



Leithart, Peter J.

Athanasius

Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Pp. xvii + 204.
Paper. \$27.99. ISBN 9780801039423.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

There are few theologians—ancient or modern—that I share as much in common with as Athanasius of Alexandria. When I began reading his writings a number of years ago I found myself engaged in a near constant exercise of saying, “Yes!” and “Amen!” His *On the Incarnation of the Word*, *Discourses Against the Arians*, and *Letter to Serapion on the Holy Spirit* were as confirmative as they were informative. I found my exegesis and theology being both supported and shaped at the same time. I found my passion for the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son not only matched, but exceeded. I found in Athanasius a theological hero. So it is with this in mind that I offer a few remarks on Peter Leithart’s recent volume on Athanasius in Baker Academic’s new Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality series.

There are a number of good volumes on Athanasius available to the interested reader. I have in mind Khaled Anatolios’ *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* as well as his *Athanasius* in the Early Church Fathers series. The first volume takes seriously reading all of Athanasius and then forming a theological synthesis rather than focusing exclusively on one aspect of his theology, say, his Trinitarianism. The second volume is a fresh translation of some of Athanasius’ most important writings along with a wonderfully composed biographical introduction to Athanasius. In addition to Anatolios’ volumes there is Thomas Weinandy’s *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* and Timothy Barnes’ *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics*

in the Constantinian Empire, the former being a competent and compelling introduction to Athanasian theology and the latter a critical reading of Athanasius that challenges some popular historical reconstructions.

In addition to these recent volumes there are a number of older and more far reaching works that spend plenty of time on Athanasius. So why bother with another book on this theological giant? I could wax eloquent about Leithart's narrative flare and theological acuity, but the abovementioned authors are not without these qualities, so what sets this book apart, or what commends its consumption along with these others? In short, Leithart makes Athanasius as accessible to the non-specialist as anyone seemingly could. It doesn't hurt that in doing so he writes with a simple eloquence and displays great insight into the whole of Athanasian theology while showing quite clearly that he's conversant with the best of Athanasian scholarship and more importantly the primary sources themselves.

In a wonderful narrative style, Leithart briefly introduces Athanasius' episcopal career, which Athanasius himself related to events found in the biblical narrative, before summarizing his thoughts on the Word/Son's relationship to the Father (especially in the context of his debates with the Arians), his views on the Trinity, how creation is linked to redemption, and how the faithful are made partakers in the divine life by becoming sons of God—and he does so in dialogue with ancient and contemporary theologians, philosophers, and Patristic scholars alike.

For example, in chapter 5 “Middle: God For Us,” Leithart takes Hegel, Jürgen Moltmann, and even Robert Jenson (whose concerns he finds much closer to Athanasius than would appear) to task on the issue of divine impassibility with an insightful look into Athanasius' theology of the Incarnation, i.e., while the Word/Son suffered on the cross, it was the Word/Son enfleshed that did so (see 140-45). This isn't the apathetic god of the Greeks nor is it the emotional wreck of a God espoused by modern passibilists. Leithart, while acknowledging that at times Athanasius could appear to interpret biblical texts in a way that resembles what would later be known as Nestorianism (see 121-25), shows how Athanasius' theology of the cross avoids this.

Or, to take another example where Athanasius has something to offer by way of correction to contemporary thinkers, Leithart shows how giving attention to the asymmetry within the Trinity in Athanasius' (and I'd add nearly all of Patristic) theology takes seriously the concerns about personhood that modern social Trinitarians have, but it avoids the path to tritheism that social Trinitarianism travels (see 85-88). Strangely, Leithart describes the social Trinity as “a modern egalitarian democracy, made up of distinct but identical individuals,” saying that the “persons are

indeed equal, but not identical.” (88) I’ve never heard a social Trinitarian say that the persons were identical, which tends toward Modalism; they generally go in the other direction, which Leithart acknowledges.

At the end of the day I don’t have many, if any, negative to say about this book. Leithart accomplishes his task, which is to provide the reader with a good understanding of Athanasius’ theology, but most especially an understanding of his theological exegesis. Leithart presents Athanasius as a biblical theologian of monumental proportions (as opposed to one heavily indebted to Greek philosophy), and I’m inclined to agree. He doesn’t idolize this champion of Nicene orthodoxy, nor does he vilify him. Leithart aptly points out places where Athanasius stretches the text or could tighten up an argument. He likewise points out the great force of many of Athanasius’ arguments against his Arian opponents.

I suppose I could complain about the sketch view of the history surrounding Athanasius’ rise to prominence, but the fact is that this was not a biography or history proper, and truthfully, Leithart offers more on the subject than many other books I could mention. I could lament the fact that Leithart doesn’t interact with Kevin Giles’ hijacking of Athanasius to bolster his egalitarian Trinity views, when such interaction would have certainly been appropriate during the discussion of Trinitarian asymmetry, but it’s understandable that Giles would be ignored since (a) he’s worth ignoring, and (b) this isn’t a book that’s solely about the Trinity or the personal relationships within the Trinity. This is a book about Athanasius and his theology, and it’s a darn fine one at that! Leithart has succeeded in offering the most readable synthesis of Athanasius that I’ve come across to date. I enthusiastically recommend it!