

The Passions of Christ
in High-Medieval
Thought

An Essay on Christological Development

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Contents

Abbreviations, xi

1. Introduction, 3
2. Humanity, Divinity, and Biblical Exegesis
in Early Arian Thought, 11
3. *Christus Proficiens?*
Did Christ “Progress in Wisdom?” 23
4. *Christus Nesciens?*
Was Christ Ignorant of the Day of Judgment? 39
5. *Christus Patiens?*
Did Christ Suffer Pain in the Passion? 51
6. *Christus Passibilis?*
Did Christ Experience Fear and Sorrow in Gethsemane? 63
7. *Christus Orans?*
A Praying God? 73
8. Conclusion: The Passions of Christ in Ancient
and Medieval Thought
Continuities and Discontinuities, 91

Notes, 95

Index, 143

I

Introduction

In this study, I offer a meditation on a basic assumption all but universally accepted by historians of medieval thought: namely, that ancient and medieval christological thought are essentially in doctrinal (if not formulaic or verbal) continuity with one another. Most historians of medieval thought have perceived profound continuity between scholastic theological and exegetical thought and the patristic authorities with which such thought characteristically began. I argue here that high-medieval thinkers on the passible aspects of Christ's human nature—fear, sorrow, apparent ignorance and so forth—more often rupture such putative conceptual links and erase much or all dogmatic continuity with the very figures whose thought they seem to want to preserve or, in many cases, to rehabilitate. This argument has implications for the much larger theme of continuity and discontinuity in the history of Christian thought.

Discussion of what came to be called the passible dimensions of Christ's humanity did not begin in the medieval university or even in the worlds of ancient Christian writing. It began within the texts of the New Testament itself. Indeed—especially in light of classical Christian assumptions about divinity and the metaphysics of the incarnation—one of the curious features of the gospels, especially the three Synoptic Gospels is that each includes incidents in which Jesus at times clearly is, or at least certainly appears to be, in doubt, error, or ignorance. He makes statements that reveal uncertainty, utters prophecies that go unfulfilled, and asks questions

demonstrating that he does not know things known by “his Father” or even by his followers.

In other episodes in the Synoptics, Jesus appears to be overcome with profound and sometimes violent emotion. The last hours of his life especially seem marked, not by serene assurance of divine oversight, but rather by terror, grief, and uncertainty. Such emotions are rarely more poignantly inscribed in the gospels than in the puzzled query of dereliction that, in Mark and Matthew, punctuates the long ordeal of his passion: “My God, my God,” Jesus exclaims, “why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46, NRSV). Jesus seems, thus, to distinguish himself, not by his immunity to the passions, but by the often-cruel intensity with which he appears to experience them.

Still other parts of the Gospels appear to suggest that Jesus was, at times, powerless to execute his own will and even in disharmony with his Father’s. Jesus’ nocturnal vigil in Gethsemane, for example, is marked not by sovereign control of his destiny but by helplessness, not by quiet surrender to the divine will but repeated resistance to it. Thus the gospels present us with a figure who is at least occasionally ignorant, passible, powerless, and recalcitrant. What makes this fact worthy of further inquiry is that Christian theologians in the premodern era have inevitably identified with the Incarnate Word, and especially his divinity, the opposite qualities of omniscience, impassibility, omnipotence, and obedience.

The first Christian theologians to show anxiety about Jesus’ human ignorance, passion, and will were the later Gospel writers.¹ Among the most difficult and embarrassing texts for later Christian theologians to manipulate was Jesus’ candid acknowledgment that he was ignorant of the time at which the Son of Man would return in glory. Jesus concludes the Apocalyptic Discourse in Mark by declaring that “about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father (Mark 13:32; emphasis supplied). In this case, Matthew reflects no obvious discomfort with the version of the story he inherited from Mark and delivers the verse in essentially unaltered form (Matt 24:36). Interestingly enough, however, there are ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew whose scribes, perceiving a problem not recognized or acknowledged by the evangelist himself, dared to edit out the words “nor the Son.”² The difficulty does not escape Luke’s attention. He is so uncomfortable with the verse that he does not even attempt to edit it. Instead, he expunges it altogether from his account of the Discourse (Luke 21:25–37).

A second category of scriptural texts relating to Jesus’ human knowledge are the many questions he asks in the Gospels, particularly in Mark. In Mark, after a woman with a hemorrhage touches Jesus’ garments in the hopes of being cured, Jesus turns and asks, “Who touched my clothes” (Mark 5:30)? Receiving no satisfactory answer from his disciples, Jesus, still apparently

ignorant, looks “all around” (Mark 5:31) to see who had touched him. Here Matthew modifies the story bequeathed by Mark. In the Matthean version of the story, Jesus is touched, turns and instantly recognizes the woman who had sought his cure (Matt 9:22). Any hint of ignorance is erased.

It is more usually the case that both Matthew and Luke rewrite texts inherited from Mark (or a source they all used) in which Jesus appears to be ignorant. In Mark 9 the disciples, arguing with a group of scribes, are asked by Jesus, “What are you discussing with them?” (Mark 9:16). In their versions of the story, Matthew and Luke both edit out the questions Jesus asks (see Matt 17:14). Somewhat later in Mark 9, the disciples, on the way to Capernaum, argue about who among them is “greatest” (Mark 9:34). When they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus asks them, “What were you arguing about on the way” (Mark 9:33)? Again, both Matthew and Luke omit the question posed to the disciples and, in their rendering of the story, Jesus marvelously knows the content of their discussion (Matt 18:1; Luke 9:47). Luke explicitly states that Jesus was able “to perceive the thought of their hearts” (Luke 9:47). In this case, Matthew and Luke do not simply edit out an embarrassing piece of the received story. They also transform a Markan pericope that incidentally alludes to Jesus’ ignorance of some things into a story that intentionally reveals his extraordinary knowledge of many or all things.

Just as problematic for the later gospel writers are texts in which Jesus appears to experience and even to be overcome by turbulent emotion. In the Markan account of the passion, Jesus arrives at the Garden of Gethsemane and “begins to be terrified and troubled” (Mark 14:33). Apparently tormented, he poignantly announces to his disciples that he is “deeply grieved” (Mark 14:34). Matthew transmits this part of the story in essentially unaltered form (Matt 26:38). Luke, however, expurgates from the Markan narrative any reference to Jesus’ terror or agony (Luke 22:39). Moreover, he subtly transfers the sorrow present in the original story from Jesus to the disciples. The disciples, Luke tells us, are sleeping “because of their grief” (Luke 22:62). Indeed, in order to keep the disciples from being vanquished by their sorrow, Jesus must sharply command them to “get up and pray” (Luke 22:46). The discomfort with Mark in Luke becomes outright denial in John. The author of the Fourth Gospel borrows from Mark (or a common source), it seems, only to mock his picture of a vulnerable and frightened Jesus. Where the Markan Jesus implores his Father three times to “let this cup pass,” John’s Jesus practically ridicules this possibility: “What shall I say,” he sarcastically inquires, “‘Father save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (John 11:27). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus experiences no fear and little sorrow at the prospect of his death. There is no tension between the will of the Son and the will of

the Father. Only in the noncanonical gospels do we find a figure so immune to human vicissitude, passion, and finitude. Had this picture of Jesus triumphed decisively over Mark's, his victory may have saved later Christian exegetes much embarrassment, anxiety, and labor.

There is perhaps no more pathetic episode in the Gospels than Jesus' anguished cry of dereliction at the moment of his death (Mark 16:34). Again, Luke is uncomfortable with the note of grief, complaint, and perplexity sounded here. True, he allows Jesus to cry at the moment of his death, but in his version of the story, Jesus cries, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Luke drains Jesus' final cry of the sorrow and doubt with which Mark had drenched it. Where in Mark, Jesus is the object of his Father's action (abandonment), here he is the subject of the action. In Luke, it is Jesus who stoically superintends the conclusion of his own death.

A similar pattern of embarrassed editorializing occurs in the transmission of those parts of Mark in which Jesus seems to be in disharmony with the divine will. In Mark, Jesus arrive at Gethsemane and announces that he is "grieved even to death" (Mark 14:34) and begs his father three times to "let this cup pass" (Mark 14:36, 39, 41). Matthew transmits this part of the story with almost complete fidelity to Mark (Matt 26:39, 42, 44). The insistence with which the Markan Jesus presses this request was, perhaps, too strong to allow Luke to strike out these passages entirely from his Passion Narrative. Yet Luke has Jesus ask this question only once (Luke 22:42). Moreover, he emphasizes more than both Mark and Matthew the unity of Jesus' will with his Father's. Where in Matthew, Jesus begins his prayer by saying, "Father, if it be *possible*, let this cup pass from me" (Matt 26:39), the Lukan Jesus begins his prayer, "Father, if you are *willing* . . ." (Luke 22: 42). Just as Luke's Jesus is sovereign over the passions, so too is his will in near-perfect accord with the Father's. Taken together, these texts in the Synoptics reveal there was significant discomfort with the genuinely human dimensions of Jesus' experience as early as the second generation of Gospel writers. It is an anxiety that, in different contexts and in slightly different forms, would be felt in Christian theological writing for at least the next thirteen centuries.

Yet not all early Christian groups were made anxious by such texts. In fact, the fourth-century "Arians"³ found them most convincing proof of their conviction that the Son of God was a creature or lesser deity. It was these very texts to which, over and over, they pointed their "orthodox" opponents' eyes. In the study that follows I analyze how the Arians, their orthodox opponents, and three high-medieval theologians and exegetes—Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure—interpreted these problematic scriptural texts and how they understood Christ's human passions. As I move through the following

chapters, it will be observed that the exegetical maneuvers that the ancient fathers needed in order—not to put too fine a point on it—to make the scriptures sing an orthodox tune is then mirrored, many centuries later, by the high-medieval authors’ tacit manipulation of their patristic authorities, which was intended both to make their patristic authorities both coherent with one another and orthodox in content. Second, it will become clear that the problematics first raised in the “Arian controversy” continued to haunt the writings of the high-medieval scholastics long after Arianism had disappeared as a concrete social and historical force. This is in part because the ancient fathers with whom high-medieval authors began their reflections—Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, and others—themselves were involved in literary polemic against “Arians” they knew or knew of. But it is also because Arian exegesis posed the most difficult threat to orthodox understanding of Jesus’ passions, and that *theological* threat remained real for many centuries, even when unmoored from the specific ecclesial, social, and polemical context in which it originated. Finally, juxtaposition and comparison of patristic and high-scholastic interpretations of the scriptural texts considered in this study reveals that, under the guise of unchanging assimilation, incorporation, and transmission of a unanimous tradition, fissures and discontinuities actually forcefully separate the two bodies of thought, ancient and medieval, in such a way as to make continuing talk of dogmatic continuity deeply problematic.

It seems especially appropriate to address these questions of continuity and change now, in a time of renewed interest in the reception of the fathers in Latin theology, signaled so spectacularly by the recently-published *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*.⁴ Several of the essays collected in these two volumes take up the problem I address here. Some essay, for example, acknowledge that high-medieval commentators had to “explain” or “interpret” dubious or problematic patristic opinion.⁵ But none makes the argument that I advance here, namely, that such “explanation” or “interpretation” could and often did involve quite radical distortion of patristic opinion. What I see rather than organic change, exposition, interpretation, or correction is novelty, erasure, and eisegesis.

In the end, then, this new book is about an ancient theme in the history of Christian thought, namely, the problem of doctrinal change and continuity. Like all historical theologians, I have read and wrestled with the great Cardinal Newman’s elegant, profound, and learned essay on doctrinal development.⁶ It is with great respect and with a sense of the gravity of what I am saying when I state that, while Cardinal Newman explains much, his theory tells us very little indeed about the history of interpretation of Christ’s passions, which is not a history of continuity, or even organic development, but of often radical discontinuity, trial, novelty, and even heterodoxy.

Late in the composition of this work—indeed, after all but the introduction and conclusion were drafted—I encountered Paul Gondreau’s massive and fine study of the treatment of the passions of Christ’s soul in Thomas’s *Summa*. Gondreau’s volume is certainly, as Richard Cross has declared, “the first place than an English-speaker would look for a thorough account of this anthropological question.”⁷

In this volume, I have not aimed for the sort of thorough account of Thomas’s account of the passions of Christ in Thomas’s *Summa* which Gondreau has so splendidly achieved, though I have done my best to note where his arguments intersect with my own. Instead, I have concentrated on the use of patristic authorities in Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* and on the commentaries on the *Sentences* by Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. My aim is not simply to talk about Thomas, though he looms large in this study, nor do I wish to concentrate on his *Summa*, though I do not ignore it. Rather I concentrate in the Sentence commentary on a genre of literature that was, in its day, in many ways more important than any other genre of high-medieval theological literature.

I concentrate, secondly, on *both* Thomas and Bonaventure’s Sentence commentaries (with occasional references to Albert the Great) because, as Thomas is known to rely on Bonaventure as well as on the commentary of his teacher Albertus Magnus (though not slavishly),⁸ the two can be considered together for the purposes of understanding a more or less common way of approaching the Lombard’s *Sentences*. In particular, the way in which each uses, appropriates, shapes, and transmits his inherited patristic authorities is, so I shall argue, all but indistinguishable from one another and, more important, *entirely characteristic of the era in which they wrote*. Through much of the thirteenth century, it is quite possible to talk of a common “scholastic” approach to problems in commentaries on the *Sentences* (and I shall want to talk, throughout this book, about that common approach. This is not, needless to say, to go the next step and say the outcomes were inevitably common.) But at some point—put authoritatively right around 1285 in a brilliant new essay by Russell Friedman⁹—theological “schools,” especially the Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian, develop in ways that make it impossible to talk any more of a single sort of approach to the problem of Christ’s passions. But in the mid-thirteenth century, these schools had not yet developed. It is, I repeat, possible and even advisable to speak of a common high-scholastic approach shared by the figures under consideration in this study. Indeed, I hope to convince the specialist reader that the conclusions I defend here have implications for the nature of central- or high-medieval theological and exegetical thought as such.

Let me say a word about organization. In the second chapter, I talk about Arian, including less well known Latin Arian sources, using some of the

problematic texts I have described above. I attempt to analyze how the Arians interpreted these texts, show why they thought it theologically necessary to analyze them as they did, and to hint at the dismay caused in the developing Pro-Nicene party. This chapter is the foundation of my argument that the Arians, long after they ceased to be a political or social force in Western Europe, served as silent interlocutors for the great medieval authors under consideration here.¹⁰

The following five chapters then treat ancient and medieval orthodox responses to five of the major issues raised by the Arians. Chapter three treats the interpretation of Luke 2:52, which states that “Jesus progressed in wisdom,” an immensely problematic text for patristic writers, as was Mark 13:32, in which Jesus appears to avow his ignorance of the day of judgment, a topic I treat in chapter three. In chapter five, I examine Hilary of Poitiers’s attempt to neutralize Arian subordinationism by arguing that Christ felt no physical pain in his passion and death. It is in this chapter that the wide gap between patristic and high-medieval interpretation of the same text is especially obvious, as is the high-medieval anxiety to make Hilary say something he quite evidently did not intend to say. In chapter six, I study the interpretation of the Gethsemane pericope and the ways in which Christian authors dealt with Christ’s sorrow and fear. In chapter seven, I examine reflection on the act of Christ’s praying (as distinct from the passions he expresses while praying). Here we will see that the Arians made much of his submission to the supreme Deity, his apparent powerlessness, his doubt, his praying for himself, and God not, apparently, answering his prayer.

The medieval figures discussed here are by many often (and rightly) regarded as theological saints. Their ideas are, for some readers, of existential and religious as well as intellectual interest. I understand this. Nonetheless, I have felt I have had to make my case, in places, quite vigorously. I hope my respect for the medieval authors, of whose staggering erudition and achievements I simply stand in awe, is never obscured. But one must distinguish between respect and idolatry. I remain convinced that the beginning of error in this realm of historical inquiry is to accept uncritically the actors’ own description of their procedures and, in particular, their views, as expressed in actual theological and exegetical *practice*, of the authority of the past and its continuity with the present. I also remain confident that scholars of Thomas, especially, have been predisposed to gloss over or minimize the degree of their hero’s intellectual discontinuity with the patristic past. To make an argument such as this and to determine whether it sheds any light on the past demands, of course, that the evidence be presented convincingly. That is my job; I doubt I will convince everyone. But it also requires that the arguments put forward be heard with open minds, and discussed with thoughtfulness and, above all, civility.

2

Humanity, Divinity, and Biblical Exegesis in Early Arian Thought

As is now widely recognized, the Scriptures and their interpretation were not mere embroidery in a larger theological dispute during the “Arian controversy.”¹ In fact, the relationship between theological discourse and the Scriptures is rather the reverse of the one often assumed. Far from being fodder for proof-texting of already-established theological positions, the theological language was in fact the fruit of reflection and argument over key scriptural passages. It may well be true that the controversy stemmed from dispute over the meaning of only a dozen or so such texts. Instructive here is Aloys Grillmeier’s remark on the role played by a few select texts in controversy: “However much the whole of Scripture continued to be read, theological polemics, precisely in trinitarian and christological discussion, restricted themselves to a certain number of important or disputed scriptural texts.”² That is true. But that is very different from suggesting that the Scriptures functioned as mere proof-text to what was central, namely philosophically-informed theological argument. These scriptural texts were the initial and abiding source of the quarrel. Examining both genuine Arian and Nicene sources in this chapter, we will identify which scriptural texts were crucial in the dispute. We will also briefly gesture toward the ways in which they were interpreted by the early Arian writers. But first a word on sources.

Sources

It is now almost idle to observe that, in the history of Christian thought, our information about movements deemed “heretical” derives, for the most part, from hostile, not wholly reliable observations of victorious or “orthodox” parties. For that reason, we must be particularly careful to maintain a critical, sometimes agnostic point of view on “orthodox” perception and judgment. Naturally, this principle applies to early Arianism as well. In this case, as in analogous ones, it remains true that the bulk of our knowledge of this heretical movement comes from writers—Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, the Cappadocian fathers, and others less familiar—intensely and, in cases, ferociously opposed to it. Not surprisingly, the anti-Arian writings these thinkers produce rarely can be trusted entirely. Nonetheless, they are hardly without importance or use. For one thing, it would have been pointless for the pro-Nicene party to refute only arguments the “Arians” did not in fact assert. Thus, we can learn quite a lot, particularly about what scriptural texts the Arians used, and how they interpreted them, from biased sources.

Fortunately, we are not entirely wanting in genuine sources for early Arianism, particularly for the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries. Indeed, we have something like a dozen or so authentic sources for Arianism during this period. These sources take a whole variety of literary forms: conciliar *acta* and glosses, commentaries, (including the very lengthy and valuable Pseudo-Chrysostom *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum*),³ an unfinished fifth-century commentary on the First Gospel (with “orthodox” emendation) and, interestingly, two commentaries on Job,⁴ as well as homilies, creeds, letters, liturgies, church orders, and a few other fragmentary writings.⁵ Putting together materials from both these orthodox and non-orthodox sources, we can achieve a remarkably clear picture about which scriptural texts were considered important in the controversy, as well as of how such texts were interpreted by the early “Arians.” Before discussing these, however, we must first analyze the crucial soteriological motivations the Arians had for interpreting the Scriptures as they did.

Soteriology and Anthropology in Early Arianism

One of the curiosities of scholarly work on the Arians is that, for the first eight decades of the twentieth century, few, if any, scholars perceived that either Arius or the Arians had compelling soteriological reasons for emphasizing that the Son was a creature or a reduced, inferior, or imperfect divinity. Most

scholars viewed the Arians—at least those who do not dismiss them as self-evidently heretical⁶ or even heathenish⁷—as logicians, cosmologists, rigid syllogists, or as thinkers whose interests were otherwise largely philosophical or obsessively focused on the monarchy of God. Harnack is quite representative of early twentieth-century work on Arianism in this respect. He not only fails to talk about Arian soteriology; he denies that it had any.⁸ More recently, R. D. Williams has contended that, whatever else it was, Arianism was surely not a theology of salvation.⁹ In some ways these views are quite excusable. Virtually all of the extant writings of Arius himself concern the ontological relation of Father and Son (and many of the texts we now have were not edited when Harnack was writing).¹⁰ On the other hand, it still can be maintained justly that Harnack, Williams, and others focused too intently on the writings of Arius and insufficiently on the writings of the early Arians. When scholars began to examine the latter more carefully, a very different picture came into view.

One of the main reasons Hanson rightly designates Gregg and Groh's *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* a "milestone in the study of Arianism"¹¹ is that, as their title explicitly implies:

Gregg and Groh maintain emphatically that Arius and Arianism had a soteriology, that the Arian Christ was specifically designed to be a Saviour and that neither Arius nor Arianism can be understood until this point is realised.¹²

This "welcome and timely" emphasis upon the soteriology of Arianism," Hanson emphasized was in "strong contrast to almost everybody who preceded them in the field."¹³ Part of Gregg and Groh's achievement derived from their willingness to examine not only the writings of Arius himself but of the early Arians. Having scrutinized those writings, Gregg and Groh came to the conclusion that "one of the most important keys to unlocking Arian Christology and soteriology is to be found in Stoic-influenced ethical theory," especially that of late Stoicism.¹⁴ More specifically, Gregg and Groh argued that the Arian Christ was improvable, capable of advance in virtue and knowledge, ever moving toward perfection. If the Savior were mutable, as the Arians insisted he was, it was because he was capable of progress in knowledge, love, and virtue. As such, he could serve as an example of to his imperfect and sinful human followers. In the Arian view, then, Christ the Savior's redemptive work was to educate humanity in moral *paideia*. As Gregg and Groh sum up their argument, "Arians are arguing not for the stratification of the universe but for the dynamics of redemption whereby creatures, in emulation of the creature of perfect discipline, may be themselves begotten as equals to the Son."¹⁵

While commending the general emphasis on soteriology given by Gregg and Groh, Hanson has argued against the particular soteriology they attribute to the Arians. Essentially, Hanson criticizes Gregg and Groh on three points. First of all, Hanson argues (convincingly) that Arian soteriology is not indebted to the terms and thought-world of Stoicism. If the early Arians wished to depict a mutable or improvable Son, as Hanson certainly conceded (if for reasons other than those suggested by Gregg and Groh) they did, “the language of the Bible was sufficient.” Second, while some Arian writers are, in fact, anxious to depict a Son who can progress toward moral perfection, other Arian writers (particularly late ones) seem less comfortable with such a Son. Finally:

The third and most serious objection to the account of Arianism given by Gregg and Groh is that the Son cannot give an example of human achievement of perfection, because he is precisely not a man. The Son assumed a *soma apsychon*, a body without a human mind or soul. . . . The Word incarnate in the Arian scheme may give some sort of example, but certainly not that of a human being making moral progress.¹⁶

The doctrine of a “soulless body” (σῶμα ἄψυχον) was, as Hanson has emphasized, crucial to the soteriology of the Arians. Essentially, this is because the exemplarist ethical soteriology emphasized by Gregg and Groh was far less important to early Arian writers than was the notion of a suffering God.¹⁷ This idea Hanson identifies, again quite accurately, as “the heart of Arianism.”¹⁸ In Arian eyes, humanity is redeemed only if God suffers.¹⁹ At the same time, the Arians were quite loath to assign suffering (or change of any kind) to the Supreme God. Thus, in the Arian system, the Son functions to perform the suffering required for human redemption. The Arians, in effect, (as Hanson has plainly put it) taught “two unequal gods, a High God incapable of human experiences, and a lesser God who, so to speak, did his dirty work for him.”²⁰

This sort of redemptive work, it cannot be overemphasized, was possible, in the Arian view, *only* if the Son lacked a human soul or mind. If the Son had taken on a complete human nature, with soul and mind (as the Arians vigorously denied), it would have been quite easy to shield the Logos (as the pro-Nicene party constantly attempted to do) from human finitude, limitation, and suffering. One would need only to assign these quintessentially human experiences to the human soul, or even (if more awkwardly) to the human flesh, of Christ. The Arian doctrine of *soma apsychon* effectively blocked this ploy. For if the Logos assumed a body without a soul, it followed remorselessly that the Logos *must* have been the subject of these experiences, including suffering. In fact, the Arians argued that *if* the Logos had been screened from the human

experience of suffering, humanity had not been redeemed. Thus, the anonymous author of the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaem* (*Unfinished Work on Matthew*), complains that if it were a “mere man” (*purum hominem*) who suffered on the cross, humanity was doomed. “The death of a man,” he concludes bluntly, “does not save us.”²¹ God had to suffer.

Once we begin to comprehend the motives and nature of Arian soteriology, it becomes obvious why the Arians were so anxious to comb the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, for proof of the Son’s ontological inequality to the Father. In this they were impressively skilled. In fact, one of the features of Arian theology that caused its orthodox opponents special distress was the Arian eagerness and talent for searching the Gospels, especially, but not only the Synoptics, for proof of the inferiority of Christ’s divine nature. As Gregg and Groh have observed, “the picture of Arius as a logician and dialectician” has been so “firmly entrenched in all our minds that it has been easy to overlook the degree to which appeal to the Scriptures was fundamental for Arius” and, it might be added, the later Arians.²² Hanson, too, is on the mark when he states, “the dispute was about the interpretation of the Bible” and that the philosophical language used by Athanasius was “all devoted to what was ultimately a Scriptural argument.”²³ Actually, this observation applies with equal force to the Arians and the orthodox. Scriptural warrant and support were essential for both.

In addition, it may be observed that, hermeneutically, however they differed in interpretation of specific texts, both sides approached the scriptural text atomistically. Both lifted certain key texts (and both sides agreed to a remarkable degree about which were the pertinent ones) and attempted to interpret them, often in radically decontextualized fashion. This is certainly not to fault them for not being modern. It is simply to observe that, however incompatible, even contradictory their interpretation of specific texts, their basic approach and exegetical assumptions—particularly the “atomic” principle of interpretation—were quite indistinguishable.²⁴ “All of the antagonists,” concludes T. E. Pollard, “were primarily interested in the literal interpretation of Scripture, and it was on this ground that the battles were fought.”²⁵

Following Athanasius too closely, some modern scholars have argued that it was only the Arian side that so interpreted the scriptures. T. E. Pollard, for example, argues:

That the Arians were extreme literalists is borne out by Athanasius’s criticism of them. He criticizes them, however, not because they interpret the Scriptures literally, but because they isolate carefully selected texts from their context and interpret them literally without any regard for their context or for the general teaching of Scripture.²⁶

But the pro-Nicenes were no less capable than their counterparts of reading the text of Scripture in this decontextualized fashion. Indeed, it could be argued that the Arians were generally on much stronger ground when exegeting the Bible. Some critics have argued that the Nicenes so doctored the pertinent texts as to have practically intentionally falsified the meaning of Scripture. Hanson in particular has argued that “when arguing about the career and character of Jesus Christ himself as depicted in the Gospels,” the Arians “are usually on much firmer ground than their opponents. Here both Athanasius and Hilary [of Poitiers] are driven to take refuge in the most unconvincing arguments.”²⁷ Hanson would surely have agreed with Maximinus (whom he quotes), when he observed to Augustine, “the divine Scripture does not fare badly in our teaching so that it has to receive correction (*emendationem*) from us.”²⁸ One does not have to be an Arian apologist to perceive that Hanson is often quite on the mark about the tortured character of Nicene biblical interpretation. Hanson observes of his attitude toward anti-Arian hermeneutics in his own book, “There is little denunciation or derision, little approval or dissent.”²⁹ But there is in fact quite a lot of derision, possibly much of it quite justified, when it comes to Nicene exegesis. Be that as it may, it was over the Scriptures and their interpretation that this theological battle was fought. “All of the antagonists,” concludes T. E. Pollard, “were primarily interested in the literal interpretation of Scripture, and it was on this ground that the battles were fought.”³⁰

Creaturely Limitation: The Key Biblical Texts and Their Meaning in Early Arianism

Despite the hermeneutical similarities, the Arians, both Eastern and Western, ruthlessly focused on texts that, in their eyes, indicated quite clearly that the Son of God had experienced pain, ignorance, sorrow, fear, abandonment, distress, need, and other sorts of creaturely limitation and weakness. As Hanson points out, “The Arian theologians whom [Athanasius] was opposing made . . . a great point of the infirmities, weaknesses and limitations of the historical Jesus . . . in order to argue that these frailties demonstrated that the pre-existent Son was inferior.”³¹ Gregg and Groh concur: “One of the best attested and most ignored aspects of early Arian Christology has to do precisely with the chronicling of the creaturely limitations of their redeemer.”³² This is evident from both Arian sources and, more fully, from orthodox sources, not least of all from Athanasius.

In his *Orations* against the Arians, Athanasius (296–373) complains bitterly that the Arians, their hearts hardened like that of Pharaoh, perceive only

the Savior's "human characteristics" (τὰ ἀνθρώπινα).³³ He then proceeds to give a remarkably rich description of scriptural texts precious to the Arians, which can be organized into roughly five categories: texts that prove (in the Arian view) the radical ontological difference between Father and Son; texts that suggest the Son was overcome by irrational passion; texts that indicate the Incarnate Son was ignorant of some things; texts that show Jesus in prayer and, by implication, in a state of creaturely submission; and the texts in the Synoptics that establish Jesus' belief that he was finally forsaken by the Father.

To Athanasius, these Arian interpretations and ideas are all "irreligious concepts," evidence that the Arians had (again, like Pharaoh) willfully hardened their hearts. Nonetheless, he goes to some length to enumerate them. Of the many texts favored by the Arians to demonstrate the inferior nature of the Son, Athanasius observes that his opponents preferred Matt 28:18 ("All power is given to Me") and Luke 10:22 ("All things are delivered to me by the Father"). They also invoked three Johannine texts: John 5:22: "The Father . . . has committed all judgment to the Son"; John 3:35–36: "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand"; and John 6:37: "All that the Father gives me will come to me." Athanasius and the pro-Nicenes in general were convinced that the Gospel of John was on their side; Athanasius once observed that it was the Fourth Gospel that "especially condemned" and "vanquished" the Arians.³⁴ But the Arians were able to exploit John as well, though, in general, they preferred the Synoptic Gospels to the fourth.

Referring both to the Synoptics and to John, the Arians were quick to point to texts in which the Incarnate Son appeared to be overwhelmed by uncontrollable passion, an infallible sign, in Arian eyes, of the vulnerability associated with the state of creaturehood. Thus the Arians, according to Athanasius, pointed their opponents' eyes to John 12:27, where Jesus, in agony, admits, "Now is my soul troubled" (τετάρηται), or to John 13:21, where he is described as "troubled in spirit." The Arians made much of the entire Passion and above all the Gethsemane pericope, especially the prayer by Jesus to "let this cup pass" (Matt 26:39) and his admission that his soul was "troubled unto death" (Matt 26:38). One of Arius's first opponents, Alexander of Alexandria, mordantly if quite accurately observed, "The Arians remember all the passages concerning the Savior's passion."³⁵ Hilary of Poitiers reports that the Arians interpret this admission to mean that the Son was:

far from the blessedness and incorruption of God, whose soul permits itself to be dominated by fear of imminent sorrow, who was so terrified by the necessity of death.³⁶

Athanasius informs us that, based on such texts as these, the Arians would argue, “If he were truly the Father’s power (δύναμις), he would not have felt any trouble or fear.”³⁷

It is here, perhaps, rather than in connection with the Arian soteriological view, that late Stoic philosophical thought influenced the controversy, particularly the notion of the impassibility of deity and the undesirability of violent emotion, which, both sides agreed, would incline one to error and sin. Both sides, Arian and Nicene, agreed that the Supreme God was immutable, and each concurred that a wise man (*sophos*) was one who had achieved freedom from passion (*apatheia*).³⁸ As Gregg and Groh note, “the primary mark of the sage was his ἀπάθεια or, as it was occasionally termed by a Platonist aiming at the same target . . . παντελής ἀπάθεια (‘complete indifference’).”³⁹ For the Nicenes, it was urgent to demonstrate that the Incarnate Son was not, as he appeared to be, overcome by desperate passion in Gethsemane. Jerome (ca. 342–420), ever irascible, is quite representative here. He splenetically denounces the Arians for suggesting Christ felt fear in the Garden: “Let those who think that the Savior feared death and in fear of his passion said, ‘Let this cup pass from me’—let them turn pink with shame.”⁴⁰

If strong and potentially uncontrollable emotion made the Nicenes anxious, then the appearance of a nescient Jesus made them even more so. Naturally, no influential Greek philosophy of the pre-Christian or Christian period celebrated ignorance; even less did any regard it as compatible either with divinity or the achievement of wisdom. It is no wonder, then, that the Arians (as Athanasius tells us) delighted in observing that Jesus is often found asking questions. “Who do men say that I am?” (Matt 16:13). “Where had Lazarus been lain?” (John 11:34). “How many loaves had the disciples?” (Mark 6:38).

By far the text most frequently cited by the Arians in this connection was Mark 13:32: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Here the Incarnate Son seems unambiguously to confess his ignorance of the eschatological day of judgment; it was a text that was to give the pro-Nicene party grave difficulty. In his work *On the Holy Spirit* (381), Ambrose explicitly ties the subordinationist reading of the text to the Arians.⁴¹ Genuine Arian texts also demonstrate both to what extent and how it was used. In one of the Latin Arian fragments Gryson has edited, we see Mark 13.32 used as a scriptural reinforcement to support the radical ontological difference between Father and Son. The author of this fragment makes his point by positing a long set of antinomies between the Father and Son, each of which is intended to demonstrate that they are of two substances, not one. Thus, they are unequal in power. One is ungenerated, the other only begotten. There is one who commands and the other who accepts commands, one who

sends and another who is sent, one who is impassible and one who suffered. And so on.⁴² The fragment concludes with a supporting reference to Mark 13:32: “There is the Son who denies he knows that day and the Father who in his power can know it.”⁴³ In the view of this Arian author, Mark 13:32 demonstrated unequivocally that the Son, deprived of knowledge the Father clearly had, was therefore unequal to the Father. “How, the Arians ask, is he able to be Logos or God who . . . had to learn by inquiry?”⁴⁴

Against such a reading, orthodox contemporaries would attempt, none more vigorously than Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–97) and Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315–67), to show where the Arians had erred. We will consider their responses in detail below. Gregg and Groh observed that, for late-Stoicism, lack of knowledge meant the Son could not be considered *sophos*, a wise man. But the more important point here is that, for *both* sides, lack of knowledge would have meant the Son was not fully divine, and this, in turn, would have suggested to the pro-Nicene party that he could not have served as redeemer.⁴⁵

Another text very often invoked by the Arians in this connection was Luke 2:52, which states that Jesus “increased in wisdom,” a text that implies that the Son was not noetically or ontologically equal to Eternal Wisdom and that he was increasingly less ignorant over time, though never, presumably, omniscient. “How then,” the Arians asked, “can he be the true Wisdom of God, who increased in wisdom and was ignorant of what he asked of others?”⁴⁶ This, too, is a question over which much orthodox ink would be spilt for the next millennium. We find Augustine (among other Latin pro-Nicene writers) wrestling with this text in his anti-Arian work *Against Maximinus*, written just two years before his death (428), by which time Arianism had arrived in North Africa.⁴⁷ His contemporary bishop, Ambrose of Milan, who was preoccupied with the Arians, returned to the text over and over in an attempt to combat the Arian exegesis of it.⁴⁸ In his *Treatise on the Psalms*, Jerome denounced the “insanity” of the heretical Arian interpretation of the text and furnished his own, different reading.⁴⁹ And this only scratches the surface of the scores of Latin exegetes who attempted to come to grips with this problematic text.

Other texts that demonstrated the creaturehood of the Word were those copious instances in which Jesus is pictured at prayer in a state of submission and need. Why the Arians ask, should the Son have any occasion to pray? If indeed he was of the very substance of the Father, then it rigorously follows that he should need nothing. It is necessary for creatures to require divine assistance. But since the Son also prayed for such, it follows that he “must be a creature and one of the things generated.”⁵⁰

Again, the Son utters words of supreme vulnerability, weakness, defeat, and dereliction on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

(Matt 27:46). How can such a Son be the Father's essential Word, "without whom the Father never was," if he uttered such a cry? "How," the Arians conclude, "can he be the Word of God, this Son who had slept, wept, and asked questions—just as ordinary men do?"⁵¹ "This, then," Athanasius wearily concludes, "is what these irreligious men allege in their discourses."⁵²

Likewise, in his *Theological Orations*, the Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395) lists those assertions about the Incarnate Logos that his theological opponents relished and which they insisted were given in the explicit sense of the Scriptures: Christ's ignorance; his subordination; that he prayed; that he asked questions; that he grew physically and in wisdom; that he was being perfected; that he experienced hunger and fatigue; that he was sorrowful, wept, and endured agony; and that he was submissive to his Father.⁵³ It would be otiose to describe them, but very similar catalogues of Arian arguments (and the Scriptures that inspired them) appear in the works of other Eastern anti-Arian writers.⁵⁴

From the Western Nicene party, no writer took on the Arian exegesis of these problematic texts more vigorously than Hilary of Poitiers, particularly in his most important dogmatic work, *De Trinitate*. The anti-Arian animus and intent of *De Trinitate* is so pronounced that Jerome thought the work entitled *Adversos Arianos*.⁵⁵ Written while Hilary was in exile in Phrygia,⁵⁶ where he probably encountered Arianism in its homoiousian form, Hilary complains bitterly that his theological opponents have usurped the Scriptures of *our* faith (*fidei nostrae*)—that is, of the pro-Nicene party.⁵⁷ He then offers a very useful, compact catalogue of the sorts of scriptural passages which the Arians delighted in "seizing upon" (*rapiunt usurpationem*) and which the pro-Nicene party found so difficult to explain away.⁵⁸ Like Athanasius, Hilary emphasizes how fiercely the Arians exploited Mark 13:32, how insistently they contended that his ignorance of the day and hour of the eschatological judgment proved there was a real ontological distinction between Father and Son. This avowal of ignorance the Arians interpret as evidence of an inferior nature (*infirmam naturam*) and, in Hilary's words, an insult to his divinity (*contumeliam divinitatis*). Hilary contemptuously dismisses this "godless blasphemy" as part of the "most ridiculous arguments" (*stultissimis professionibus*) of the Arians.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, behind the rhetoric of contempt there seems to lie genuine anxiety about the Arian exegesis of the text.

Again, like Athanasius, Hilary emphasizes how vigorously the Arians focused on the passion of Jesus, particularly those texts in John (12:27) and Matthew (26:38, 39) in which Jesus "trembles with fear," acknowledges his soul to be filled with sorrow, and asks his Father if it is possible to avoid the "brutality of bodily punishment." Likewise, the Arians make much of the text in which

Jesus asks God, “why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46)⁶⁰ and the text in Luke in which Jesus ends his life by saying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Hilary tells us in *De Trinitate* 10.71 that Jesus’ cry of dereliction and his commendation of spirit was, for the Arians, the “chief way to deny his divinity.”⁶¹ For the Arians, these scriptural texts indicate that the Son lacked divine “assurance of power” (*potestatis securitate*) and the incursion of spirit that does not feel pain or fear bodily suffering (*corporalis poenae*). After all, the Arians (Hilary tells us) would argue, anxiety (*anxietas*), fear, and desolation are all incompatible with possessing a fully divine nature (and Hilary would agree).⁶² So is the experience of pain (*dolor*) and of being abandoned and vanquished in the passion. All these scriptural texts thus prove, to the Arians, that the Son’s nature is inferior to God the Father’s (*inferioris a Deo Patre naturae*); they prove, in particular, that the Son did not possess the nature of the impassible God (*inpassibilis Dei*).⁶³ One genuine Arian theological text states that the Son commended his spirit to the Father in order, precisely, to demonstrate that he was always subject to or beneath (*subiectum*) him.⁶⁴

Though Hilary of Poitiers does not make much of Matt 20:23 (“Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father’”), it is quite clear from many other anti-Arian writers that this was a disputed text through the sixth century. From Ambrose in his fourth century *De Fide* to Pseudo-Vigilius of Thapse’s *Opus contra Uarimadum Arianum*, quasi-catechetical polemical instructions are produced on “how to respond to the Arians if they say x,” and both gave lengthy advice to their readers on how to respond if Matt 20:23 was used by their theological foes.⁶⁵ An early Arian sermon edited by C. H. Turner focuses very heavily on this verse and its implications of divine inequality.⁶⁶

According to Hilary, the Arians also frequently resorted to Mark 10:18 (“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good except God alone”) to establish a metaphysical distinction between Father and Son.⁶⁷ One of the authentic Arian *scoliae* on the Council of Aquileia demonstrates how, precisely, many Arians (it is one of the few Arian texts to explicitly invoke Arius—in fact, “the divine teaching of Arius”) liked to interpret this text (Eusebius is also named as one of many bishops who favored it). It declares that even the Son cannot bear comparison with “the one through whom goodness was made.”⁶⁸ Just as a human being is not to be compared to Christ, so Christ cannot be compared to God.⁶⁹ John 14:28 (“You heard me say, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I”) was put to similar use by the Arians. Members of the pro-Nicene party would vigorously respond, in

word and deed, to what they perceived as the extremely dangerous Arian use and exegesis of this text. Indeed, at the Council of Aquileia (381), Ambrose famously debated at length with Palladius of Ratiara over the meaning of this text and finally anathematized him for it (with a chorus of bishops echoing his curse).⁷⁰ As is well known, Palladius was condemned at the Council. Whether his exegesis of this text was less convincing than that of Ambrose, though, is another matter.

As is obvious, these sorts of catalogues of scriptural texts bear close resemblances to each other. Indeed, they were more or less the same, regardless of whether they were Western or Eastern in origin. The reason, of course, is that both Eastern and Western Arians seized upon the same biblical passages to prove their point of divine inferiority. Gregg and Groh summarize the issue nicely when commenting: “the Arians pieced together a picture of the earthly Christ which emphasized the existential and psychological aspects of creaturely existence in the ministry of Jesus.”⁷¹

Those existential and psychological aspects of creaturely existence would, however, haunt both patristic and medieval writers. The Arian insistence upon those aspects of Jesus’ existence, given, so far as they could see, plainly in the Gospels, would shape christological and exegetical writing for more than a millennium.