ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA:  
THE SCOPE OF SCRIPTURE  
IN POLEMICAL AND PASTORAL CONTEXT

BY

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Athanasius of Alexandria is best known as the resolute controversialist who championed the Nicene homoousios against Arian and "semi-Arian" objections. In this struggle he demonstrated his rhetorical acumen by marshalling arguments of all known varieties, plus rarer types of his own devising.1 Even his Life of Antony, which is on the face of it a primer in ascetic spirituality, functions in the anti-Arian polemic by asserting the revered monk’s example of subordination to clergy and his loathing of Arian heretics.2 Primarily, however, Athanasius’s dispute with the Arians took the form of a battle over the interpretation of the Bible. To a degree, this was inevitable, since Arians and pro-Nicenes alike were committed to demonstrating that their doctrines were found in Scripture. Hence the talk of Athanasius’s anti-Arian exegesis,3 the implication being that his way of using Scripture is shaped specifically by the need to rebut the Arian prooftexts.

And yet not all of the authentic surviving writings of Athanasius present themselves as part of the anti-Arian polemics. This is the case with the two well-known works from the earliest part of Athanasius’s career, the Contra Gentes and the De Incarnatione.4 It is also the case with a work probably written closer to the end of the bishop’s career5 and not very similar in character either to this early pair of writings or to the anti-Arian works: the Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms. So this paper will examine one aspect of the biblical hermeneutic of the anti-Arian writings, represented in this paper by the three Orations Against the Arians,6 the De Decretis, and the Second Letter to Serapion, and then briefly suggest an understanding of the findings there in the context of Athanasius’s broader concerns, as these are revealed in the De Incarnatione and the Letter to Marcellinus.7

A theme that has received prominent attention in recent assessments
of Athanasius's exegetical practice is the "scope of Scripture." The fullest texts on this topic occur in CA 3; but since there is now some question regarding the authenticity of that treatise it seems better to begin with other texts and only afterward compare these with CA 3. We will see that σποράς is only one of several interchangeable terms that Athanasius has for describing the theological—or better, Christological and soteriological—unity of Scripture.

We may begin with a text near the beginning of De Incarnatione:

Perhaps you are wondering why, when we have set out to discuss the incarnation of the Word, we are now narrating concerning the beginning of humans. But this also is not foreign to the scope of the narration. For it is necessary for us, in speaking about the appearing of the Savior, to speak also concerning the beginning of humans, so that you may know that the charge against us was the reason for his descent, and that our transgression called forth the mercy (φιλανθρωπία) of the Word, so that the Lord both came to us and appeared among humans. For we constituted the basis for his incarnation, and it was for the sake of our salvation that he had mercy and came in human form and appeared in a body.

The scope here is not explicitly the scope of Scripture but the scope of Athanasius's own narration. On the other hand, it is clear enough that it is Athanasius's intent to talk about what Scripture talks about. (We may think of the tendency of thirteenth-century theologians to treat the question of the subject of Lombard's Sentences or of their own summae interchangeably with the questions of the subject of Scripture and the subject of theology.) If Athanasius accounts for his attention to the first human disobedience in this treatise on the incarnation by indicating that the point of the incarnation was to restore to humankind what was lost thereby, then it will not be surprising later on to find him insisting that the scope of Scripture is the incarnation of the Word for the sake of human salvation.

For an instance of the actual phrase "scope of Scripture" apart from CA 3, we have to skip forward chronologically to the Second Letter to Serapion, written as an abbreviated guide to the refutation of "those who say that the son is a..." In the first several chapters of this work, Athanasius reviews the prooftexts for the deity of the Son and demonstrates both the incompatibility of these with the assertion that he is created and also the necessity of the assertion that he is homoousios with the Father. After this, he takes up a leading Arian text, Prov 8:22: