

THE ARSENAL OF ATHANASIUS:
A LOOK AT ATHANASIUS' DEFENSE OF THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

From the dawn of the church age, a plethora of heretical assertions have been launched against the truth of the Christian scriptures and orthodox Christian theology. Even the first few centuries saw some of the most horrific distortions of truth, and most of today's deviations from sound doctrine find their roots in these earlier heresies. Perhaps few of these profanations could be comparable to the Arian heresy and the controversy that would ensue from it.

The early stages of the controversy began brewing around the year AD 319 when a presbyter named Arias began to preach that Jesus Christ was a created being through whom all the rest of creation had been subsequently formed by God. By implication, he further emphasized his belief in a Christ who was not entirely eternal and did not share the same nature of divinity as that of God the Father. Arias' bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, eventually condemned and exiled Arius for his teachings. In 325, at the Council of Nicaea, Arius was anathematized; however, due to widespread unease over the semantics of this decision as well as later political and ecclesiastical issues, the heresy continued to threaten the church until it was finally thwarted at the Council of Constantinople in 381.¹ Athanasius, who eventually succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria, was perhaps the most persistent and outspoken opponent of the

¹William G. Rusch, ed. *The Trinitarian Controversy*. Fortress, (1980): 17-19, 24.

Arian heresy. He would suffer exile a total of five times over the course of the controversy.²

A contemplation of the framework and the vast theological, political, and ecclesiastical complexities of this resilient controversy beg a host of questions, yet I have chosen to answer the following: What were the main elements of Athanasius of Alexandria's campaign against Arianism? It will be the aim of this discourse to argue that Athanasius' conviction of the full divinity of Jesus Christ and the implications this doctrine has on the gospel of Jesus Christ directly influenced his method for defending Christian orthodoxy against the threat of the Arian heresy. I will attempt to prove this claim by examining Athanasius' employment of scripture, logic, and descriptions of the behavior of Arians in his writings regarding Arianism.

Use of Scripture

In order to effectively survey Athanasius' use of scripture concerning his defense of the divinity of Christ, it is profitable to trace his argument through the first three Discourses of his *Orations Against the Arians*. Due to uncertainty regarding its authorship and whether it ought to be considered a continuation of the first three discourses, the fourth discourse will not be included in this survey.³

Athanasius' conviction of the divinity of Christ and of a gospel that requires a fully divine Christ is founded first upon the direct assertions of a number of passages in

²Athanasius *Select Works and Letters*, ed. Schaff, Philip, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II, Volume 4*, Christian Classis Ethereal Library [online]. Accessed 19 November 2009. Available from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.html>; Internet.

³Rusch, ed. *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 23.

scripture concerning Jesus Christ, the Word of God, which include John 1:1-3, John 8:58, John 14:6, I Corinthians 1:24, and Revelation 1:8. In addition to these texts, Athanasius adds to the equation the fact that Christ describes himself in terms of “I am” as opposed to “I became,” and the scriptures refer to him in terms of “always” and “everlasting” as opposed to using the word “once” like the Arians.⁴ However, to this the Arians reportedly asserted that Jesus was only God “in name” and “by participation” in the Father’s will and grace.⁵ In addition to this, they had proposed that perhaps there were actually two Words or Wisdoms of God, one being an eternal “attribute” of the Father and the other being originated through that attribute as Jesus Christ.⁶ Realizing that arguments from the surface level of the scriptures would not suffice in his efforts to expose the errors rampant in Arianism, from this point forward Athanasius embarks on an endeavor to defend one by one what he finds to be some of the most common verses and passages misrepresented by the Arians.⁷

The Immutability of Jesus Christ

In their attempt to disprove the veracity of the deity of Christ, the Arians would point to words in passages that, if taken out of context, would seem to say that Jesus Christ had changed and had not always held the exalted status that is attributed to Him in scripture.⁸ Below are examples of Athanasius’ defense of some of these passages.

⁴Athanasius, *Orations*, 1.11-13.

⁵Ibid., 1.6.

⁶Ibid., 1.5

⁷Ibid., 1.37, 54

⁸Ibid., 1.37

Philippians 2:9-10. The Arian interpretation of this portion of scripture is that Jesus Christ was exalted and given a special name above all others as a reward for his actions upon the earth. This would imply that the Son was once lacking this exaltation and did not always have this name, meaning that he was “neither very God nor very Son” and only received this status later.⁹

To answer this position, Athanasius draws from passages such as John 17:5 and John 1:3 to demonstrate that Jesus Christ had preeminence and glory before creation even existed, much before he had made his appearance on earth and partook in his exaltation and naming. Athanasius further argues that Jesus underwent these things not on behalf of himself, but rather on behalf of mankind. He explains, “He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us.”¹⁰

Psalms 45:7-8. The Arians would understand from this passage that Jesus Christ was at one time equal with other men, referred to as his “partners” and that he had required an anointing, which was once lacking, in order to receive his kingdom. Again, they would also point to this passage as one proving his mutability, having earned his position by loving righteousness and hating iniquity.

Athanasius defeats this incorrect interpretation of the Psalm by indicating that the Psalmist identifies Jesus Christ as God and speaks of his kingdom as one that is “forever” and “eternal,” separating him from all other created things. The anointing he undergoes is again for the sake of mankind and not his own. He makes reference to the

⁹Ibid., 1.38.

¹⁰Ibid., 1.37-39.

baptism and anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in the Jordan, emphasizing that he received this anointing of the Spirit to enable humanity to receive it and that he as the Word and Wisdom of God does not need the anointing of the Spirit. Athanasius further argues that the immutability of Christ is on the contrary proven by his love for righteousness and hatred for iniquity, for it in no way implies that he ever did not love righteousness or hate iniquity. He references Romans 5:12, adding that Christ was the second Adam who is the express image and example of all that is right.¹¹

The Non-origination of Jesus Christ

In addition to their desire to debunk the immutability of Christ, the Arians also sought to find passages that seemed to teach that Jesus Christ was a “creature,” a “work” or something “originate.”¹²

Hebrews 1:4. From the wording of this verse, the Arians would assert that because it says Christ had “become better than the angels” and “obtained a more excellent Name,” his origin is being likened to that of the angels.¹³

Athanasius contends that from the broader context of the passage, the biblical author is referring to the arrival in the flesh of the ministry of the Son as becoming greater than that of the angels who were slaves, for he as Son was greater than a slave. This was done to distinguish between the old ministry of the angels and the present ministry of the Son. Further he argues that the author of this verse chooses the word

¹¹Ibid, 1.46-47.51.

¹²Ibid. 1.53

¹³Ibid.

“better,” instead of “greater” or “more honorable,” to show a difference in nature rather than a similarity and supports this point by drawing attention to similar word usage in Psalm 84:10, Proverbs 8:10-11, and Isaiah 56:4-5.¹⁴

Hebrews 3:2. Again, Athanasius shows that the context of the surrounding passage qualifies the verbiage used by the writer in this verse. The scenario underlying this text is Christ’s taking on flesh to destroy the power of the devil and death. He argues that his being “made” refers to his “human economy” and not his divine “essence.”¹⁵ Additionally, Athanasius reaffirms his aforementioned position on the difference in nature between the Son and God’s created servants, asserting that indeed Moses was said to be faithful in the house of God, but that Christ is said to have built that house and reigned over it.¹⁶

Acts 2:36. In this verse, it is argued by the Arians that Jesus had not always been Christ and Lord, but had become these things as an obedient creature or work of God and according to his will.¹⁷

To begin, Athanasius asks the Arians rhetorically whether the scriptures ever explicitly say that the “Word” or the “Son” of God is said to have been “made.”¹⁸ He then continues along this line of thought, asserting that Jesus’ being “made both Lord and

¹⁴Ibid., 1.53.

¹⁵Ibid., 2.8.

¹⁶Ibid., 2.10

¹⁷Ibid., 2.11

¹⁸Ibid.

Christ” refers to his being “manifested” as a man in these offices, for it was not the divine nature of the Word that died on the cross, but his human body.¹⁹ In essence, this verse does not teach that Jesus had not previously been Lord and Christ, but that he had in those days begun to “shew His Lordship,” having “gained possession” of humankind.²⁰

The Unity of Divine Substance Between the Father and Jesus Christ

Another quality of Jesus Christ’s divinity that the Arians sought to undermine was His immateriality. They would often understand the statements that Christ made concerning his relationship with the Father through a finite filter and thus would interpret the “immaterial” in a “material manner.”²¹ As a result, their only explanation for the following verses was that Christ was in the same manner abiding in God and one with God as the saints.

John 14:10. In reply to the above mentioned response to verses such as this, Athanasius argues that there is nothing lacking in the Father and the Son nor is there any emptiness in their divinity that they should want. Simply put, Jesus is referring to their commonness of divine nature and that the same essence of divinity in the Father is in Christ.²² Had Christ been speaking of a similar relationship to the saints, Athanasius claims that he would more likely have said, “I ‘too’ am in the Father.”²³ He further

¹⁹Ibid., 2.12

²⁰Ibid., 2.12-13

²¹Ibid., 3.1-2

²²Ibid., 3.1,4

²³Ibid., 3.3

strengthens his position regarding this verse by referring to John 14:9 in which Jesus declares that he is the express image or proper representation of the Father in divine substance.²⁴

John 17:3. To the Arians, this passage appears to teach that Jesus Christ is differentiated from the “True God.”²⁵ However, Athanasius draws his readers’ attention to the purpose of this verse. Rather than distinguishing the True God from Jesus Christ, the aim of the text is to distinguish the true God from all of the false gods that people worship instead of him. In addition, he points out that contrary to the Arian notion mentioned above, Christ actually ranks himself equal in nature with the True God and thus finds himself worthy to share in receiving worship.²⁶

John 10:30, 17:11. Again, the Arians find these verses to teach that Christ’s relationship as one with the Father is nothing more than what the saints may experience with him. Athanasius skillfully refutes this notion, giving a few examples from scripture in which similar language is used. Referring to Matthew 10:16, he highlights Jesus command to his disciples to “be . . . wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” Additionally he presents from the words of Christ, “Be ye merciful, as your Father which is in heaven is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Neither of these examples are an invitation to share the same essence, but rather to imitate qualities. Consequentially, Athanasius instead defines the unity that is to be had amongst the adopted children of God as a unity

²⁴Ibid., 3.5.

²⁵Ibid., 3.8.

²⁶Ibid., 3.7,9

in the Holy Spirit.²⁷

The Harmony of the Humanity and Divinity of Jesus Christ

As if the defense put forth by Athanasius thus far had not sufficed to leave them speechless, the Arians still sought to shed doubt on the reality of Christ's divinity. They found his human experiences in the gospel accounts to be irreconcilable with his divinity, as they understood that the divine have no need or lack. These men held that if Christ suffered and prayed, he lacked omnipotence; if he asked questions, he lacked omniscience; if he was forsaken by God on the cross, he lacked eternal fellowship with the Father; and if he asked for glory, he lacked divine glory.²⁸

To this Athanasius responded first by asserting that the gospels contain a "double account of the Savior," displaying two distinct and uncompromised natures of humanity and divinity within the one undivided agent, Jesus Christ."²⁹ Next, he compares the instances in which the scriptures purport that Jesus Christ "asked for" or "received" things from the Father, with the accounts of Him already possessing these things before ever asking for them or receiving them.³⁰ Indeed, Athanasius argues based upon passages such as John 1:3, I Corinthians 8:6, and I Corinthians 2:8 that because Jesus Christ was the divine Word of God, He already had possession of everything, including all authority and glory. Athanasius reasons from Matthew 4:10, Luke 10:18,

²⁷Ibid., 3.17-19

²⁸Ibid., 3.26

²⁹Ibid., 3.35

³⁰Ibid., 3.39

Matthew 9:5, Luke 7:48, and Isaiah 9:6 that the Christ demonstrated fullness of authority before He ever mentions being given authority in Matthew 28:18. He then continues to explain that the occasions in which we find the Christ speaking of “everything,” “all authority,” and “glory” being “given” or “handed over” to Him are not a negation of His possession of these things as the divine Word, but were necessary for the Son to fulfill in His humanity so that “from now on, through His mediation, human beings, made ‘sharers in the divine nature,’ have authority over demons on earth, while in the heavens, ‘being set free from corruption,’ they will reign eternally.”³¹ This understanding of Christ having essentially “summed up” humanity in himself that he might free mankind from death and corruption in Adam and thereby make him able to be blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ highly resembles Irenaeus of Lyons’ doctrine of recapitulation.³²

Allegorical Interpretation

Athanasius devotes a considerable portion of his second discourse to defend what he understands to be the proper meaning of Proverbs 8:22. The influence of the Alexandrian school of thought, particularly in respect to its emphasis on the allegorical method of scripture interpretation, is apparent in the assertions of both these Alexandrian clergymen.³³ The ‘lady wisdom’ who is speaking in this proverb is understood by both of

³¹Ibid., 3.40

³²Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 5.14.1.

³³Kurian, G. T. *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The authoritative resource on the Christian world*. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Pubs, 2001), s.v. “Alexandrian School.”

them to be synonymous with the Wisdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ.³⁴

Use of Logic

In discussing Athanasius' use of logic in his dismantling of the Arian heresy, it is important to note that even his logical assertions were either direct deductions from the scriptures or analogies that suitably represented concepts conveyed in the scriptures.

Proof by Implication

The Eternity of Jesus Christ. The Arians incorrectly believed that the Father begot the Son in the same manner that humans beget sons and bring them into existence at some point in time. Athanasius argues that by implication if the Father is of eternal nature, then what he begets must also be of eternal nature because begetting signifies a sharing of nature both in human and divine spheres.³⁵

The Immutability of Jesus Christ. It was often argued by the Arians that Jesus Christ was mutable in nature and had once not existed yet at some point in time had become Son. Athanasius demonstrates by implication that if the Son had not always been Son, then the Father had not always been Father. This further implies that the Father would have had to be mutable, a clear violation of the scriptural picture of divine nature according to verses and passages such as Malachi 3:6.³⁶

³⁴Athanasius, *Orations* 2.18-82.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 1.23

³⁶*Ibid.*, 1.24

The Distinction of Jesus Christ from Creatures. The role of Jesus Christ in the process of bringing about creation was severely misunderstood by the adherents of Arian theology. They believed that Jesus Christ was among created things, though he was considered the first being to have been created. The rebuttal of this position by implication according to Athanasius was that Christ could not have created “all things,” if he himself was a creature, for he could not create himself. Therefore, he could not have been among created things, clearly being different from them in nature.³⁷

Illustration by Analogy

Athanasius referred to the analogy of light and radiance to describe his understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Just as light is displayed in radiance, so the Father is seen in the Son. In much the same way “when the Son works, the Father is the Worker”.³⁸

The Fruit of the Arian Heresy

In addition to scripture and logic, Athanasius also employed examples of the fruit of those who adhered to Arian theology in an attempt to prove that this belief system was not in line with a proper interpretation of the scriptures and thus left them with a gospel that was dead because it opposed the divinity of Christ.

General Examples

According to Athanasius, perverse practices were common among the

³⁷Ibid., 1.19

³⁸ Ibid., 3.8, 11

followers of Arianism. When the opportunity and especially when political favor was at hand, the Arians would persecute Christians of sincere faith to a harmful degree. People were known to have suffered severely ill treatment and even death at their hands.

Athanasius believed that the persecutions of Christians by governing administrations were encouraged by Arian instigators. They are even said to have conjured up false slanders against people in the name of their cause.³⁹ Athanasius found them to be willing to practice all manner of wickedness and cruelty. His view of the connection of their behavior with their theology is that “indeed their lives are only in accordance with their spirit and the follies of their doctrines; for there are no sins that one could charge them with, how heinous soever, that they do not commit without shame.”⁴⁰

Specific Examples

Athanasius mentions a number of specific examples of ungodly behavior from the Arians. First, a man named Leontius was censured due to an inappropriate and intimate relationship with a young woman named Eustolium. So that he might continue to associate with her, he decided to mutilate himself. Despite being degraded for his wickedness on multiple occasions, he managed to underhandedly work his way back into higher ranks. Second, a presbyter by the name of George was notorious for living a corrupt life, and he rebelled to the point that even his peers despised him for his crimes.⁴¹ Third, Paul, the Bishop of Constantinople, was “openly strangled” on behalf of the Arian

³⁹Athanasius, *Outrages of the Arians against the Bishop*.

⁴⁰Athanasius, *He acted according to the example of the Saints. Character of his accusers*.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

cause.⁴²

Final Remarks

By the grace of God, Athanasius of Alexandria's boldness for truth and resilience against his foes enabled him to be perhaps the most formidable challenger of the Arian heresy and its cause. Based on the discussion that has unfolded above, it is hardly questionable that Athanasius was overwhelmingly convinced that he must exhaust his resources in his defense of the gospel of the divine Jesus Christ. It is doubtful that there are words that could better capture his heart for this mission than these: "I believed it necessary to tear apart the breastplate of this foul heresy and to point out the foul smell of her folly, so that those who are distant from her might flee her, and those deceived by her might repent, and with the eyes of their heart opened might discern that, just as darkness is not light, falsehood is not truth, the Arian heresy is not good."⁴³

⁴²Athanasius, *Outrages of the Arians against the Bishop*.

⁴³Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 63.

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