

St. Hilary's treatment of Genesis in *De Trinitate*: A Response to Crisis

St. Hilary of Poitiers' *De Trinitate*, written in the context of exile and the Arian-esque *Homoian* debate, utilizes extensive passages from Genesis in its polemic. While we have little biographical data, and most of it comes from Hilary's own pen,¹ it is clear that he writes in the context of Constantius' attempt to impose what Manlio Simonetti calls "a disguised form of Arianism" in the West.² Hilary was exiled to Phrygia for taking part in the 356 council at Beziers, failing to support the condemnation of Athanasius at Milan, and breaking ties with church leaders who did.³ In exile, he encountered Origenism, but also met the Sabellians and the Homoians, who took issue with the Homousians' language of "one substance"⁴ and tried to demonstrate that "the Son does not share in the attributes of divinity."⁵ While the exact timeline of the construction of *De Trinitate* is up to debate,⁶ it is clear that it was written primarily in response to these two errors.

Since Hilary's exegesis of Genesis is the primary substance of Books IV and V of the treatise, it is worth asking to what extent his exegesis of this text can be trusted in our contemporary context. In other words, do his insights into Genesis endure, or are they simply a fleeting response to *his* contemporary situation? Another way of asking the question would be whether Hilary performs true exegesis, or an eisegesis in regard to these passages?

In order to answer these questions, I will first examine Hilary's stated exegetical principles and summarize his treatment of Genesis in Books IV and V of *De Trinitate*. Then, I

¹ Manlio Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers and the Arian Crisis in the West: Polemicists and Heretics," *Patrology*, Vol. 4, ed. Angelo di Berardino, trans. Placid Solari, intro. Johannes Quasten (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1986) 36.

² Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers," 36.

³ Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers," 36.

⁴ Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers," 37.

⁵ Mark Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," *The Trinitarian Theology of Hilary of Poitiers*, Vigiliae Christianae Supplements Series, Vol. 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2007) *ProQuest Ebook Central*, 124.

⁶ Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers," 40, 42.

will demonstrate that most of Hilary's treatment of Genesis is well within an established tradition of responding to various heretical movements in the Church. At the same time, I will show that Hilary's treatment modifies the tradition to respond specifically to his contemporary concerns, especially subordinationism. Finally, by way of contrast, I will point out how Augustine questions the framework of the by-now traditional interpretation, since he is not conditioned by the same doctrinal questions. Augustine's easy dismissal signals a change in the culture. The goal of these steps is to show that while Hilary makes genuine contributions to the exegesis of Genesis, and while he intended to do true exegesis, what he was able to see in these texts was unquestionably colored by his milieu.

I. Exegetical Method

In general, Hilary's exegesis could be said to have three main characteristics: a polemical character, emphasis on unity, and a sense of the transcendent. Each of these characteristics influences Hilary's approach and how he should be read.

First, Hilary emphasizes the utter transcendence of God and the difficulty of speaking about Him, underscoring the polemic nature of the work and providing a context for his contributions to the Genesis tradition. He laments the "defects of language,"⁷ writing that in saying "God is invisible, ineffable, or infinite...the mind becomes weary in trying to fathom Him" whom the Son alone can fathom.⁸ Each of these words invites untrue conclusions that God is somehow lacking something.⁹ Hilary uses his apophatic inclinations first polemically, by asking how a person could be so arrogant as to think he could penetrate the mystery of the Son's begetting, since he cannot even know his own.¹⁰ This application is significant to our question

⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, Fathers of the Church, Vol. 25, trans. Stephen McKenna (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954) II.7.

⁸ Hilary, *The Trinity*, II.6.

⁹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, II.7.

¹⁰ Hilary, *The Trinity*, II.9.

because it demonstrates how thoroughly this work is directed toward Hilary's opponents.

Secondly, his focus on the transcendence of God – Father and Son – provides a context for our later considerations on how Hilary's work on Genesis fits into the overall tradition, which tended to emphasize the transcendence of the Father in contrast to the immanence of the Son.

Hilary's emphasis on the unity of all the Scriptures provides a key for understanding why his exegesis appears circular or eisegetical. Even in the context of critique, it is important to keep in mind his own understanding of his methodology and acknowledge its benefits. After all, Hilary himself cautions against eisegesis, writing that the reader of scripture must not limit God, but "evaluate the divine truths in accordance with the magnificence of God's testimony concerning himself. The best reader is he who looks for the meaning of the words in the words themselves rather than reads his meaning into them..."¹¹ It stands to reason that a person so eager to censure reading into scripture would not, as a rule, do so intentionally. As Mark Weedman points out, "In Hilary's thought world, in order to have a right conception about the relationship between the Father and the Son we have to read Scripture correctly. But in order to read Scripture correctly we have to properly understand the relationship between the Father and the Son."¹² In other words, to see what the Scripture is saying about the nature of the Son, one has to already believe it. Carl Beckwith points out that though this approach seems circular to the modern reader,¹³ Hilary sees all of scripture as "governed by a soteriological narrative that progressively discloses how God comes to us in order to make possible our return to him."¹⁴ Thus, the idea that one would have to understand and profess Jesus' *homousian* divinity before being able to see what God said about it in Genesis is consistent with his overall view of the

¹¹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, I.18.

¹² Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," 119.

¹³ Carl L. Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity: From De Fide to De Trinitate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 194-95.

¹⁴ Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers*, 187.

Scriptures. Not only that, but the Church as a whole has operated from the beginning with the idea that the New Testament reveals the Old.¹⁵ Moreover, Hilary echoes the Alexandrian ideal of the inspired interpreter, insisting that pious reading and desire for knowledge must be supplemented by “new faculties in order that everyone’s conscience may be enlightened by the gift that comes from heaven.”¹⁶ Ultimately, then, Hilary’s understanding of good exegesis differs substantially from the modern understanding, and therefore the paths he takes with Genesis, while conditioned by his times, are faithful to his exegetical method.

II. Treatment of Genesis

Before evaluating his exegesis, it would be helpful to summarize how Hilary contextualizes and treats Genesis passages in Books IV and V of *De Trinitate*.

Book IV begins with warnings on the limitations of language and human understanding.¹⁷ Hilary then discusses the errors of the heretics, which reduce to A) Adoptionism, B) radical Arianism, and C) rejections of *homoousious* on various grounds, all of which Hilary counters with Catholic teaching.¹⁸ He recounts the arguments of his opponents from various passages from the New Testament and Psalms,¹⁹ but assesses his opponents’ error as an *a priori* commitment to maintain the Father’s divine attributes by excluding the Son.²⁰ Hilary responds to this concern: “The Son has nothing else than birth, and the tribute of praise which the begotten receives tends to the glory of his begetter.”²¹ Hilary reproduces a letter from Arius to Alexander of Alexandria before his condemnation,²² and concludes that the key concern of the Arians (and, one may presume, their theological descendants), is to safeguard the oneness of God, of whom

¹⁵ See the stories of Emmaus (Lk 24:13-32) and Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).

¹⁶ Hilary, *The Trinity*, I.18.

¹⁷ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.1-2.

¹⁸ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.3-6.

¹⁹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.8.

²⁰ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.9.

²¹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.10.

²² Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.12-13.

Moses wrote, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one.”²³ Since his opponents base their argument on Moses’ presentation of God, Hilary proposes to examine “whether Moses who said to Israel: ‘The Lord thy God is one’ has proclaimed the Son of God as God.”²⁴ In other words, the purpose of this book is to show that Moses wrote about the Son as God. Let it be noted that by including such a lengthy preamble, Hilary makes it clear that his exegetical approach is at base dictated by the concerns of his opponents.

Hilary begins his treatment of Genesis by pointing out that when God created the firmament, “God made the firmament, and God divided through the midst of the water.”²⁵ Hilary sees the making as revealing the Father *from* whom are all things, and the dividing as the God *through* whom are all things. Since “All things were made through”²⁶ the Word, the Son must be present in this moment of Creation.²⁷ He moves on to the classic proof-text, “Let us make mankind in our image and likeness,”²⁸ elaborating the idea that speaking at all, and using “us” especially, reveals cooperation and also a shared nature that would cause a shared image.²⁹ By way of extension, Hilary considers Proverbs 8:27-31, in which Wisdom acts as artisan.³⁰

Finally, he arrives at the Genesis narrative, the beginning of what Hilary calls “the election and the law,” and which he believes corroborate the Creation’s witness to the Son’s nature as God.³¹ First, Hilary considers when the angel of the Lord counsels Hagar to submit to Sarai’s abuse. The angel promises, “Multiplying I will multiply your posterity and it shall not be numbered because of the multitude.”³² The text calls the angel “Lord,” and Hagar says God has

²³ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.15, quoting Duet 6:4.

²⁴ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.15.

²⁵ Gen 1:6-7, as quoted in Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.16. Hilary uses the LXX, which accounts for the parallelism not found in modern translations.

²⁶ Jn 1:3.

²⁷ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.16.

²⁸ Gen. 1:26.

²⁹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.17-18.

³⁰ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.20.

³¹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.22.

³² Gen 16:10, as quoted in Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.23.

seen her, and she God.³³ Hilary, using the Septuagint's description of the Messiah as "the angel of the great council," sees no trouble, then, in identifying this "angel" with the Son, since Hagar says she has seen God.³⁴ He ties this apparition with that of God's promise to Abraham to bless and increase Ishmael: if the promise is the same, the "I" making the promise should be the same. "It is God, therefore, who is also the angel, because He who is also the angel of God is God, born of God."³⁵ Continuing on, Hilary identifies one of the three visitors at Mamre with the Son, insisting that the Son promises Isaac and is the one who investigates, barbers over, and ultimately destroys Sodom and Gomorrah.³⁶ Hilary even insists that Abraham gave adoration (*adorauit*) and "recognized the mystery of the future Incarnation"³⁷ – "Abraham your father rejoiced that he was to see my day. He saw it and was glad."³⁸ Through promises and fulfillment, word and action, Hilary says, "He [the visitor] indicates that He is God."³⁹ After harmonizing the Lot account⁴⁰ and using the parallelism of Jacob's ladder ("God said to Jacob... 'build there an altar to the God who was seen by you'"⁴¹) to make another grammatical distinction between the Father and Son, Hilary goes on to consider the burning bush.⁴² After a long polemical excursus on the ways the Son's integral part in God's plan is manifested throughout the prophets and New Testament,⁴³ he finally concludes that the identity of the one who conversed with Abraham, spoke with Moses, etc. is the same one who suffered the Passion.⁴⁴ In all of these passages, Hilary does not attempt additional demonstration for why it would be fitting for the Son to do the

³³ Gen 16:13.

³⁴ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.23, quoting LXX Is 9:6.

³⁵ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.24.

³⁶ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.25-26.

³⁷ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.27.

³⁸ Jn 8:56, as quoted in Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.27.

³⁹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.27.

⁴⁰ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.28-29.

⁴¹ Gen 35:1, as quoted in Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.30.

⁴² Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.32-34.

⁴³ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.35-41.

⁴⁴ Hilary, *The Trinity*, IV.42.

actions, specifically in Genesis, rather than the Father. Later we will consider how foregoing that move allows Hilary to sidestep subordinationist tendencies⁴⁵ that would have put him too close to his opponents' position.

Book V considers the same biblical data from the angle of a different question: can Hilary say that “the Son of God is the true God”?⁴⁶ Answering this question is essential to an overall response to those who saw the Son as *like* God (*homoousious*). In order to answer this question, Hilary examines the same passages as in Book IV in light of the principle that “a true nature arises from its nature and power.”⁴⁷ Thus, if the Father spoke, “Let there be a firmament,” and the Son “made the firmament,” the Son must have the power of God to create, since his “operation...is placed on an equal level with the Word.”⁴⁸ Likewise, when the Father says, “Let us make man in our image and likeness,” the “‘Our’ indicates that there is no union [God is not a composite], no unlikeness, no distinction,” since unlike things cannot share an image.⁴⁹ Returning to Hagar and Ishmael, Hilary says that calling the Son an “angel” simply denotes the office of messenger, rather than a nature, since Hagar calls him God.⁵⁰ When this “angel” promises to multiply Ishmael and delivers on that promise, his power to work goes beyond the power of a mere angel. If this work must be attributed to God, the nature must be that of God.⁵¹ If God is the only just judge, then the being who had the power to judge Sodom and destroy it must be God.⁵² Jacob seeks true, not adoptive, blessings in his struggle.⁵³ More importantly, the directive of God to Jacob to worship the God he saw in the struggle demonstrates that the Father

⁴⁵ While Hilary did not always avoid subordinationist tendencies, according to G.T. Armstrong, “he is able to employ traditional Logos Christology with less sense of subordinationism than almost any of his predecessors. G.T. Armstrong, “The Genesis Theophanies of Hilary of Poitiers,” *Studia Patristica*, Vol. 10, 1970, 207.

⁴⁶ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.3.

⁴⁷ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.3.

⁴⁸ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.5, quoting Gen 1:6-7.

⁴⁹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.8.

⁵⁰ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.11.

⁵¹ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.13.

⁵² Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.16.

⁵³ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.19.

himself desires the Son to be worshipped as God.⁵⁴ After again showing how Moses encountered the Son in the burning bush and various other theophanies,⁵⁵ Hilary continues with other logical considerations and commentary on the Prophets and New Testament.

III. Modifying the Tradition

In order to demonstrate that Hilary's exegesis of Genesis amounts to a modified, polemical eisegesis appropriate to his contemporary context, we must now consider the exegetical history Hilary inherited. In a survey of early Christian responses to the theophany of the three visitors to Abraham, Bogdon Bucur demonstrates that Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen and others all identify one of the figures as the Son, in various cultural contexts. He also states that this "reading remains normative for later authors," such as Novatian, Athanasius, Hilary, and seven others.⁵⁶ Further evidence of this widespread understanding comes in the form of anathemas of the First Creed of Sirmium, issued just around when Hilary became Bishop of Poitiers in 350.⁵⁷ Three of the conditions for anathema follow:

- 14 – If anyone says that at Gn 1:26, 'Let us make man', God was talking to himself
- 15 – That Abraham did not see the Son but the ingenerate (ἀγέννητον) God or a part of him.
- 16 – That Jacob did not wrestle (Gn 32:24-32) with the Son in the guise of a man, but with the ingenerate God, or a part of him.⁵⁸

The Council's insistence on these particular readings underscore both their traditional element and the intensity of the Arian temptation that would fuel such pronouncements.

The first instance of identifying the angel of God with the Son can be found in Justin Martyr, but, like Hilary's employment of this idea, Justin's is colored by his Christology and the

⁵⁴ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.20; c.f. Gen 35:1.

⁵⁵ Hilary, *The Trinity*, V.23.

⁵⁶ Bogdon G. Bucur, "The Early Christian Reception of Genesis 18: From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 23:2 (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) 250-53.

⁵⁷ Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers," 36.

⁵⁸ "The First Sirmian Creed (351)," in R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) 327.

concerns of his audience.⁵⁹ Like Hilary, Justin identifies the Son as present at all the theophanies from Abraham to Moses.⁶⁰ He employs the same grammatical argument from “Let us make man in our image.”⁶¹ Also, although Justin addresses Jewish concerns, his analysis of the Mamre theophany is in the context of Trypho asking for proof that there could be another God other than the “Creator of all things,”⁶² which is analogous to Hilary’s goal of showing that the Son can be God while maintaining monotheism. However, Justin’s exegesis contains clear subordination of the Son to the Father. For example, while he paves the way for Hilary to say that “angel” refers to his office rather than his nature, “because He proclaims to man whatever the Creator of the World—above whom there is no other God—wishes to reveal to them,”⁶³ even this description implies separation. Justin rejects as ridiculous the idea “that the Creator and Father of all things left his super-celestial realms to make Himself visible in a little spot on earth.”⁶⁴ The angel “is distinct from God, the Creator; distinct, that is, in number, but not in mind...He never did or said anything else than what the Creator...desired that He say or do.”⁶⁵ In these passages, one gets the clear sense that Justin views the Son as less than the Father, since the Father is portrayed as the utterly remote Creator.

Next, Irenaeus of Lyons provides a possible source for Hilary’s idea that Abraham anticipated the Incarnation of Christ. In his *Against Heresies*, he claims that Abraham,

having learned, by an announcement [made to him], that the Son of God would be a man among men, by whose advent his seed should be as the stars of heaven, he desired to see that day, so that he might himself also embrace Christ; and, seeing it through the spirit of prophecy, he rejoiced.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Armstrong, “The Genesis Theophanies,” 205.

⁶⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, Saint Justin Martyr: The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy, or The Rule of God*, ed. Thomas B. Falls, Fathers of the Church, vol. 6 (New York: Christian Heritage, 1949) chap. 58-59.

⁶¹ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap 62.

⁶² Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap 55.

⁶³ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap 56.

⁶⁴ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap 60.

⁶⁵ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap 56.

⁶⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, from Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature

Irenaeus also says the joy of those who actually saw Jesus passed backwards to their forefather, who rejoiced in them in some derived way.⁶⁷ In this passage, Irenaeus clearly stops short of saying that Abraham worshipped one of the angels as God, and he also does not go so far as to claim that Abraham foresaw the Incarnation in the angel itself. Instead, Abraham rejoices in the prospect of the Incarnation, which Irenaeus may derive from the Septuagint verses dealing with Isaac as the “seed” who has been promised superabundant blessings.⁶⁸ When Hilary claims that Abraham adored God and somehow experienced a pre-Incarnation, therefore, he seems to be taking Irenaeus’ idea and amplifying it.

Tertullian and Novatian, since they write in Latin and have so much in common with Hilary, are undoubtedly part of the tradition he consciously inherited.⁶⁹ Tertullian argues for plurality in the creation of man, since he already sees three persons present at Creation – Father, Son, and Spirit⁷⁰: “For in whose company was he [the Father] making man, and like whom was he making him? He was speaking with the Son who was to assume manhood, and the Spirit who was to sanctify man.”⁷¹ Since Tertullian must respond to those who would make the Father and Son different names of the same person, he is at pains to show that it must be the Son who interacts with humanity at Babel or Sodom.⁷² Likewise, he acknowledges that his opponents, particularly Praxeas and his followers, will use the acknowledgement of Jacob that he saw the

Publishing Co., 1885), rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, IV.7.1. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103407.htm>. Accessed 10 July 2019.

⁶⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.7.1.

⁶⁸ cf. Gen 17:5-9, LXX.

⁶⁹ See Weedman, “Exegeting Scripture,” 126 and Novatian, *The Treatise of Novatian, “On the Trinity,”* trans. Herbert Moore, Translations of Christian Literature, Series II, Latin Texts (New York: Macmillan, 1919) Reprint Lexington, KY: University of Michigan Library, 2011, 14.

⁷⁰ A consideration of Hilary’s silence on the Holy Spirit is beyond the scope of this paper. Simonetti argues that his silence is meaningful, since Tertullian had already called the Spirit a person. He points out that Hilary saw the Spirit as gift, the *res* of the divine nature, and not a person. In this, Simonetti sees Hilary as limiting himself “to the terms of the polemic which at that time involved only the relationship between the first two divine persons.” Simonetti, “Hilary of Poitiers and the Arian Crisis,” 59-60.

⁷¹ Tertullian, *Tertullian’s Treatise Against Praxeas*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: S.P.C.K., 1948) chap 12.

⁷² Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, chap 16.

Lord “face to face”⁷³ to claim that the Son is the Father when visible (a form of Modalism). His solution is to say there are two faces – that of the Father and the Word – and only the Father’s face slays. This explains why Moses can see God face to face, but also ask to see his face. Jacob, therefore, must have seen the Word. In this dichotomy, Tertullian suggests a subordinate nature for the Word, and he further suggests His mutability when he writes that through these interactions with man, the Word “was always also learning how as God to company with men...laying a foundation of faith for us, that we might the more easily believe that the Son of God has come down into the world, if we knew that something of the sort had previously been done.”⁷⁴ The latter idea in this passage, that of making people gradually accustomed to God’s presence among them, is further developed by Novatian.

Novatian’s opponents embraced various forms of Docetism, with some claiming Jesus’ acts were not real, or that he was a ghost, or that the Word “received nothing from Mary” or had unreal flesh.⁷⁵ Also, Novatian freely proclaims his subordinationist beliefs, clearly stating that the Son is “less than the Father.”⁷⁶ Like Justin, for example, he argues that God the Father could not possibly have been the one to interact with those at Babel, since “Moses everywhere represents God as boundless and limitless.... Yet Moses represents God as going down to the tower.”⁷⁷ Novatian uses all the aforementioned arguments about how the Word must be the one to appear to Jacob⁷⁸ or rain down fire at Sodom,⁷⁹ but two points stand out. First, he amplifies how Tertullian sees the Genesis theophanies as a pedagogical way of preparing people for the Incarnation. He compares God (the Father) to the bright sun who cannot be seen. The Word is

⁷³ Gen 32:30.

⁷⁴ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, chap 16.

⁷⁵ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap X.

⁷⁶ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap XXVII.

⁷⁷ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap XVII

⁷⁸ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap XIX.

⁷⁹ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap XVIII.

like a slow-rising luminary that gradually accustoms us to the light and heals the defect of blindness. “Otherwise the sudden and unendurable brightness of His full glory would beat upon it and overwhelm it, so that it could never see God the Father, whom it has always longed to see.”⁸⁰ This interpretation is so similar to Philo’s that it is hard to think it not adapted from his,⁸¹ and Origen also has a similar interpretation.⁸² This converging accounts testify that a subordinationist reading that sees the Logos as a pedagogical preparation for the vision of a remote God/Father is part of the tradition Hilary inherited. More importantly, Hilary does not follow this line of interpretation precisely because he wants to avoid a subordinationist interpretation, which shows that he modifies the traditional “exegesis” in response to his milieu.

While treating of Novatian, we should note that, besides Hilary, he is one of the only major writers of the early Church to comment specifically on Genesis 16:10, the promise of the Angel to Hagar that Ishmael’s descendants would be numerous, and 16:13, Hagar’s reflection that she has seen God. In fact, in the seven-volume index of *Biblica Patristica*, these two verses are cited less than ten times outside of Hilary’s work,⁸³ mostly in Novatian, and also in Philo and Origen, who give a more allegorical treatment.⁸⁴ Like Hilary after him, Novatian makes the connection between the angel of God and the messianic “angel of the Great Counsel” of Isaiah 9:6. He insists that the angel “would not have promised a blessing upon her [Hagar’s] seed if He

⁸⁰ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap XVIII.

⁸¹ God “on occasion took the place of an angel, as far as appearance went, without changing his own real nature, for the advantage of him who was not, as yet, able to bear the sight of the true God; (239) for as those who are not able to look upon the sun itself, look upon the reflected rays of the sun as the sun itself...so also do those who are unable to bear the sight of God, look upon his image, his angel word, as himself.” Philo, *On Dreams, That They are God-Sent, The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1993) 1.XLI.

⁸² Lot received the visitors in the evening because “Lot could not receive the magnitude of midday light; but Abraham was capable of receiving the full brightness of the light.” Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald Heine, Fathers of the Church, Vol. 71 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1982) Genesis homily IV.1.

⁸³ *Biblica Patristica: Index des Citations et Allusions Bibliques Dans la Litterature Patristique*. Centre D’Analyse et de Documentation Patristiques, 7 vols. and supplement (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) 1975-1982.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Philo’s treatment: Philo, *On Dreams*, 1.XL.231.

had not been both angel and God...God forbid that we should call the Father an angel, that would make the Father subject to another being whose angel He is..."⁸⁵ Again, Hilary's treatment of this passage distinguishes itself from while echoing Novatian's. On one hand, the fact that Hilary ties the Hagar interaction to the later passage with Abraham shows a development of this "proof," and, of course, he avoids the subordination of the angel to the Father, shifting an originally anti-modalist argument to an anti-subordinationist one.⁸⁶ He also shifts his general focus to the nature of God.⁸⁷ On the other hand, Hilary's use of this passage in particular, along with his general use of the argument from power (since the power to bless indicates the nature) are rooted in the tradition he inherited.

In light of this survey of the treatment of Genesis before Hilary, it is easy to see how Hilary's exegesis is conditioned by the contemporary questions. He sees his opponents as committing the same errors that Arius did, and so he wants to show that the Son shares the divinity of the Father.⁸⁸ His exegesis is "polemical in character,"⁸⁹ attempting to show that the Son (as Word) is not a "perfect creature like the other creatures" or "composed of visible matter"⁹⁰ but true God. In order to do this, Hilary takes passages, such as Jacob's wrestling match, that the Arians would have used to support a "reduced and inferior Son" and tries to show how they show the Son as equal.⁹¹ In all of this, Hilary is conditioned and constrained by his milieu to maintain that the Son was present in these theophanies. As a counterexample, Marcellus of Ancyra, who went against the "universal habit of reading into the Old Testament

⁸⁵ Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chap XVIII.

⁸⁶ Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," 127.

⁸⁷ Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," 127.

⁸⁸ Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," 125.

⁸⁹ Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," 120.

⁹⁰ Weedman, "Exegeting Scripture," 123.

⁹¹ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) 844.

the presence of the pre-existent Son” was eventually condemned, in part for his reluctance to read these passages in the traditional way.⁹²

Before concluding, it seems fitting to consider how Augustine treats these passages, since he represents a slightly later milieu still in contact with but less tempted by Arian sensibilities. He acknowledges that God could, in his power, appear visibly to man, and he acknowledges the tradition that one of the visitors to Abraham at Mamre was Christ. However, Augustine sees a conflict because Lot also addresses the two (while Abraham speaks with the one) in the singular as “Lord.” Thus, Augustine concludes that Abraham and Lot see God in these visitors – two or three – as in the prophets, since they were actually angels.⁹³ In his *De Trinitate*, Augustine points out that it would not be fitting for Christ to be “...found as a man’ before taking our flesh.... For had He already ‘emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of man in habit found as a man’ when we know when He did this through His birth of the Virgin?”⁹⁴ This is not to say that Augustine has difficulty with the idea that the Son was involved in the world prior to the Incarnation. For example, he agrees with the tradition that sees the Son in the burning bush, but, in line with the theological development of the time, he also suggests that the Holy Spirit might be the person responsible for that theophany.⁹⁵ The trouble for Augustine is primarily, therefore, with a pre-Incarnational appearance in the form of *man*. This shift in exegetical emphasis shows that Augustine, like his predecessors, is using the theological framework at his disposal to treat these passages. However, at least in this particular case, Augustine seems less constrained than Hilary by polemical preoccupations.

IV. Conclusion

⁹² Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 843.

⁹³ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God, Books VIII-XVI*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan, Fathers of the Church, Vol. 14 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952) XVI.29.

⁹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 45 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963) II.11; quoting Phil 2:7.

⁹⁵ Augustine, *The Trinity*, II.13.

Hilary of Poitiers' treatment of Genesis helps advance his polemical purpose, which he situates midway between modalism and subordinationism.⁹⁶ He begins his treatment by showing how the Son is present at creation and the Genesis theophanies and is shown to be true God. He then considers these same passages, focusing on how the Son is shown to have the same power, and therefore the same nature, as the Father. In so doing, he distinguishes his exegesis from the Latin authors who came before him and tended to subordinate the Son to the Father. However, the distinctions he makes are governed by the polemical concerns he faces in response to the Homoian party. Looking at the entire trajectory, and especially at how Augustine can dismiss the whole tradition just a few years later, it becomes clear that his treatment of Genesis, however well-intentioned it may be, is more eisegetical than exegetical. Because of the Council at Sirmium and the Arian concerns, Hilary had little choice but to see the Son as the primary actor in the Genesis theophanies. In light of his opponents, especially the Homoians and Sabellian modalists, he had little choice but to focus his attention on how to show the equality of the Son to the Father in these passages. Even his choice of biblical texts was governed by his opponents' choices. Thus, while Hilary's *De Trinitate* influenced his contemporaries and has lasting value as one of the survivors among many treatises,⁹⁷ his treatment of Genesis does not have perduring value.

⁹⁶ Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers*, 83.

⁹⁷ Simonetti, "Hilary of Poitiers," 42-43.

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