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Abstract

The scholarly and ecclesiastical tradition quite unanimously considers Athanasius of Alexandria (297-373) as the theologian par excellence of the Incarnation. Likewise, being the author of the Life of Saint Antony, he is considered as the founder of the ascetical ideal in Late Antique Christianity. Athanasius' ascetical spirituality is closely linked to his theological reflection. It is the Incarnation that opened the way to the deification (theosis) of the man and consequently all the humankind, regardless man or woman, young or old, has the possibility to approach the divine. Among the other ascetical writings of Athanasius, his First Letter to Virgins, dated to 337-339 between his first and second exiles and preserved only in Coptic translation, possess a particular position due to his careful attention to the ideal of female virginity. Through the comparison of marriage with virginity and but mainly by the emergence of the person of Virgin Mary as a model and archetype for ascetical life, Athanasius outlines the Christian values of spiritual maturation uniquely. In the present paper, I will focus on the hermeneutic approach of the Alexandrian bishop to the book of the Song of Songs, as it has been expressed within his First Letter to Virgins with the purpose to highlight those points which differ from the earlier exegetical tradition, principally represented by Origen. Thus, what will become apparent is the authenticity of the ascetical theology of Athanasius that would afterwards significantly affect the ascetic spirituality of Eastern, Oriental and Western Christianity up to date.