration of immortality to human beings through Christ’s death and resurrection.

I contend that the development of these arguments provides the structure for all but a few sections of *Pagans-Incarnation*. Previous studies have proposed various structures for *Pagans-Incarnation*,¹⁷ but I believe the coherence of each part, and of the treatise as a whole, becomes most clear when we read it in light of these two arguments. In effect, Athanasius dedicates *Pagans* to developing the restoration-of-the-knowledge-of-God argument, which he then completes in *Incarnation*. The majority of *Incarnation*, in turn, focuses on the restoration-of-immortality argument.

The remainder of this section shows that Athanasius dedicates *Pagans* to the development of his first argument. By tracing the content and claims of the remainder of *Pagans*, I demonstrate that nearly every part of the work contributes to this core argument. In describing humankind’s creation according to the image of God, its loss of the knowledge of God, and the idolatrous consequences of this loss, Athanasius highlights humankind’s need for the cross to restore them to the knowledge of God.

Theological Anthropology

Following his introductory remarks in *Pagans*, Athanasius begins the body of the text with an account of the creation and fall of the human race. This account offers an explanation of why the saving works of the cross—namely, the restoration of immortality and the knowledge

17. See Charles Kannengiesser, *Athanase d’Alexandrie: Sur l’incarnation du Verbe: Introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes, et index*, SC 199 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973), 52–66; Camelot, *Athanase d’Alexandrie*, 14–17; Karen Jo Torjesen, “The Teaching Function of the Logos: Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, XX–XXXII,” in *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments*, ed. Robert C. Gregg (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1983), 213–21; Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius*, 51–67.

of God—were necessary, providing support for both core arguments. Athanasius sees the creation of humans as unique from other creatures because only humans were formed according to the image of God. He writes:

[God] has made mankind in his own image through his own Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ; and he also made man perceptive and understanding of reality through his similarity to him, giving him also a conception and knowledge of his own eternity, so that as long as he kept this likeness he might never abandon his concept of God or leave the company of the saints, but retaining the grace of him who bestowed it on him, and also the special power given him by the Father's Word, he might rejoice and converse with God, living an idyllic and truly blessed and immortal life. For having no obstacle to the knowledge of the divine, he continuously contemplates by his purity the image of the Father, God the Word, in whose image he was made, and is filled with admiration when he grasps his providence towards the universe. (*Pagans 2*)

In Athanasius's account, the human race originally possessed happiness and immortality on account of its unique relationship of similitude with the image of God.¹⁸ God the Father, working “through his own Word,” made human beings according to the Word, who is the Father's own image (see Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3). Here, as throughout *Pagans-Incarnation*, Athanasius maintains the preposition used in Gen 1:26–27, emphasizing that God made human beings “according to” (κατ') his image; God did not give human beings his

18. In *Pagans-Incarnation*, Athanasius presents human beings as creatures that are simultaneously like and unlike all other created beings. As with all creatures, human beings owe their existence to God, who created them through his Word. Consequently the nature (φύσις) of human persons resembles that of other created beings. It is originate (γεννητός), brought into existence from nothing (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων), corruptible (φθαρτός) because of its origination from nothing, and given life and subsistence through the Word. Yet human beings are also distinct from the rest of creation. They alone have been formed according to the image of God (κατ' εἰκόνα). For Athanasius, the human race's formation according to the divine image distinguishes it from all other beings because this formation implies that human beings were created to image their Creator. As such—as creatures that are both created from nothing and formed according to the divine image—human beings possess an essential identity and place in the universe that is uniquely paradoxical. On the one hand, human beings are creatures by nature. They have been created from nothing, and as such they are naturally corruptible—they are naturally pulled back towards nonexistence. Their existence therefore entirely depends on God, who creates and sustains them. On the other hand, humans are icons of the image of God. They have been formed “according to the image of God”—according to the Word, who is “the exact Image of his Father” (*Pagans 41*; cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3) and “the Image of the invisible God” (*Pagans 41*; Col 1:15).

image.¹⁹ Instead of intrinsically possessing the divine image, human beings participate in God's image through grace.

In *Pagans-Incarnation*, Athanasius employs the language of participation to explain the relationship between creation and the grace of the Word. The Word graciously gives human beings a share in his natural rationality, existence, and imaging of the Father.²⁰ The appeal of participation language for Athanasius appears to be twofold. First, through the influence of Origen and other Platonizing biblical interpreters, such language was by then an established part of Greek theological terminology.²¹ Second, and most importantly, participation language remained flexible. It could be adapted to express complex biblical ideas, such as humanity's formation according to the divine image, which required nuanced language capable of articulating contingency, similarity, and distinction. As Khaled Anatolios observes, participation language can be used to indicate and preserve a relationship of both opposition and similarity.²² Through participation, the participant receives a share in and a similitude to the form; but the participant simultaneously remains distinct from the form. In turn, the form necessarily transcends the participant in the act of giving a share in itself to the participant. Participation therefore implies a degree of similitude, and similitude implies a degree of participation.

The unique grace of participation in God's image (the Word) empowers the human person, making that person capable of considering divine things, including the Word and, through the Word, the Father. It is crucial to note that, for Athanasius, humanity's imaging of God primarily occurs in the human soul, which, like the Word of

19. Régis Bernard, *L'image de Dieu d'après Athanase* (Paris: Aubier, 1952), 27.

20. The grace of participation overcomes human beings' natural epistemological limitations because it allows them to share in and actively experience and use attributes that are proper to the Word. Participation language also enables Athanasius to distinguish the Word's natural possession of these properties from the human experience of them. Both uses are evident in *Pagans* 46. Athanasius says the Son "is the Father's Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation [μετοχή], nor as if these qualities were imparted to him from without. . . . [Those] who partake [μετέχοντας] of him . . . are made wise by him, and receive power and reason in him."

21. On participation in earlier writers, see below, <TS>00. See also David L. Balás, *Μετουσία Θεοῦ: Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, *Studia Anselmiana* 55 (Rome: Libreria Herder, 1966), 6–12; Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially 147–52.

22. Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 51–52.

God, is immortal and rational (*Pagans* 8, 34).²³ As such, if the soul is kept pure, then it possesses a real similarity to the Word (and therefore also to the Father, whom the Word perfectly images). Indeed, the pure soul resembles the Word to such a degree that it is said to reflect the Word “as in a mirror” (*Pagans* 34; cf. 8). When contemplated by the human mind, this reflection brings about real knowledge and contemplation of the Word and, through him, the Father. As long as human beings preserve their divine likeness through purity, avoiding the obstacles of sensual desire, they can enjoy the blessed life God intended for them, namely, a life characterized by immortality and the happiness that comes from the everlasting contemplation of God.

The Loss of the Knowledge of God

After this brief introduction to how human beings were created, Athanasius turns his attention toward demonstrating why humans required the salvation achieved through the cross. Summarizing what lies at the heart of humanity’s problem, he writes:

In this way then, as has been said, did the Creator fashion the human race, and such did he wish it to remain. But men, contemptuous of the better things and shrinking from their apprehension, sought rather what was closer to themselves—and what was closer to them was the body and its sensations. So they turned their minds away from intelligible reality and began to consider themselves. And by considering themselves and cleaving to the body and the other senses, deceived as it were in their own interests, they fell into selfish desires and preferred their own good to the contemplation of the divine. Wasting their time thus and being unwilling to turn away from things close at hand, they imprisoned in the pleasures of the body their souls which had become disordered and defiled by all

23. This association of the image of God with the human soul and its rationality is not new in the fourth century, but it is expressed in very similar terms in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Preparatio Evangelica*, which Athanasius surely knew at the time of writing *Pagans-Incarnation*. Eusebius writes: “Rather does the rational and immortal soul and the impassible mind in man’s nature seem to me to be rightly spoken of as preserving an image and likeness of God, inasmuch as it is immaterial and incorporeal, and intelligent and rational in its essence, and is capable of virtue and wisdom” (*P.E.* 3.10). Also: “[We] have been made in our soul after the image and likeness of God. And in reference to this man is also regarded as having the nature of a ruler and a king, and is the only one of the creatures upon earth that has powers of reasoning, creating, judging, and legislating, and is capable of learning arts and sciences. For only the soul in man is an intelligent and rational essence, in which the other animals on earth do not participate” (*P.E.* 7.17).

kinds of desires, and in the end they forgot the power they had received from God in the beginning. (*Pagans* 3)

Following the general narrative of Genesis 2–3, Athanasius’s account portrays the initial history of human beings as a tragedy. God the Father gave humans the opportunity to enjoy everlasting happiness through the contemplation of the divine, but, as Athanasius continues, “at the urging of the serpent” the first human “abandoned his thinking of God and began to consider himself” (*Pagans* 3). Rather than remaining in contemplation of God, the first humans were deceived by the devil into reorienting their rational powers away from God.

In *Pagans* 4–5, Athanasius explains that the soul, being the “charioteer” of the body (*Pagans* 5), is mobile (εὐκίνητος) by nature and constantly in motion (*Pagans* 4). As such, the first souls believed that as long as they were in motion they were living according to God’s will, “not realizing that [the soul] had been created not simply for movement, but for movement towards the right objective” (*Pagans* 4). Consequently, they turned their contemplative abilities and bodily senses away from God (and from “the good,” which Athanasius describes as “reality” because “it has its exemplar in God”).²⁴ They focused instead on their bodies, devising ways to abuse their abilities for the enjoyment of selfish bodily pleasures (*Pagans* 4); Athanasius considers these activities to be “evil” and “unreal” because they do not have their origin in God.²⁵ In contrast, he understands rationality to be the state in which the soul knows God the Father through the contemplation of the Word and governs itself according to reason.²⁶

24. On the possible Middle Platonic background for this aspect of Athanasius’s thought, see Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism*, 10–13, who interprets our verse in light of this background. “[*Pagans* 4.4] clearly says therefore that the good things are real, because they are created after the ideas which are God’s thoughts.”

25. For Athanasius, this movement away from the consideration of God is the definition of sin and evil because it robs human beings of their communion with God, making humans—who were created according to the image of God—no better than animals. Further, as humans turn away from God, they inevitably focus on finite pleasures, which leads to greed, murder, and other harmful activities. See also the discussion of “sin as movement” in M. C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 174–77.

26. While contrasting the rationality of humans with animals, Athanasius equates irrationality with ignorance of God and self-governance according to physical desires. Rationality, on the other hand, involves knowing God and judging sense perceptions according to reason and realities beyond the individual person. At its most basic level, rationality distinguishes humans from

As a result of misusing their abilities in this way, these souls enslaved themselves to the pursuit of debased bodily pleasures, forgetting their formation according to the image of God that had graced them with a rational soul. Thus when these souls abandoned their movement toward God, they also effectively abandoned their rationality.

Consequences of Losing the Knowledge of God

Apart from the occasional supplementary expositions on the formation and fall of human beings, the remainder of *Pagans* describes the consequences of humankind's abandonment of rationality and loss of the knowledge of God. By abandoning their contemplation of God and using their sensory abilities for pleasure, humans discovered that such pleasures are fleeting. Rather than turning back to God, however, humans "began to adopt such an attitude towards [these pleasures] that they were afraid of losing them," and this, in turn, inspired fear of death, because death would bring an end to the enjoyment of bodily pleasures (*Pagans* 3). The fleeting quality and finite quantity of these pleasures also evoked greed. The soul could not be fully satisfied by bodily pleasures, and thus "desiring and not obtaining satisfaction, it learned to murder and commit injustice" as it attempted to obtain for itself as much pleasure as possible, through whatever means was necessary (*Pagans* 3).²⁷ In *Pagans* 5, Athanasius expands on this theme, showing that the pursuit of pleasure involves misusing the body and

animals, for it implies that the human "can reason about what lies outside himself, and think about absent things, and recall his reasoning and judge and choose the better arguments. But irrational animals only see what is at hand, and only make for what they can see, even if they thereby come to harm. Man, however, does not rush on what he sees, but judges with his reason what he sees with his eyes" (*Pagans* 31). Rationality, however, as the mind's capacity to consider and contemplate realities beyond oneself, ultimately entails knowledge and contemplation of the Word and the Father. The soul is immortal and has been given the power to consider things that are immortal and "above the earth" for the sake of beholding God (*Pagans* 33; cf. *Pagans* 8). Each of us has the road to the knowledge of God "within us" (*Pagans* 30). Athanasius identifies this road as our soul's rationality and intelligence, and he argues that one could only deny this potential by denying the very existence of the soul or its rationality (*Pagans* 30).

27. There is also a cosmological consequence of sin. Human beings, having forgotten that God is the center of the universe and thereafter contemplating themselves, came to view the world as though all things were intended to relate to and serve themselves. Each soul, now orienting the cosmos around itself, became inclined to greed, envy, robbery, murder, adultery, and warfare as it attempted to make the earth serve itself, which effectively shattered the harmony of the universe.

harming other persons, and that these evils “have no cause save the turning away from better things.”

In *Pagans* 6–7, Athanasius highlights another consequence of humankind’s loss of rationality and the knowledge of God: certain human beings, aware of the presence of evil in the world but unaware of Christ, have concluded that evil must be a substantive reality created by a god. Athanasius of course rejects this view, arguing that it contradicts Scripture and reason. Thinking first of gnostics, Athanasius refutes this position by arguing that if evil truly exists, then either God is not the creator of all things or God is the creator of evil. Turning to Marcionites, Athanasius acknowledges that some heretics have avoided these conclusions by proposing a solution that annuls Christianity’s claims to monotheism: there are two Creators—one of good things and one of evil things.

The remainder of *Pagans* amounts to an extended refutation of Greek and pagan idolatry. This idolatry is a consequence of the irrationality characteristic of fallen human beings, who have lost the knowledge of God. The refutation begins in *Pagans* 11–29, where Athanasius attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of these idols, arguing that it is not right for human beings to worship “gods” who are characterized by the basest of human behaviors (11–12; 14; 16–18), composed of immobile, lifeless wood and stones (13; 15–16), formed by irrational artists and poets (13; 19–22), considered local deities (23–24), associated with practices that make their worshipers less than irrational animals (25–26), or are corporeal parts of the universe (27–29). Next, in *Pagans* 30–34, Athanasius criticizes idolatry on the basis of the human soul. He contends that idolatry cannot be justified because the soul, being formed according to the image of God, provides humankind with the ability to know its Creator. Last, Athanasius dedicates the rest of *Pagans* (35–47) to refuting idolatry on account of God’s self-revelation to humanity. Here Athanasius argues that there is no excuse for idolatry because the Father and the Word have revealed themselves through the harmonious order of the universe (35–47), which is also testified to in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Athanasius concludes *Pagans* by reminding his readers of humankind's predicament prior to the incarnation of the Word. Although human beings were created according to God's image, and given every opportunity to preserve (and later regain) their knowledge of God, they ignored these opportunities, acting instead like "completely blinded fools" (*Pagans* 47), "worshipping creation instead of the creator" (Rom 1:25) and living as those who deserved "great shame and merciless danger" because "although they knew the road of truth they did the opposite to what they knew" (*Pagans* 47). In this manner, *Pagans* ends as it begins, with a focus on the importance of the knowledge of God.

3. The Arguments of *Incarnation*

With the opening of *Incarnation*, Athanasius begins a gradual transition from the focus in *Pagans* on the loss and restoration of the knowledge of God to the subject of the loss and restoration of immortality, which becomes the primary theme of *Incarnation*. Athanasius starts out by summarizing the content of *Pagans* in a manner that further supports my argument about the purpose of *Pagans*. He describes *Pagans* as a treatise "regarding the error of the Gentiles concerning idols and their superstition, how their invention was from the beginning, and that out of wickedness human beings devised for themselves the worship of idols," which also contains "points regarding the divinity of the Word of the Father and his providence and power in all things, that through him the good Father arranges all things, by him all things are moved, and in him are given life" (*Incarnation* 1). For Athanasius, *Pagans* was meant to demonstrate the necessity of the cross by highlighting the evil and irrationality that arose as a result of humans forgetting their Creator and replacing him with gods of their own invention.

Having summarized *Pagans*, Athanasius proceeds by anticipating a theme that he will return to later in *Incarnation*: The cross is mocked by unbelievers because of its weakness, but this very weakness shows the power of God, for it was through the powerless cross that Christ did the "impossible" (*ἀδύνατα*) in defeating death, overthrowing idolatry, and

revealing God. Athanasius argues that mockery of Christ's crucifixion ultimately promotes the worship of Christ because

the more [Christ] is mocked by unbelievers by so much he provides a greater witness of his divinity, because what human beings cannot understand as impossible, these he shows to be possible, and what human beings mock as unseemly, these he renders fitting by his own goodness, and 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, invisibly persuading those who mock and disbelieve to recognize his divinity and power. (*Incarnation* 1)

The apparent degradation of the cross presents a stumbling block to so-called wise persons who are too proud to believe that God could work in this way. However, to those who believe, the apparent powerlessness of Christ on the cross proves the power of God and strengthens their faith. This is because the cross shows that God was able to do the impossible through the most unlikely of means.

Athanasius's transition from the focus in *Pagans* on rationality and knowledge of God to the subject of mortality continues in *Incarnation* 2–7. In *Incarnation* 2, Athanasius introduces the subject of cosmogony, which leads to a second account of the creation of the universe and the fall of human beings.²⁸ He observes that the various Greek cosmogonies rob God of his glory as Creator, teaching that the universe was formed through spontaneity,²⁹ preexistent matter,³⁰ or a creator other than the Father of Christ.³¹ Athanasius proceeds to contrast these views with his understanding of creation. In *Pagans*, Athanasius's account of creation and the fall emphasizes the significance of the rationality of the human soul due to its formation according to the image of God, which gave humans the ability to know God. The nature of this account helps to set up Athanasius's argument for the need to restore rationality and the knowledge of God. In *Incarnation* 3, the account of the creation and

28. On the first account, see above, <TS>00; *Pagans* 2–5.

29. Athanasius attributes this to the Epicureans. See the negative account in Aelian, *Fr.* 61.

30. Attributed to Plato. See *Tim.* 31b–33a.

31. Athanasius is thinking of Marcionism, which is described similarly in Eusebius of Caesarea, *H.E.* 4.11; Origen, *Princ.* 2.4.3; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.1.

the fall reaffirms humanity's rationality, but it places more emphasis on matters related to human mortality and immortality. The account begins by again linking humanity's rationality to its formation according to the image of God.

[God] seeing that by the principle of [humanity's] own coming into being it would not be able to endure eternally [καὶ θεωρήσας ὡς οὐχ ἱκανὸν εἶη κατὰ τὸν τῆς ἰδίας γενέσεως λόγον διαμένειν αἰεὶ], he granted them a further gift, creating human beings not simply like all the irrational [ἄλογα] animals upon the earth but making them according to his own image, giving them a share of the power of his own Word [μεταδούς αὐτοῖς καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἰδίου Λόγου δυνάμεως], so that having as it were shadows of the Word and being made rational [ἵνα ὥσπερ σκιάς τινὰς ἔχοντες τοῦ Λόγου καὶ γενόμενοι λογικοί], they might be able to abide in blessedness, living the true life which is really that of the holy ones in paradise. (*Incarnation 3*)

As in *Pagans*, Athanasius at least partially defines the formation of human beings according to the image of God in terms of the experience of rationality, and describes this rationality as a participation in the Word's own rationality.³² Human rationality is again associated with the preservation of immortality.

The Restoration of Immortality

From here, the subject of immortality becomes central to Athanasius's account of the creation and fall of human beings. God created humans with free choice, and he desired for them to use their contemplative abilities to remain in paradise and in relationship to himself. God also recognized that free choice involved risk. Humans could use their contemplative powers to focus on bodily pleasures, which would lead them to invent evil. The implicit problem with this option is that allowing humans to live forever after abandoning God and discovering evil would ultimately result in a world filled with unending horror.³³

32. The English use of "Word" and "rationality" for λόγος and λογικός of course hides the cognate relationship between these Greek words. The language of participation indicates that humans do not intrinsically possess rationality; their experience of rationality is contingent on their relationship to the Word. For more on participation, see above, <TS>00, and chap. 6.

33. In this scenario individuals could subject one another to every evil imaginable for the sake of

Therefore, according to Athanasius, God, being wise and good, established the law of death to protect humans from this scenario. Consequently, if the first humans “guarded the grace” of their rational powers and their formation according to the image of God, using it only for good, they would preserve their immortality, living the angelic life with God. On the other hand, if they turned from God, becoming evil, “they would know that they endure the corruption of death according to nature [γινώσκειεν ἑαυτοὺς τὴν ἐν θανάτῳ κατὰ φύσιν φθορὰν ὑπομένειν], and no longer live in paradise, but thereafter dying outside of it, would remain in death and corruption [μένειν ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ καὶ ἐν τῇ φθορᾷ]” (*Incarnation* 3 TM).

Here Athanasius introduces an important theme in *Incarnation*—that death is accompanied by corruption. Athanasius describes his understanding of this relationship in the subsequent section, which discusses the fall of human beings. He writes:

For the transgression of the commandment returned them to the natural state [τὸ κατὰ φύσιν], so that, just as they, not being [οὐκ ὄντες], came to be, so also they might rightly endure in time the corruption unto non-being [τὴν εἰς τὸ μὴ εἶναι φθορὰν]. For if having a nature that did not once exist [τὸ μὴ εἶναι ποτε], they were called into existence by the Word’s advent and love for human beings, it follows that when human beings were bereft of the knowledge of God and had turned to things which exist not—evil is non-being, the good is being, since it has come into being from the existing God—then they were bereft also of eternal being. But this, being decomposed, is to remain in death and corruption [μένειν ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ καὶ τῇ φθορᾷ]. For the human being is by nature mortal [θνητός], having come into being from nothing [ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων γεγινώς]. But because of his likeness [ὁμοιότητα] to the One who Is, which, if had guarded through his comprehension [κατανοήσεως] of him, would have blunted his natural corruption [φύσιν φθοράν], he would have remained incorruptible [ἔμεινεν ἄφθαρτος]. (*Incarnation* 4)

Human beings, having been created by God out of nothing, are naturally pulled toward this nothingness. However, by the grace of participation in the Word and contemplation of God, humans were

attempting to satisfy their corporeal desires. Exploited persons would never be able to escape from these unchecked terrors—not even through death, since there is no death.