

**Seeing God, Becoming God:
Christology and Soteriology in Athanasius' Oration against the Arians and
Origen's On First Principles**

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Περίληψη: Ο Μ. Αθανάσιος και ο Ωριγένης εκφράζουν αρκετά διαφορετικές απόψεις για τη φύση και την αποστολή του Ιησού Χριστού, όπως αυτές διατυπώνονται στους Λόγους Κατά Αρειανών και στο έργο Περί των Πρώτων Αρχών αντίστοιχα. Σκοπός μου είναι να εξετάσω τη θεολογία τους, με αναφορές στη Χριστολογία και τη σωτηριολογία. Ενώ και οι δύο συμφωνούν ότι ο Ιησούς Χριστός είναι Θεός και άνθρωπος, ο Ωριγένης υποστηρίζει ότι ο Υιός του Θεού ενσαρκώθηκε σε μια υπάρχουσα ανθρώπινη φύση, ενώ ο Αθανάσιος θεωρεί ότι ο Υιός δημιούργησε μια ανθρώπινη φύση τη στιγμή που την ενεδύθηκε. Ο Ωριγένης αναπτύσσει μια σωτηριολογία βασισμένη στη μίμηση του παραδείγματος του Ιησού, ενώ ο Αθανάσιος αναπτύσσει μια σωτηριολογία που θεμελιώνεται στην πρόσληψη ανθρώπινης σάρκας από τον Ιησού. Και οι δύο συμφωνούν, ωστόσο, ότι τελικός σκοπός της σωτηρίας είναι μια μορφή θέωσης. Όμως ενώ ο Αθανάσιος τοποθετεί μια θεμελιώδη οντολογική μετατόπιση από τον θάνατο στη ζωή με την έννοια της σωτηρίας ως θέωσης, για τον Ωριγένη σωτηρία είναι απλά η προοδευτική ανάπτυξη μιας ήδη υπάρχουσας συμμετοχής στη θεία φύση, την οποία μοιράζονται όλα τα όντα.

Summary: Athanasius and Origen hold strikingly different views on the nature and work of Jesus Christ as expressed in the *Orations against the Arians* and *On First Principles* respectively. I will examine their theology, with a view to Christology and soteriology. While both agree that Jesus Christ is God and man, Origen argues that God the Son took up an existing human nature, while Athanasius holds that God the Son created a human nature at the moment when He took it up into Himself; Origen posits a soteriology based on imitating the example of Jesus Christ, while Athanasius posits a soteriology founded on partaking of the flesh of Jesus Christ; both agree, however, that some kind of deification is the ultimate goal of salvation. Nevertheless, while Athanasius posits a fundamental ontological shift from death to life in salvation-as-deification, for Origen, salvation is merely a progressive increase in an already existent share in the divine nature held by all beings.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: Αθανάσιος, Ωριγένης, θεολογία, σωτηριολογία, Χριστολογία

Key-words: Athanasius, Origen, theology, soteriology, Christology

Athanasius and Origen agree that Jesus Christ is in some sense both God and man. Origen refers to “the corporeal coming and incarnation of the Only Begotten Son of God”¹ and clearly states that “when the Son of God wished to appear to men and live among men for the salvation of the human race, He took not only a human body... but also a soul, and one like our souls in its nature”.² However, it is clear that Origen views the incarnation of the Son of God as the Son of God assuming a human nature that existed prior to the event of His taking it up – the soul that the Son of God took was one “like Himself in purpose and power, and such as could fulfill without turning all the wishes and dispensations of the Word and Wisdom”.³ Hence there is a clear distinction between the agency of the human nature that the Son took up (which is called Jesus⁴), and the agency of the Son Himself, such that the human nature that the Son took up is here described as being cooperative with the will of the Son. It is also the case that this soul that the Son took up had existed as intelligent and active, making choices, before the event of the Incarnation – “that soul which was in Jesus chose good before it knew evil”;⁵ “because it ‘loved righteousness and hated wickedness, therefore God anointed it with the oil of gladness above its fellows.’”⁶ This anointing occurred “when it was joined with the Word of God in a pure bond.”⁷ Clearly, Origen believes that a human called Jesus existed before the Incarnation, and was morally worthy to be specially privileged by God “because it was capable of holding the Son of

God well and fully.”⁸ So on Origen’s view, there was a human, called Jesus, who on account of righteousness was specially anointed by God, and this anointing consisted in being joined with the Word or the Son of God. The resulting union of the Son of God with the righteous human Jesus is called “Jesus Christ”;⁹ that is, Jesus the Anointed.

Accordingly, the soteriology that Origen puts forth is one of imitation: repentance, sanctification, and the attainment of mankind’s ultimate end in God are all accomplished by imitating Jesus Christ. Repentance – “each person either after a fall or after an error cleanses himself from stains by the example set forth.”¹⁰ Sanctification – “the traces of the divine image are clearly recognized... through the intelligence of the soul, its righteousness, temperance, courage, wisdom, discipline, and through the entire chorus of virtues that are present in God by substance, and can be in man through effort and the imitation of God.”¹¹ The attainment of man’s ultimate end – “the aim for which we hope is that so far as it can happen we may be made participants in the divine nature by imitating [Jesus Christ].”¹² Origen believes that the natural state of humankind without the salvific intervention of God the Son is one not ontologically divided from God, but rather one whose capacity to participate in God is severely attenuated: “in God... virtues can never enter or leave, but they are acquired by men little by little and one by one. It follows that human beings appear to have some affinity with God for this reason.”¹³

¹ Origen 207

² Origen 208

³ Origen 208

⁴ Origen 209

⁵ Origen 209

⁶ Origen 209

⁷ Origen 209

⁸ Origen 209

⁹ Origen 209

¹⁰ Origen 209

¹¹ Origen 216

¹² Origen 209

¹³ Origen 216

Despite this imitation-based soteriology, Origen does believe in some kind of deification as the ultimate end of salvation.

If the human soul receives participation in the same light and wisdom [of the divine nature], they and it will be of one nature and of one substance with one another. Moreover, the heavenly powers are incorruptible and immortal; so, doubtless, the substance of the human soul will be incorruptible and immortal. Not only this, but since the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from whose intelligible light alone the entire creation draws participation, is itself incorruptible and eternal, it certainly both follows and is necessary that every substance that draws participation from that eternal nature also endures itself forever both incorruptible and eternal... those who receive His benefits are also eternal.¹⁴

Thus, Origen posits a soteriology that runs as follows: human beings, who by default participate to some small degree in the divine nature, must imitate Jesus Christ, who as Christ is the union of the human nature of a certain Jesus with God the Son, and so increase their participation in the divine nature until they become, like the divine nature, fully incorruptible and eternal.

Athanasius differs greatly from Origen in Christology but has more in common with Origen's soteriology. For Athanasius, as for Origen, Jesus Christ is somehow God and human; however, for Origen, the human nature that belonged to Jesus Christ at one point before the Incarnation belonged only to Jesus, not yet Christ; for Athanasius, the human nature of Jesus Christ came into existence at the Incarnation and so always belonged to Jesus Christ; that is, to the

Incarnate Son of God. The Incarnation, that is, involved God the Son assuming a human nature that was created at the moment that He assumed it. This is in contrast to Origen's view, wherein the Incarnation involves God the Son assuming a human nature that was already in existence, and sufficiently rational to reject evil and choose good so in some sense "earn" the honor of being filled with God the Son. In direct contradiction to Origen's view, Athanasius declares of God the Son: "He became human. He did not enter into a human being";¹⁵ "although He is always God... in the end and on our account He became a human being, and 'the Godhead dwelt bodily'... in the flesh";¹⁶ "being God, He had His own body, and using this as an instrument, He became a human being on our account."¹⁷ So God the Son, on Origen's view, merely joined with an existing human, Jesus, to a greater degree than He had been present in anyone before or since; on Athanasius' view, God the Son actually became human by taking up a human nature such that the properties of human nature are predicated of God the Son Himself, as properly Incarnate. Hence "the things proper to His flesh are said to belong to Him because He was in it – such things as being hungry, being thirst, suffering, getting tired, and the like."¹⁸ It is not fully clear, but very unlikely, that Origen would ascribe these qualities to God the Son, as such, rather than to Jesus Christ.

Athanasius' soteriology is in many ways richer than Origen's. Although they agree on the doctrine of deification, they disagree on the means by which is accomplished. For Origen, the attenuated capacity of humans to contemplate God is gradually enlarged by practice of virtue

¹⁴ Origen 215

¹⁵ Athanasius 88

¹⁶ Athanasius 89

¹⁷ Athanasius 89

¹⁸ Athanasius 89

and is concurrent with an increasing participation in the divine nature; for Athanasius, God the Son Incarnate as Jesus Christ took on the passions of humans and, by receiving from God the Father the divine honors proper to God the Son *in His flesh*, enables humans to share in His divinity. Athanasius gives a clear statement of this view:

“now that the Logos has become human and made the flesh His very own, these passions no longer affect the body because the Logos has come to dwell within it. In fact, the opposite is the case. The passions have been destroyed by Him, and from now on human beings no longer continue as sinners and dead persons in accordance with the passions that are proper to them. Rather, they have risen from the dead in accordance with the power of the Logos, and they remain forever immortal and incorruptible.”¹⁹

As in Origen, the Christian is ultimately divinized and made “immortal and incorruptible” (similar to Origen’s “incorruptible and eternal”), but whereas for Origen this is a function of a quasi-Neoplatonic contemplation begetting ontological transformation through participation which has really nothing to do with Incarnation other than that Jesus, in Whom God the Son became incarnate, provides a perfect example of virtue to imitate, for Athanasius deification is a direct function of the Incarnation inasmuch as the body of Jesus Christ, which in truth the body of the Son of God, is how the Son of God takes onto Himself the passions that plague humanity, and confers the blessings and glory and authority of divinity to humanity. For Athanasius, the body of Jesus Christ is the locus of interchange between the passions and brokenness of humanity, and the wholeness and holiness and health and beatitude of divinity.

¹⁹ Athanasius 91-2

Whereas for Origen, sanctification is only a process of increasing the already-nonzero degree to which a human being participates in the divine nature –for “every rational creature requires participation in the Trinity”²⁰ – for Athanasius, the event of salvation in an individual’s life and their subsequent sanctification is a qualitatively new way of being. Origen does not appear to believe in a fundamental ontological change as part of the process of sanctification – rather, he posits that a progressively sanctified human being merely participates progressively more in the divine nature such that the attributes proper to divinity can be increasingly ascribed also to the human being. The salvation event as such does not really mark a dramatic change in the nature of the person. This differs from the Athanasian view, wherein at the moment of salvation a human being goes from being dead to being alive; sanctification is just a working-out of the divine nature in which the human is made participant through participating in Jesus Christ. On Athanasius’ reading, the flesh says:

“I am indeed mortal by nature, taken from the earth... I have become the flesh of the Logos, and He Himself has borne my passions, impassible though He is. So I am free from them... I have been released from the corruption which is mine by nature... the divine Logos took to Himself my state of slavery. Just as the Lord became a human being when He put on a body, so we human beings, once we have been connected to Him by way of His flesh, are divinized by the Logos, and from that point on we are the heirs of eternal life.”²¹

The passions that are natural to the flesh, which in addition to temptation to sin include susceptibility to death and impotence in the face

²⁰ Origen 210

²¹ Athanasius 93-4

of evil spiritual powers, were taken on by the Logos in the person of Jesus Christ (who is the exact same as the Incarnate Logos); He, having received (with respect to His flesh) rewards proper to divinity from God the Father, conferred them on the flesh such that anyone who is joined to His flesh enjoys the benefits of God the Son. Accordingly, “human beings, made ‘sharers in the divine nature,’ have authority over demons on the earth, while in the heavens, ‘being set free from corruption,’ they will reign eternally.”²² Because “He was true God in the flesh, and He was true flesh in the Logos,”²³ those of us who are flesh, yet joined to His flesh, are also joined to the Logos.

To situate the theologies of Athanasius and Origen within the broader context of early Christianity it will be helpful to examine the mechanisms by which they posit sanctification to occur. Origen, whose views generally are not all orthodox, is also not orthodox in his soteriology. He views sanctity as “participation in the divine light, that is, the divine nature”²⁴ and uses the language of rational contemplation to speak of sanctity – while earlier I argued that inasmuch as Origen proposes a sanctity that is a participation in the divine nature, he agrees with Athanasius, it is equally true that inasmuch as he uses the language of participation in light, and contemplation, he is in the rhetorical, if not theological, territory of the gnostics.

Athanasius has a “sacramental” view of sanctification: “‘we are all made alive in Christ’ because we are ‘reborn’ from above ‘by water and the Spirit’”²⁵; “we human beings, once we are connected to Him by way of His flesh, are divinized by the Logos, and from that point on we

are the heirs of eternal life.”²⁶ The naming of “His flesh” as the means by which we are connected to God the Son is likely a reference to the sacrament of communion; references to baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit are straightforwardly sacramental. The naming of sacramental practices as the means by which salvation and sanctification occur places Athanasius in the camp of orthodoxy more or less represented by Justin the Martyr, who when speaking of “how we dedicated ourselves to God when we were made new through Christ”²⁷ –i.e. when speaking of the events of salvation and sanctification– names baptism and communion: “they are brought by us where there is water, and are reborn by the same manner of rebirth by which we ourselves were reborn”²⁸ –the identification of baptism with rebirth here is echoed by Athanasius quoted above. And Justin later speaks of communion as “the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from Him, by which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation... the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.”²⁹ In ascribing a transformative power to communion, which is identified as the flesh of Jesus Christ, Justin establishes a line that is echoed by Athanasius who marks connection to God the Son “by way of His flesh” as the constitutive element of sanctification.

Thus, Athanasius and Origen both posit a sanctity that is in some sense a divinization, and agree that Jesus Christ is in some sense both God and man; but while Athanasius posits that God the Logos *became* human, and enables humans via sacramental participation in Himself to become divine, Origen argues that God the Logos

²² Athanasius 100

²³ Athanasius 101

²⁴ Origen 215

²⁵ Athanasius 92

²⁶ Athanasius 93-4

²⁷ Justin 282

²⁸ Justin 282

²⁹ Justin 286

joined with an existing human nature, and sets an example for humans to, via righteous action, participate to a greater degree in the divine light.

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