

An Introduction to *The Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit* by Athanasius of Alexandria

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Introduction

This paper is an examination of the three works of Athanasius known as *The Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*.¹ In the first part of the paper we will introduce these epistles providing a historical setting which will include discussions on authorship, the context, the audience, and the opponents against whom Athanasius wrote. It will be important to explore these subjects because this is a paper defined by the discipline of historical theology. It will be assumed that we can not interact with the author as if he wrote mere abstract theology. We must presuppose that he was shaped by external factors (e.g. the relatively recent decision of the Council of Nicaea; the content of the heresy being addressed).²

Likewise, it will be important to summarize the content of each letter. While the argument of one is

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- 1 This paper is dependent upon three works. The first is the Greek text which belongs to the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG®), a Research Center at the University of California, Irvine, which digitized it and owns the relevant ©Copyright. On May 15, 2008, Prof. M. Pantelia, the Director of the Center, has expressly authorized www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu to post it into that site. The second is the translation of C.R.B. Shapland, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius concerning the Holy Spirit* (New York, NY: The Philosophical Library, Inc. 1951) which is now out of print. Finally, Khaled Anatolios' work *Athanasius* (New York, NY: Routledge. 2004) which gives attention to part of letter one on pp. 172-189. It should be noted that verse divisions follow Shapland. The TLG text has verse markers as well but it is less coherent and more difficult to follow.
 - 2 As an example, Shapland notes that one reason why the second half of Letter IV is not considered to be part of the original correspondence with Serapion is because of Athanasius' exegesis of Matthew 12.32 ("Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or the age to come" NASB). He interprets this to "refer not to the Holy Spirit at all, but to the Godhead of Christ as opposed to His humanity". (p. 11) This almost has a Nestorian echo to it. Meanwhile, in I.33 and III.7 he applies the more traditional interpretation of this text to be a reference to the Holy Spirit.

What this evidences is that the Arian controversy over the deity of Christ influenced selective exegesis of this text in which he defined the Holy Spirit as the deity of Christ rather than the third person of the Trinity. In this discussion regarding the Tropici the divinity of the Spirit is at stake while the divinity of Christ is a shared premise with his opponents. Since the exegesis found in IV represents an "earlier controversy" Shapland writes, "IV.8-23 belongs to an earlier period in Athanasius' ministry." (p. 12) In reality the Arian controversy was far from over but we can appreciate the observation that IV.8-23 is addressing a subject foreign to Athanasius' discourse with Serapion.

dependent upon the other there is a reason for why Athanasius had to write three times. This will provide content for the rest of the paper.

The bulk of this discussion will be dedicated to the primary theological category of these works: Pneumatology. While there are other topics that can be addressed—such as emerging Trinitarian definitions and the Christological implications of these letters—it is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that Athanasius had to defend. The sect that he was rebutting had minimized the Holy Spirit to a created being of God which Athanasius deemed as nothing less than heresy.

Finally, it is the hope of the author of this paper to convince those currently engaging Trinitarian theology, especially Pneumatology, that there needs to be great care when it comes to discussions regarding the paradigm of the social Trinity as well as attempts by many pneumatologist to suggest that there may be a work of the Spirit that is separate from that of the Son. It should be most evident that any such suggestion must be a conscious departure from great theologians like Athanasius.

Historical Setting

Authorship and Context:

At the time that this letter was written the author, Athanasius, was in exile. He served as bishop of Alexandria from 328 CE until his death in 373. During this period he had to flee five times due to sectarian politics. It is fairly certain that he began this correspondence during the third exile (356-361).³

This one had been caused by the rise of Constantius as a pro-Arian emperor of the Roman Empire. It forced Athanasius to spend time in the Egyptian desert (which politically speaking was not as bad as it sounds considering he was able to be near the monks who were highly respected amongst the populace⁴). It was during this time that “the distinctive phrase of the Nicene Creed was condemned”⁵ and pseudo-council after pseudo-council condemned Athanasius and the Nicene party.

3 For the dating and manuscript tradition of these letters see Shapland, pp. 16-18, 43-47 for additional resources.

4 In fact, the legendary monk Antony died the first year of this exile. Since Athanasius knew Antony he was asked to write his hagiography which resulted in the *Life of Antony*. He unapologetically depicts Antony as pro-Nicene in this work.

5 Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity: V. 1, Beginning to 1500* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1975), p. 161.

In some sense it is a testimony to the where with all of Athanasius that he was able to write these treatise in the midst of political turmoil with imperial bounty hunters searching for him in the wilderness.⁶ Likewise, it is often one's first impression that when Athanasius wrote these letters the Christological controversies had been settled. This is not so. Rather, it seemed as if Arianism was going to capture all of Christendom.⁷ In fact, Jerome wrote of the decisions of the Council of Ariminium and the Council of Seleucia, which repelled Nicene terminology, that "...the Nicene faith stood condemned by acclamation. The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian".⁸

As regards broader ecclesiastical history the Council of Nicaea had occurred in 325 and the Council of Constantinople would not take place until 381 which was almost a decade after Athanasius' death. At Nicaea the enemy was Arius, a presbyter of the church in Alexandria, and his associates, who taught that Jesus was divine in a way that was somehow less than the Father. This his opponents interpreted to mean he had put the Son on the side of the Creator/creature divide. The bishop of Alexandria at that time was Alexander who objected to Arius' teaching. The two entered into a considerable debate on the matter with Alexander enacting his authority as bishop to depose the presbyter from his office. This eventually led to the council that met at Nicaea determining that the Son was of the same substance with the Father (ὁμοούσιον) supporting the views of Alexander.

Athanasius was Alexander's secretary and adviser at the council. Although he did not contribute directly it is understood that he did so indirectly due to the character of his position and close associate with Alexander. When he succeeded Alexander he vigorously defended the decisions made at Nicaea.

At the council it was Christology that was the focus. The Nicene Creed mentions the Holy Spirit saying that they believed in a list of things καί εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον. This was very vague. It said nothing about

6 For some of the interesting stories that arose from this third exile consult Adrian Fortescue, *The Greek Fathers: Their Lives and Writings* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007 reprint of 1908 edition), pp. 29-33.

7 Nevertheless, in I.2 he writes of the Arians, "Therefore it is not necessary to say anything more in reply to them; what has been previously said against them is sufficient." In spite of being exiled he seems confident that truth will prevail.

8 Jerome, *The Dialogue Against the Lucifarians*, 19.1. Accessed from <http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG1305/PG.HTM> on 17 April 2010.

the Holy Spirit likely assuming that there was a basic agreement that was not actually there.⁹

The Pneumatology of Athanasius was not as vague as the wording of the council. He had already addressed the subject in *Contra Arianos* I-III. Shapland summarizes the “principle points” as being found in I.47-48; I.50; II.18; III.15; and III.24. In I.47-48 the “Spirit is sent and given by the Son as His own”. In I.50 the Spirit is depicted as equal with the Son and the one who sanctifies. In II.18 the Spirit is the gift of God “and His mission from the Son” is proof of “the Son's Godhead”. In III.15 the Trinity is straightforwardly explained as Father, Son, and Spirit. In III. 24 “God is in us by the indwelling of the Spirit.”¹⁰

By the time of the First Council of Constantinople a definition of what it meant to “believe...also in the Holy Spirit” was expanded to include the words, “*the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.*” This creed described deity to the Holy Spirit presenting the Spirit as one God with the Father and Son. While we cannot deny that theologians such as Basil of Caesarea (“the Great”) and his work *On the Holy Spirit* were the primary influence neither can we deny what was likely the influence of these writings of Athanasius on the subject.¹¹

In fact, Shapland mentions that we would know more about Athanasius' Pneumatology had his correspondence with Basil survived.¹² One cannot help but wonder if Athanasius' writings were the foundation for Basil's thinking on the matter. It seems that the most important distinction between Athanasius and Basil concerning the Holy Spirit is that Athanasius may have merged the work/identity of the Spirit with the Son too closely for the comfort of later theologians causing Basil's work to be preferred. Nevertheless, Basil moved closer

9 One could ask if the Arians openly attacked the deity of the Holy Spirit like the Tropici would do. Shapland responds to this writings, “How far Arius himself took account of the Spirit in his doctrine is doubtful...His silence, if silence it was, needed not to be attributed to policy...It was inevitable that the new heresy should first be formulated in terms of the Son of God, and that the controversy should spend its first strength at that center. (p. 18).

10 Shapland, p. 35. n. 1.

11 In his introduction to *On the Holy Spirit*, David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980) does not mention Athanasius at all. Likewise, for all the praise Fortescue heaps upon Athanasius he says nothing of this correspondence either in his formerly noted section on the third exile or his concluding remarks regarding the latter end of Athanasius' life on pp. 34-37. While this does not determine whether or not Athanasius influenced Basil, or even if Anderson or Fortescue thinks he did or did not, it does indicate that whatever influence Athanasius may have had is not of *primary* importance (at least to them).

12 Shapland, p. 14. Though he does not see Athanasius directly influencing Basil since Basil wrote his great work c. 360 which in his opinion is not enough time for these letters to have any real impact. If this is so what we can gather is that there were two independent pro-Nicene strands that had “no difficulty in extending the ἁγίου πνεύματος to the Holy Spirit.” (p. 21)

to Athanasius when confronted with the Pneumatology of his “early associate and ascetic mentor” Eustathius of Sebaste who “maintained a subordinationist theology of the Spirit”¹³

Orthodoxy had to find a balance between the doctrine of the subordination of the Spirit and the Sabellianism/Modalism paradigm. In addition, Lewis Ayers writes,

While Basil and Athanasius have different pneumatologies they also exhibit common concerns. We might say that they and all pro-Nicenes face common pressures when they argue that the Spirit is a coequal member of the triune Godhead. The most important pressure is to find a place for the Spirit in the Trinity as distinct and not simply as another Son.¹⁴

We may not be able to reconstruct whether or not Athanasius' writings influenced the council of 381. Nevertheless, we can presume that it did have a positive impact on his immediate audience since it was preserved. Likewise, Athanasius is considered today by many to be the “Father of Orthodoxy” while we no longer hear of the “Tropici” indicating that Athanasius was the victor in this dispute.

Audience:

These letters “were written in response to a request made to him by his friend and supporter the bishop Serapion of Thmuis.”¹⁵ According to Shapland, “Serapion is not only the channel through which information as to the new heresy reaches Athanasius. He is to be the mouthpiece, and even the editor and interpreter, of the latter's reply.”¹⁶ It may be that Serapion's greatest contribution to the history of the church is his preservation and reproduction of much of Athanasius' writings.¹⁷

13 Lewis Ayers, *Nicaea and its Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 215.

14 Ibid. p. 217. Ayers seems to see the greatest distinction between Athanasius and Basil being found in their use of $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha$ language. While it is contextually obvious that Athanasius saw the actions of God as being one which came from Father, through Son, in Spirit, this term was adopted by the Homoiousian party to refer to the Spirit as “lacking real existence”. This made the Spirit a force or action of God, but not in any sense one with God.

Meanwhile, Basil was careful to avoid this use of the word by emphasizing that the Spirit “participates in all the activities of Father and Son” and by “placing all discussion of $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha$ language within the context of casual sequence”. This may explain why Basil's work on the Spirit has gained so much attention throughout church history while Athanasius has seemingly been ignored. It was the casualty of one important word in Athanasius' vocabulary being adopted by anti-Nicenes that Nicenes wanted to avoid. (See Ayers, pp. 214-218)

15 Anatolios, p. 172.

16 Shapland, p. 27.

17 A.A. Vaschalde in his article “Serapion, Saint” for the *Original Catholic Encyclopedia* (Accessed from

Since it does not appear that these letters received wide circulation, or nearly as much influence as Basil's work on the Holy Spirit, we may cautiously *assume* that the audience was localized bishops and priest under Athanasius' authority and influence as well as indirectly toward the Tropicci.¹⁸ The tone of these works appear directed at sustaining orthodoxy amongst these individuals as well as direct attacks against his opponents. Athanasius uses a lot of harsh (yet culturally acceptable) rhetoric; he writes both toward and about his opponents; and he is fond of “slippery-slope” arguments showing his readers that they must beware of x because it necessarily will lead to adopting y which is not always *necessarily* true. It is very pastoral in its intent. There are some shared premise that Athanasius has with his audience as well as his opponents. He uses this starting point to show why his opponents are wrong and why everyone else should avoid the same errors since it necessitates the abandonment of what many agree to be orthodox.

As concerns the various letters it is assumed that Letters I-IV are all authentically from the hand of Athanasius. The debate is over whether or not Letter IV belongs with Letters I-III. Most scholars simply ignore Letter IV now attributing IV. 8-23 to be altogether separate in content and focus. There is some discussion that II and III may in fact be one letter. Finally, IV.1-7 is understood to be “an independent work”¹⁹ so we will not give it much attention. It will be befitting of our purposes here to follow the traditional division of Letters I, II, and III.

Opponents:

The Tropicci²⁰ are a historical anomaly. While there were other sects that directly disputed the deity of the Holy Spirit²¹ this one appears to be distinct. It may be that it was a localized heresy found only in Egypt.²²

[http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Serapion, Saint](http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Serapion,_Saint) on 17 April 2010) accredits many more accomplishments to Serapion but it seems he is not as critical as most other sources that seem to indicate he was more of a marginal figure as concerns his own contributions. This is not to say that he did not have an important role in the Arian and Tropicci controversies since it is obvious that he did.

18 By this it is not meant that he never uses second person language against the Tropicci. Rather, it does not seem that he expected the Tropicci to actually read these letters but rather that these letters would serve as weaponry for the orthodox against the heretics.

19 Shapland, p. 13.

20 The Tropicci are called such because they were perceived to be the inventors of various “tropes” or novel teachings. Ibid. 85. n. 9.

21 Other than the normal Arians and semiarians were have direct mention of groups such as the “Macedonians” and the “Pneumatomachi”. While the Tropicci share an erroneous view of the Holy Spirit with these others it does not appear that this is one

Shapland writes,

Athanasius never explicitly says that it belongs to Egypt. But he does write as though, through Serapion, he were addressing a body of teachers and pastors toward whom he had special responsibilities.²³

Anatolios notes that the Tropici were “a group of Christians who accepted the doctrine of the full divinity of the Son but shirked from extending that confession to the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ We will address the particular arguments of this sect when we summarize the content of Letters I-III below as well as throughout our exploration of Athanasius' Pneumatology. For now, it will suffice to note two important shared premise with the Tropici.

First, it is apparent that the Tropici consider themselves to be of the Nicene party. While Athanasius will deny that this is so, since he sees any denial of the deity of the Spirit as having implications upon Christology, this is not how the Tropici likely saw themselves. While some anti-Spirit sects were essentially semiarian it does not seem that this is so with the Tropici. Therefore, Athanasius has a starting point in his shared Christological assumptions. Athanasius is determined to prove that the, “...Spirit's dependence on Christ is the same as the Son's dependence on the Father; as the Father's own the Son has the Father present in him: just so the Spirit belongs to Christ and Christ is present in the Spirit's work.”²⁵ In other words, “the work of the Spirit is the same as that of the Son...just as the Son's presence is also the presence of the Father, so too the Spirit's presence is the presence of God”.²⁶

Second, it can be assumed that there is a shared canon of Scripture. In his 39th *Festal Letter* written in 367 we find the first formalized list of the twenty-seven books that make up the current New Testament canon. While we cannot guarantee that the Tropici affirmed this list in its entirety we can assume that there was a

unified movement. As we have seen with the Arians one could lump several different strands of thought under one ideological umbrella. Likewise, there could be two different groups in two differing geographical regions that affirm something similar with various nuances that cause distinction such as the Donatist and the Novatians.

22 Lewis Ayers writes, “This group appears to be an isolated phenomenon”. p. 212.

23 Shapland, p. 27.

24 Anatolios, p. 172.

25 Ayers, p. 212.

26 Ibid. p. 213.

broad common ground here. As with the Arians there is very little effort to defend the legitimate authority of any particular work. It is usually assumed that there is good reason to quote from it. This will shape the strong *biblical* Pneumatology of these letters as interpreted through the Nicene lens.

This provides the terms of the debate. It is between two groups who have affirmed Nicene Christology; who have a similar shared authority base in the Christian canon of Scripture; and who live and minister in Egypt under the authority of the See of Alexandria. This is about as close as we can come to fully understanding the Tropicici.²⁷

Content

Letter I:

The first letter begins with a description of the Pneumatology of the Tropicici. Athanasius asserts that their teaching would destroy the Trinity. Furthermore, if the Spirit is a creature then the close connection between the Spirit and the Son will eventually lead back toward the Arian heresy (1-2).

Athanasius must follow these assertions by addressing the exegesis of the opponent. The two passages that the Tropicici used as primary proof texts were Amos 4.13 and I Timothy 5.21. In the LXX of Amos 4.13a it reads, διότι ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ στερεῶν βροντὴν καὶ κτίζων πνεῦμα καὶ ἀπαγγέλλων εἰς ἀνθρώπους τὸν χριστὸν αὐτοῦ.²⁸ The Tropicici used this text to provide sufficient proof for the Spirit as “creature”. “For, behold, I am he that strengthens the thunder, and creates spirit/wind, and proclaims to man his Christ” sounds like a Trinitarian formula with God (the Father) speaking saying he created the Spirit and he declares to people the Messiah (3-10).

In I Timothy 5.21 it reads, Διαμαρτύρομαι ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν ἀγγέλων (“I charge you in the presence of God, and of Christ Jesus, and the elect angels”). The Tropicici saw this text as a counter to the baptismal formula of Matthew 28.19 which had been used as a Trinitarian proof text

27 For more speculation regarding the identity of the Tropicici, as well as their relation to other anti-Spirit sects, see Shapland, pp. 18-34.

28 The MT (וּמְנַיִד לְאָדָם מֵה־שׁוּי) does not read, “declares to humanity his Christ” but rather “declares to humanity his thoughts/plans”. It is not easy to determine why the LXX translated מֵה־שׁוּי as τὸν χριστὸν but it is likely that this is a case of *homoarchton*. In this scenario the translator would have over looked the ה in מֵה־שׁוּי which would have made it look like מְשִׁיחַ (“his Messiah”).

along with the fact that every Christian entered into the church through this baptismal confession. If the angels could be ranked next to God and Christ why should anyone think that Matthew 28.19 necessarily referred to the Spirit as deity (10-14)?

In addition to these two primary proof-text the Tropici asserted that if the Spirit was not a creature the Spirit must also be a Son. It made no sense to speak of the Spirit as coming from the Father and being one with the Father while saying there was one “only-begotten Son” (15-21). It is at this juncture that Athanasius counters with his own approach to apophatic theology. This is followed by Athanasius pearl-stringing his own proof-text for the deity of the Holy Spirit (22-27). He finishes by appealing to the tradition of the church on the matter (28-31) before finishing with exegesis of text supporting his position (32-33).²⁹

Letters II, III:

Letter II is more Christological than Pneumatological. It is a polemic against the doctrine that the Son is a creature. It is unlikely that he needs to make this argument because his opponents deny the deity of the Son. Rather, he uses it to set up his argument in favor of the Spirit in Letter III.

Letter III uses the arguments of Letter II to move toward a defense of the deity of the Spirit. If the Spirit is connected with the actions of the Father and Son it makes no sense to call the Spirit a creature. Again, for Athanasius, this would have devastating results for the Christian doctrine of God.

The Pneumatology of Letter I

The Trinity:

As we have already noted the doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit is something Athanasius presupposed during his attack on the Arians. It was an intrinsic element of the doctrine of the Trinity. For Athanasius the acts of God were always “through the Word, in the Spirit”.³⁰ Therefore, it was simply unthinkable that anyone could suggest that the Holy Spirit was anything less than of the same substance with

²⁹ For synopsis and outlines of the contents of Letters I-IV see Shapland, pp. 50-53.

³⁰ E.g. I. 12

the Father and Son.

Athanasius proceeds in I.1 to compare the Tropici with the Arians reminding his audience that just as someone who denies the Son also denies the Father³¹ likewise those who are “speaking evil of the Holy Spirit speak evil also of the Son.” In I.2 he argues from the premise that God is Trinity. He asserts that the doctrine of the Tropici makes no sense because the Spirit is “the Spirit of the Son” and the Son is “the Word of the Father”. Likewise, “As the Son is in the Spirit as in his own image, so also the Father is in the Son.”³² In this scenario to introduce a created being appears to be indicating that in some sense God has a created element since the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and “belongs” also to the Son. If this is so Athanasius is unsure of what may prevent this doctrine from incorporating the Son as well leading everyone back toward Arianism.

If this is denied then the only other conclusion is that there is no longer a Trinity. If there is no longer a Trinity then God is now a “dyad, with the creature left over”. This slippery-slope deconstructs the Christian doctrine of God entirely for Athanasius!

While it may appear that these assertions are a case of “begging the question” this is not so. Athanasius may generalize by refusing to entertain possible scenarios in which the Son could be of the same substance while the Spirit is not but he is not being dogmatic for the sake of mere dogma. As we will see below Athanasius was convinced that the Scriptural witness from beginning to end was emphatically straightforward regarding the relationship of the Spirit to God.

The Unity of Son and Spirit:

In Letter I there is a clear emphasis on the unity of the Trinity. In I.14 Athanasius insist that when one sees an action of the Father it is the same action done by the Son and the Spirit. There is one deity.

By implication the Son and the Spirit are closely related in action. In fact, he writes in I.24 that “The Spirit is said to be, and is, the image of the Son.”³³ Athanasius speaks of this relationship using similar wording

31 See 1 John 2.23.

32 I.20

33 He cites Roman 8.29 as a proof-text which is poor exegesis at best. In fact, this argument unfolds in such a way that it totally

to the later doctrine of the *Filioque*.³⁴ The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. The Spirit proceeds from the Father *as well as* the Son. The Spirit is characterized by sharing similarities with the Son.³⁵ In order to explain this relationship several analogies are used. In I.19 is the Father is the fountain the Son is the river that flows from the fountain and the Spirit is water of the river. Likewise, if the Father is the light the Son is the radiance and the Spirit is the one “by whom we are enlightened”. Whenever one receives the Spirit the Son and Father are received as well.³⁶

Exegesis of Amos 4.13:

We have already addressed the Tropici interpretation of this text above. As it has been shown the Tropici used Amos 4.13 as a primary proof-text (at least the attention given to it should causes us to assume such). It seemed to be a veiled reference to the Father, Son, and Spirit having the Father speaking of how he “creates Spirit” and reveals the Messiah. The Tropici noted that if the Father created the Spirit there is no sense in which the Spirit can be understood to be one with the Father and Son.

First, Athanasius, in I.3, knowing that the Tropici already affirmed Nicene Christology, cites the “creation of Wisdom” in Proverbs 8.22. He is using a tool of the Arians to display to the Tropici that if his opponents continue their hermeneutical approach to Scripture then Wisdom = Word is “a creature”. It seems that the obvious point here is to remind the Tropici that broad statements about what various passages mean because of shared language with other passages *can be dangerous*. It is not true that because the Holy Spirit is S/spirit that every mention of spirit is a reference to the Holy Spirit just like it is true that the Son is Wisdom but not every reference to wisdom is about the Son.

The obvious deduction is that it is not likely that this passage refers to the Holy Spirit at all. This is a point that he makes over and over again with a string of definitions in I.4 as well as a list of biblical passages in

contradicts what Athanasius is trying to say about the Spirit and the Son since it does refer to humans who are “conformed” into his image and not the Holy Spirit.

34 Athanasius writes in I.20, “The Son is sent from the Father...The Son sends the Spirit”.

35 See I.25 where he continually links descriptions of Christ with descriptions of the Holy Spirit.

36 Cf. John 14.23.

I.7-8. Athanasius is more than comfortable accepting that it refers to the creation of the concept/reality of “spirit”. It is not clear why he does not seem to notice that this is most likely a reference to “wind” being that the context of this passage is clearly a reference to the created order.

Exegesis of I Timothy 5.21:

The simplest definition of the Pneumatology of the Tropicists is that they understood the Spirit to be “one of the ministering spirits” that “differs from the angels only in degree” (I.1). To defend this teaching the Tropicists appealed to I Timothy 5.21 where the Apostle Paul writes, “I charge you in the presence of God, and Christ Jesus, and the elect angels”. If angels could be connected with God and Christ in this manner what made reference to the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” more important?

There was a lot at stake in the discussion of this text. It appears that the primary reason for appealing to I Timothy 5.21 was to counter appeals to Matthew 28.19. As it is well known Matthew 28.19 contained the foundational baptismal formula of the early church. It was from this passage that Christian identity as people incorporated into the Triune God had been established. If it could be shown that this text was being misappropriated the whole structure of the baptismal liturgy could collapse. If it collapsed loyalty to any proclamation of faith in a God who is Trinity could be dismissed.

Athanasius begins addressing this teaching in I.10. First, he is quick to lump the Tropicists with the teaching of Valentinus. Although it is not apparent that the Tropicists were resorting to a form of Valentinian gnosticism it is apparent that Athanasius was intent on making this connection. Rather than allow the Tropicists to establish the rules for rhetoric by demoting the Spirit because of what I Timothy 5.21 says of the angels Athanasius goes the route of representing the Tropicists as people who are “ranking the angels with the Triad”. In doing so he attempts to make the Tropicists seem as ridiculous as the pantheon of Valentinian gnostic thought.

Second, he straightforwardly questions where in Scripture the Holy Spirit is equated with an angel. In response, he notes in I.11 that, “He is called Paraclete, Spirit of adoption, Spirit of sanctification³⁷, Spirit of God,

37 Shapland writes, “Not actually a Scriptural phrase, but sums up the association of the Spirit with sanctification in the Scriptures.” p.

and Spirit of Christ; but never angel or archangel, or ministering spirit, as are the angels.” The premise is simply: “But if the Scriptures do not speak of the Spirit as an angel what excuse have they for so great and absurd an audacity?”³⁸

Third, Athanasius delivers a rebuttal of their assertion that the Spirit is an angel by showing several passages where the actions of angels are bluntly distinct from that of the Spirit and where Scripture could have mentioned angels but mentioned the Spirit, or visa-versa. This passage does not mean the Spirit is an angel; it simply means the Spirit is not mentioned.³⁹ The angels are angels.

The Spirit is Not a Son:

The Tropici are quoted as asserting that if the Spirit “is not a creature, or one of the angels, but proceeds from the Father, then he is himself also a son, and he and the Word are two brothers. And if he is a brother, how is the Word only begotten?”⁴⁰ It appears that it was difficult for them to understand why the Holy Spirit is called “the Holy Spirit” and the Son is called “the Son” if both come from the Father.

In response to the assertion that the Spirit is from the Son the Tropici (sarcastically?) stated that he must be the Grandson of the Father. Athanasius makes an appeal to an apophatic theology asserting that the Tropici are foolish for trying to “search the deep things of God” when this is something that only the Spirit can do.⁴¹ He begins by asking if the Father has a Father and if so who this father might be and how far back does this lineage go. This question is asked in order to show that human relational terminology only captures an aspect of the Godhead. Amongst humans it is *impossible* for someone to become a father unless that person also was fathered (i.e. one cannot father who has not come into existence because of a father⁴²).

87. n. 1.

38 I. 11

39 In I.13 he uses Isaiah 48.16 and Haggai 2.4-5 as texts that mention the Spirit but not Christ. If these passages are not saying anything less of God why should this one be seen as reducing the Trinity? In I.14 he mentions several other passages that could be read as including two persons of the Trinity but not a third. The obvious point being made is that it is ridiculous to assert that absence says as much as the Tropici are asserting. This is much too dependent on an argument from silence.

40 I. 15

41 Athanasius cites I Corinthians 2.10-11 to support this assertion.

42 The obvious exception would be Adam but that would not settle the problem for the Tropici since such a statement would only suggest that the Father had to have been created by something/one.

The Fatherhood of God is not God causing a “division of himself” because the nature is “not divided”.⁴³ The Fatherhood of God is so because “the Father is a father in the strict sense” in that the Son is dependent upon the Father. All one needs to know is that “the Son is called Son of the Father, and the Spirit of the Father is called Spirit of the Son” therefore “the Godhead of the Holy Triad and faith therein is one.”⁴⁴

Biblical Theology of the Spirit:

Athanasius had no intention of remaining on the defense. Throughout Letter I he rolls out an impressive list of quotations⁴⁵ that appear to obviously refer to the Holy Spirit. He references much of the Scriptures⁴⁶: Genesis⁴⁷, Numbers⁴⁸, Judges⁴⁹, Psalms⁵⁰, Isaiah⁵¹, Ezekiel⁵², Joel⁵³, Micah⁵⁴, Zechariah⁵⁵, Matthew⁵⁶, Luke⁵⁷, John⁵⁸, Acts,⁵⁹ Romans⁶⁰, I Corinthians⁶¹, II Corinthians⁶², Galatians⁶³, Ephesians⁶⁴, Philippians⁶⁵, I Thessalonians⁶⁶, II Thessalonians⁶⁷, I Timothy⁶⁸, Titus⁶⁹, Hebrews⁷⁰, I Peter⁷¹, II Peter⁷², I John⁷³. For most of these references there is very little comment from Athanasius. It seems that he expects his opponents to notice

43 I.16
44 Ibid.
45 See I.4-6
46 In addition he references Wisdom 1.5; 12.1.
47 1.2; 6.3
48 11.29
49 3.10; 15.14; 104.29-30
50 33.6; 51.11; 139.7; 143.10
51 30.1; 48.16; 59.21; 61.1; 63.9-10, 14
52 11.24
53 2.28
54 2.7
55 1.6; 4.5-6; 7.12
56 4.1; 10.20; 12.28; 28.19
57 3.21-22; 4.1
58 4.14, 21-24; 7.39; 14.26; 15.26; 20.22
59 1.16; 2.1-5; 3.15; 4.24-25 7.51-52; 8.39; 20.22-23, 28; 21.11; 28.25
60 1.4; 8.9-11, 15; 15.18-19
61 2.10-12; 3.16-17; 6.11; 12.4-6, 11, 13; 13.13
62 3.17
63 3.2; 3.14; 4.6-7
64 1.13, 17-18; 3.16-17; 4.3, 30
65 1.18-20; 3.3
66 4.8; 5.19
67 2.8
68 4.1
69 3.4-7
70 6.4-5; 9.8, 13-14
71 1.9-11; 3.4; 4.14
72 1.4
73 2.27; 4.12-13

what is obviously right before them. There is an abundance of biblical material that connects the Spirit with God and Christ. Likewise, there are dozens of references to the Holy Spirit doing things one would expect deity to do.

One of his most precise arguments is derived from Psalm 104.29-30 in I.9.⁷⁴ In this passage he notes, “if it is by the Spirit of God that we are renewed, then the spirit here said to be created is not the Holy Spirit but our spirit. And if, because all things come into being through the Word, you think correctly that the Son is not a creature: then is it not blasphemy for you to say that the Spirit is a creature, in whom the Father, through the Word, perfect and renews all things.” If our spirit dies with everything else in v. 29, and it the Spirit of God that revives everything in v. 30, then this is evidence of not only a distinction between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit but also that the Spirit of God is the one upon whom the very life of all the created order depends.⁷⁵

Similarly, Athanasius connects the doctrine known as θεοποίησις with the work of the Holy Spirit. In I.23 Christ “seals” us by the Spirit and in I.24 he quotes I Corinthians 3.16-17 where the Apostle calls the church the “temple of God” where the Spirit dwells. He concludes from this that, “If the Holy Spirit were a creature, we should have no participation in him. If indeed we were joined to a creature, we should be strangers to the divine nature inasmuch as we did not partake therein”. For Athanasius and most of the early theologians salvation was more than a forensic experience; it was a *necessarily transformative experience!* If it is by the Spirit that God unites us with him then the Spirit *must be* deity.⁷⁶ He concludes, “If he makes men divine, it is not to be doubted that his nature is of God.”

It is very apparent that for Athanasius that there are many passages where “spirit” is mentioned that *has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit*. In I.7-8 he notes that there are references to the spirit of humans; the “spirit” as

74 Which he refers to as being from Psalm 103.

75 Whether or not Athanasius had observed that Psalm 104.29-30 echoes Genesis 2.7 and 6.3 is not apparent since he does not expound on such a connection. Nevertheless he seems aware of the motif of the Spirit being the one who brings life as well as the reality that a lack of the Spirit equates in death.

76 Cf. I John 4.13; II Peter 1.4

wind⁷⁷; the spirit of “divine words”⁷⁸ and the “law”⁷⁹. On many of these occasions Athanasius himself fails to see that these are in fact references to the Holy Spirit, but his overall argument is sufficient.

As we noted above⁸⁰, in Amos 4.13 the context makes it very apparent that *even if* “his Christ” were the correct translation the πνεῦμα in this passage refers (at best) to the concept of “spirit” but more likely “wind” since the context has to do with the created order. Athanasius exposes what we may designate today as a “word-study fallacy” in the exegesis of Tropic. There is a total disregard for the context in which S/spirit references appear. A word is not limited to one or two possible lexical entries; context is superior.

Ecclesiastical Tradition Regarding the Spirit:

Athanasius was convinced that he stood firmly in the tradition that came from the apostles. He tell his audience, “I have delivered the tradition, without inventing anything extraneous to it.”⁸¹ He appeals to “the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave⁸², the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept.”⁸³ The tradition was that the one God is a Triad.⁸⁴

As with the Arians this heresy was the “new” invention. In I.7 Athanasius accuses the Tropic saying, “But out of your sheer audacity you have invented 'tropes' for yourself”. Again, in I.10 he begins his address of the Tropic exegesis of I Timothy 5.21 by noting that they “have dared to devise for themselves tropes and to pervert also the saying of the Apostle”. These are references to a novel teaching which contrary to the modern theological climate is not something of which one would have wanted to be accused.

The Pneumatology of Letter II and III

Letter II is essentially a Christological discourse rehearsing arguments against the Arian heresy in favor of Nicene orthodoxy. It created an essentially Trinitarian structure for Letter III (see II. 6). As with modern

77 E.g. Genesis 7.1 which is a reference to the wind.

78 E.g. 2 Corinthians 3.6 which likely does refer to the work of the Spirit.

79 E.g. Romans 7.6 which likely refers to the “law of the [Holy] Spirit”.

80 See n. 27.

81 I.33

82 The primary proof-text for this assertion is John 4.21-24.

83 I.28

84 See I.28-33.

readers, so Athanasius' original audience, there is some question as to why Athanasius writes a lengthy discourse defending the deity of the Son since it is obvious from II.1 that this letter was a sequel to Letter I. At the beginning of Letter III⁸⁵ he reminds his readers that the Spirit would say nothing of himself but rather would reiterate what the Son said.⁸⁶ Therefore, the Spirit is dependent upon the Father and Son. This is the bulk of Athanasius' argument, namely that the Spirit relates to the Son as the Son relates to the Father. The Trinity cannot exist without the Spirit.

Letters II and III do not contribute much more to the overall theological agenda of the author. Rather, it narrowly focuses on the Son-Spirit relationship that is scattered throughout Letter I. What this does tell us is that this is an essential element of Athanasius' Pneumatology. For Athanasius modern discussions regarding the Spirit doing a work distinct from the work of the Son would be absurd.

Implications for Modern Pneumatology

There have been many attempts in recent years to explain the work of the Spirit as something distinct from the Son.⁸⁷ This often begins with the misuse of Irenaeus' explanation of the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of God. Modern commentators use this to show that the Father can be working through the Son to bring people to salvation by means of the Christian gospel while simultaneously using the Spirit to work through other religious expressions. The gospel may appear to be a better means of coming to the Father, but it is not the "only" means.

Anyone who has read the Fourth Gospel or Pauline literature should quickly object. Others have addressed the subject more in-depth from these perspectives.⁸⁸ Other various criticisms have been made.⁸⁹

85 Which may not be a third letter at all considering that it runs smoothly from the end of Letter II.

86 This is an echo of John 16.13.

87 For some examples see Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 20*. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996). For a valuable critique see Chapter 5, 6 and 8 of Todd Miles, *A God of Many Understandings? The Gospel and Theology of Religions* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010).

88 Again, I would recommend Todd Miles chapters on this subject.

89 E.g. Keith E. Johnson, "Does the Doctrine of the Trinity Hold the Key to a Christian Theology of Religions?")pp. 142-160 in Daniel J. Trier and David Lauber, eds., *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press,

What a reading of Athanasius' *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, or Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*, or the pneumatology of the Cappodocians will reveal is that this is a new approach to the Trinity. It is not grounded in the best of Patristic thinking and it must find ways to navigate the debate without appealing to sound exegesis. We must not sever the work of the Spirit from that of the Son for it is always the one God through whom each action functions.

Summary and Conclusion

The Pneumatology of Athanasius is fully Trinitarian. It is his contention that he is only repeating what has been passed on from Jesus, through the Apostles, through the Fathers, to the present time. Anyone who divides the Spirit from the Father and Son—whether as a created being, an angel, or something else—violates the Christian doctrine of God.

While it is true that Athanasius' writings here may come dangerously close to Modalistic/Sabellian descriptions of God at times it is important to observe that he maintains the distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit throughout. There is no attempt to deny the reality of the distinctions. There is an attempt to prevent any doctrine that would sever the work of the Spirit from that of the Father and the Son. When the Father acts it comes through the Son while being perfected in the Spirit. There is no action of God in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are not involved.

As briefly alluded to above this has important implications for modern Pneumatology. There has been an attempt by some creative theologians to speak of the Spirit working throughout the world in a sense that is distinct from the gospel proclamation of the Son who reveals the Father. Athanasius would have been baffled by such ideas likely lumping such theologians in with the Tropici who invent new “tropes”. Athanasius understood himself to be in the tradition of Irenaeus of Lyon whose “two-hands of God”, which are the Son and Spirit, never ever work distinctly from each other. Rather, the Spirit perfects the work of the Father which comes through the Son. The Spirit cannot do a work that is independent of the work of the Son.

2009).

Likewise, later theologians such as the Cappadocians seemed to have followed Athanasius in preserving the unity of God. While the Trinity has some mysterious elements this does not give theologians freedom to speculate in directions that are contrary to the the description of God revealed in Scripture. If the Scriptures depict one God acting in history as Father, Son, and Spirit in a sense that each action can be attributed to the one Trinity there is no room to move in a direction that openly contradicts such assertions. Modern Pneumatologist ought to proceed with caution when venturing toward any doctrine of the Spirit that can be considered so “new” that it would have been absolutely foreign to to the great theological tradition from which Athanasius emerged.

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