

TRINITARIAN EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGY:

PROV 8.22 ACCORDING TO THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS¹

I. INTRODUCTION

One might be astonished to see that Prov 8.22 plays such an important role in the theological controversies of the fourth century. To find the reasons for this, it would suffice to compare the different Greek versions of this verse with the Hebrew text. La Bible du Rabbinate Français translates: “The Eternal One created me at the beginning of his action, prior to his works, from the origin of things.”² The Septuagint, which was the *textus receptus* of the patristic age, had translated the original Hebrew as: *Κύριος ἔκτισέ με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ* (“The Lord created me first principle of his ways with a view to his works”). Aquila translated the verse as: *Κύριος ἐκτήσατό με κεφάλαιον τῶν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ ἀρχῆθεν κατεργασμάτων αὐτοῦ* (“The Lord acquired me as the foundation of his ways from the origin of his works”). For his part, Symmachus translated the verse as: *Κύριος ἐκτήσατό με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ πρὸ τῆς ἐργασίας αὐτοῦ* (“The Lord acquired me as the first principle of his ways before his action”). Finally, Theodotion adopted the following translation: *Κύριος ἐκτήσατό με ἀρχὴν ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ, πρὸ τῆς ἐργασίας αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τότε* (“The Lord acquired me as the first principle of his way, before his action, and up to the present moment”). St. Jerome, influenced by the Arian controversy, opted for the translation: “*Dominus possedit me initium viarum suarum antequam quicquam faceret a principio*” [“The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning”].³ [363]

¹ Page numbers of the original article format and translations of Greek expressions not original to Parys are in brackets []. We have directly translated Parys’ translations of Greek expressions.

² The Jerusalem Bible translates: “Yahweh created me at the beginning of his plans, before his most ancient works.”

³ A variant has “*in initio*” [“in the beginning”]. Cf. *Biblia Sacra juxta vulgatam editionem* edited R. Weber, Stuttgart, 1969, p. 964.

Now, the ancient Christian authors spontaneously identified Wisdom with the Son, since the Christ is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1.24). One thinks since then what argument the Arians were able to draw from this text, read according to the Septuagint translation, in favor of their subordinationist theology and what the difficulty for the defenders of the *ὁμοούσιος* [“of the same substance”] of Nicaea was so as to give this verse an orthodox exegesis. Such were the true stakes in this Scriptural controversy which set orthodox and Arian theologians at odds.

The history of the patristic exegesis of Prov 8.22 was written some years ago by Professor Manlio Simonetti.⁴ However, the interpretation of this text by the three Cappadocian Fathers scarcely received any attention from him. Even though it is a matter here of a particular point, a more attentive study shows itself as significant in several regards. It permits us first to follow, over the course of a period which extends some 20 years (364-384), the hesitations and the different interpretative tendencies for this very important verse and already long controversial during the Arian controversy. Since orthodox and Arian exegeses of Prov 8.22 also reflect the theological oppositions, the renewed attempts of the Cappadocian Fathers to propose an adequate interpretation of this text gives us assistance for the refining of their respective theological syntheses on the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son (*οἰκονομία*). Finally this research permits, always on a point of precise exegesis and doctrine, to measure the mutual interdependence of the Cappadocian Fathers and to detect the quite eclectic manner of which they inspired their successors.

Guided by these principles, we will analyze in chronological order each of the texts where they present their exegesis of Prov 8.22. It is appropriate however to underline before this the Eunomian understanding of this verse. Eunomius cites it three times, twice in the Apology,

⁴ M. Simonetti, *Studi sull' Arianesimo*. Sull' interpretazione patristica di Proverbi 8,22. Rome 1965, p. 9-87. — Cf. A. Martinez Sierra, *La prueba escriturística de los Arrianos segun s. Hilario de Poitiers*, in *Miscelanea Comillas* 41 (1964), p. 304-333.

and once in the form of an allusion [364] in “his Profession of faith.”⁵ For him this text constitutes a Scriptural confirmation of his theology, according to which the Only-Begotten is a creature of the Unbegotten.⁶ But from all the evidence, as for many of the other Scriptural proofs inherited from the Arians before, Prov 8.22 does not call for a personal or renewed effort at exegesis on his part.⁷

II. ST. BASIL OF CAESAREA

We know of only one passage⁸ where St. Basil of Caesarea proposes a personal interpretation of Prov 8.22. It is found in the second book of his work *Against Eunomius* written in the years 364-365⁹ so as to refute the Apology of Eunomius. Basil makes three remarks, designed to weaken the force of the argument which Eunomius was able to draw from this text in favor his thesis. First of all, this verse is a *hapax legomenon* in Scripture, which thus renders its exegesis difficult. Even more, the book of Proverbs is an obscure book.¹⁰ Finally, the other Greek versions of Scripture translate the Hebrew text more faithfully as *ἐκτίσατό με* “the Lord

⁵ *Apologia* 26, PG 30: 864B; 30, PG 30: 868C; *Profession de foi*, PG 67: 588.

⁶ *Ποίημα, κτίσμα, γέννημα*.

⁷ Prov 8.22 is noteworthy among the three categories of the texts of Scripture invoked by the Arians: Gregory of Nyssa, *Or.* 30.2, PG 36: 105A and *Or.* 29.18, PG 36: 97A; ps. Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula* 8.4-9, ed. Y. Courtonne I, p. 27-33.

⁸ *Adv. Eunomium* II.20; PG 29: 616B-617A.

⁹ See Basil, *Epist.* 223.5. Ed. Y. Courtonne III, p. 14.

¹⁰ Cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum* IV.87, ed. M. Borret, Sources Chrétiennes 136, p. 400-401; Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos*, PG 26: 240C-241A; ps. Basil of Caesarea, *Adv. Eunomium* IV, PG 29: 704C.

acquired me.”¹¹ Basil promises to give a more detailed exegesis of this text elsewhere, a promise which he seems not to have kept (616B). [365]

Basil’s remarks—for one cannot call them an actual interpretation—are deceiving. It suffices to compare the explications furnished by St. Meletius of Antioch in his celebrated homily offered in 360¹² and by the semi-Arian¹³ texts so as to give an account of Basil’s reticence and without doubt the difficulty there proved to be in offering a theological exegesis of this text. Basil does not seem to have retained, nor even to have known of, the Athanasian exegesis of Prov 8.22 to which his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, fifteen years later, will grant as we will see. By way of comparison we cite here the essential passage of Meletius of Antioch’s homily, with a translation that is more literal than literary:

“Do not think, then, either in the case of any other witness of Scripture, nor in this one (Prov 8.22), that the words of Scripture are opposed to one another, even if they seem to contradict themselves in the eyes of those who do not have a healthy faith or of those whose spirit is sick. As a matter of fact, every earthly example is insufficient, taken on its own, to help us achieve a clear idea of the nature of the Only-begotten. This is the reason why Scripture uses a large amount of concepts (*ἐπίνοιαί*) and eponyms in the case of the Only-begotten, so that we might be able

¹¹ Basil rightly refers then to Gen 4.1 where *ἐκτησάμην* [“I have acquired”] has the sense of *ἐγέννησα* [“I have begotten”]. The recourse to other Greek versions was not a new practice and will be used by Gregory of Nyssa as well, as we will see; Denys of Rome, PG 25: 464C; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eccl. Theol.* III.3, ed. E. Klostermann, p. 140, 13-14; Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos* II.53, PG 26: 257C-260A; Didymus of Alexandria, *De Trin.* 3.3, PG 35: 816C-817B.

¹² The sermon is preserved by Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 73.31, ed. K. Holl, p. 305, 30-307, 4; cf. Manlio Simonetti, *Studi sull’ Arianesimo*, p. 75-76.

¹³ Apud Epiph. Salam., *Panar.* 73.11 and 19-20, ed. K. Holl, p. 282, 10-16 and p. 293, 7-14; cf. M. Simonetti, *Studi sull’ Arianesimo*, p. 72-75. The semi-Arians, in contrast to Arians who explained the verb to beget in v. 25 in light of the verb to create in v. 22, in the sense of the creation of the Son, explained the verb to create in light of the verb to beget, in the sense of the impassible generation of the Son by the Father. Is this what the last remark of St. Basil was tending towards (cf. p. 364 n. 7)?

in some manner, beginning with that which is the object of our experience, to seize upon that which surpasses us and represents to us that of which we are ignorant based on we know, advancing slowly and little by little from that which is clear to us towards that which is hidden from us.

Since, then, those who believe in Christ should know that the Christ is similar to the Father, — seeing that this one who is ‘in every way’ the image of Him who is ‘above all,’ and that by him everything [365] has been created, that which is in heaven and that which is on the earth, image, not as something inanimate that is from something animate, nor as an activity that is from an art, nor as the finished result that is from an activity, but as the product engendered that is from the one who engenders him—since they should know also that he is not permitted to describe the preeternal generation of the Only-begotten with the help of human and corporeal generation, and because also according to the paradigm of Wisdom who envelopes all human thoughts, (the Son is the Wisdom) of the Father, Wisdom which is certainly not without hypostasis and without its own existence, Scripture employed each of these expressions, that of creation and that of generation, not because they seem to announce to us contradictory affirmations about the same subjects under the same relationship, but to show us the hypostatic and permanent character by the expression ‘created,’ and by the expression ‘begotten’ the eminence and specific character of the Only-begotten. For it says: ‘I came out from the Father and I am going.’ And the name Wisdom suffices to exclude any notion of passion.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Epiphanius, *Salam.*, *Panar.* 73, ed. K. Holl, p. 306.11-307.4.

In summary. Prov 8.22 is not opposed to other texts of Scripture, because the nature of the Only-begotten surpasses our abilities of adequate apprehension and thus obliges Scripture to use a large number of concepts and titles to give us some kind of knowledge. It teaches us that the Son is similar to the Father insofar as he is the subsisting image, begotten from the begetter (an anti-Arian point). It teaches us also that the Unbegotten “created” him so as to indicate to us that the Son has a real and permanent hypostasis (an anti-Sabellian point).

III. ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

In his fourth theological discourse St. Gregory of Nazianzus¹⁵ devotes a paragraph to Prov 8.22. [366]

“A passage to which they naturally have recourse is, ‘The Lord created me at the beginning of his ways, with a view to his works’ (Prov 8.22). What response can we make? Shall we accuse Solomon and reject his word, because he fell into evil at the end of his life? Shall we say that this text does not apply to Wisdom par excellence, to that one whom we can call the Knowledge and skillful Reason, model for what was made? Without doubt, Scripture often personifies a number of inanimate things ... But we should say nothing of the sort here, even though certain ones before us have seen in that a solid response.¹⁶ Let us admit to the contrary that this is the Savior himself, of the true Wisdom, that is in question here. Let us reflect a little: what is the only reality that has no cause? The Divinity; nothing can in fact indicate the cause of God, or then that would be

¹⁵ *Oratio* 30.2, PG 36: 105A-C. This discourse was delivered at Constantinople in 380. Cf. G. Rauschen, *Jahrbucher de christlichen Kirche unter dem Kaiser Theodosius dem Grossen*, Freiburg i.B. 1897, p. 78.

¹⁶ This is about Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 69; ed. K. Holl, p. 171, 1-6.

something anterior to God. And what is the cause of the humanity taken by God on our behalf? It is evidently our salvation, there could be no other reason. So then, since we find clearly: he created me, he begets me, this language is simple; that which involves a cause let us attribute it to the humanity, that which is simple and without cause, let us relate it to the divinity. The expression, ‘He created me,’ indeed implies a cause, does it not? The text in effect says: ‘He created me at the beginning of his ways, for his works’; in view of which he received the anointing of the divinity, for it is the divinity which gives the anointing to humanity. The opposite is the case in these words, ‘he begets me,’ where the generation in no way implies a cause; although it does show us what is the condition. How then can one not admit that Wisdom was said to be ‘created’ in regards of his generation from earth, and begotten according to his first generation, which is more incomprehensible still?”¹⁷

The interpretation that Gregory retains is a summary of that of Athanasius of Alexandria,¹⁸ even though he does not develop the idea of “renovation” (*ἀνανέωσις*) of creation by the Incarnation of the Word that was so dear to Athanasius.¹⁹ [368]

IV. ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA

The first text of St. Gregory of Nyssa that we have to consider is found in the first book which he wrote against Eunomius so as to defend the *Adversus Eunomium* of his brother Basil, a work for which Eunomius had written a refutation under the title of “Apology for an Apology.”

¹⁷ Translation of P. Gallay, *Grégoire de Nazianze, Les discours théologiques*, Lyon-Paris, 1942, p. 132-133.

¹⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos*, 53-54 PG 26: 257C-261C.

¹⁹ M. Simonetti, *Studi sull' Arianesimo*, p. 56-67.

This writing dates from 381.²⁰ The text of Gregory is brief and inexact.²¹ He takes his point of entry in a development on the division of created nature and uncreated. The three Persons of the Trinity belong to the uncreated nature. The Son has not been created but begotten by the Father. He is at one time Son of God, who shows *τὸ κατὰ φύσιν οἰκεῖον*²² [“the kinship according to nature”] with the Father, and son of man. Eunomius confuses these two horizons. Three remarks should refute, then, the Eunomian interpretation of Prov 8.22. The first concerns the attribution of this verse to the Lord: it is not something obligatory.²³ The two others are a reprise of those of Basil: the original Hebrew is not in favor of the translation *ἔκτισε*²⁴ [“he created”] and the sense of the passage remains obscure, because of the literary genre of Proverbs, even if one adopts the translation *ἔκτισε* [“he created”].²⁵

In comparison to the pages that Gregory of Nyssa devotes in the third book against Eunomius (382-383) to verse 22 of Proverbs chapter 8,²⁶ the paragraphs of the first book seem to indicate even more of hesitations and a certain perplexity. Here we are in the presence of a little

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Epist.* 29, t. VIII, II, p. 87-89.

²¹ *C. Eunomium* I, 296-300, t. I, p. 114.1-115.19.

²² *C. Eun.*, I, 298, t. I, p. 114.16-17.

²³ *C. Eun.*, I, 299, t. I, p. 114.26-27. The same observation according to Gregory of Nazianzus and Epiphanius of Salamis: cf. p. 367, n. 1.

²⁴ Cf. *C. Eun.*, I, 299, p. 114.27-115.4. Cf. Denys of Rome, PG 25: 464C; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eccl. Theol.* III.3, ed. E. Klostermann, p. 140.13-14. Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos* II, 53, PG 26: 257C-260A, and Didymus of Alexandria, *De Trinit.* 3.3, PG 35: 816C-817B.

²⁵ *C. Eun.* I, 299-300, t. I, p. 115.4-20.

²⁶ *C. Eun.* III, 1, 21-65, t. II, p. 10.22-27.8.

treatise on the subject.²⁷ It will be useful, for the following account, to first indicate in some way the grand contours. [369]

A. On the investigation of the hermeneutical principle: 23-27, p. 11.16-13.28.

B. The context of Prov 8.22 (Prov 8.12-21a): 28-31, p. 13.21-14.24.

C. Interpretation of Prov 8.22: 32-53, p. 15.1-22.18.

a) impossibility of a literal interpretation: 32-40, p. 15.1-18.4;

b) interior disposition required of one who would interpret this text: 41-43, p. 18.5-19.3;

c) interpretation of the text: 44-51, p. 19.3-21.24;

d) complementary scriptural proofs that confirm his interpretation of Prov 8.22: 52-53, p. 21.25-22.18;

e) conclusion: 53, p. 22.19-23.2.

D. Interpretation of Prov 8.23ff: 55-65, p. 23.2-27.8.

In some sentences Gregory first indicates that the text of Proverbs is a party to the Arian arguments in favor of the creation of the Son who base their interpretation on 1 Cor 1.24 (Christ, Wisdom of God).²⁸

What now will be the hermeneutical principle which will guide him in his own investigation? A good exegesis of Prov 8.22 demands that one recognize in advance the given literary genre of this obscure book:²⁹

²⁷ One encounters more of these little treatises devoted to a verse of Scripture or a controversial idea in *C. Eun.*; cf. M. Harl, *A propos d'un passage du Contre Eunome de Grégoire de Nysse: "Aporroia" et les tires du Christ en théologie trinitaire*, in *Rech. Sc. Rel.*, 55 (1967), pp. 217-226.

²⁸ 21, pp. 10.22-11.8.

²⁹ 23, pp. 11.16-26.

“It is universally admitted that the name ‘proverb’ in the usage of Scripture is not used to express an idea that is clear but a hidden thought. It is such that the Gospel calls enigmatic and obscure words ‘proverbs.’ If then someone would wish to mark out the signification of this name by a definition, he would say: a discourse which by means of expressions that are easy to understand indicates something else that is hidden; or indeed, a discourse that does not signify the aim hunted by the thought directly, but gives an indirect teaching by means of a winding sense.”

The book of Proverbs eminently corresponds to this definition. Its utterances thus call for the investigation of their [370] more profound meanings.³⁰ The context of Prov 8.22³¹ (Prov 8.12-21a) is a discourse of Wisdom. The kings of which she speaks can only be the poor in spirit (Matt 5.3) of which Jesus speaks in the sermon on the mount: they subjugate the folly of the passions to the reign of the spirit.³² The impossibility of giving a literal exegesis of the immediate context allows us to get a sense that Prov 8.22 can no longer be understood in a literal sense.³³ This is what an attentive exegesis of Prov 8.21b-25 teaches us of the matter, and this for different reasons: this text does not present any *ἀκολουθία* [“sequence”],³⁴ it does not agree with the received opinions,³⁵ it does not agree with the physical order of the world,³⁶ it contradicts the

³⁰ 25, pp. 12.14-15 (*μετατιθέναι τὴν ἱστορίαν εἰς τροπικὴν θεωρίαν* [“to translate the (literal) narrative into figurative contemplation”]) and 27, p. 13.15 (*ἢ κατ’ ἀναγωγὴν θεωρία* [“the contemplation according to anagogy”]).

³¹ 28-31, pp. 13.21-14.24.

³² 31, pp. 14.18-19: *τῆ συμμαχία τῆς σοφίας τὴν τῶν παθῶν δημοκρατίαν εἰς τὴν τοῦ νοῦ μοναρχίαν μετασκευάσασα* [“exchanging the democracy of the passions for the monarchy of the mind by the alliance with of wisdom”] ...

³³ 32-40, pp. 15.1-18.4.

³⁴ 33-34, pp. 15.7-21

³⁵ 40, pp. 17.19-18.4: *ταῖς κοιναῖς τε καὶ προχειροῖς ἐννοίαις* [“to the common and ordinary understandings”] ...

³⁶ 37-40, pp. 16.15-17.19.

word of the Gospel according to St. John that “by him all things were made”³⁷ if interpreted in an Arian sense. Thus it is evident that it is appropriate to seek out a deeper meaning of the text.³⁸ How to find this deep and hidden meaning or, in other terms, what will be the principle of interpretation which can guide this inquiry and to assure of its pertinence?³⁹ All Scripture was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, distributing his charismatic gifts to the authors of the Bible. It is the Holy Spirit who also, by these same charisms, enables us to understand the meaning of Scripture.

“ ... What then is our proposal? I believe that it is not possible that the wisdom that the man received by an illumination of God came all alone without the man receiving the other charisms of the Spirit, but it is necessary in any case that he receive the grace of the prophetic spirit along with the charism of wisdom. The order of wisdom is to grasp the truth of things that exist in actuality. The order of prophecy is to illuminate things that will come [371] much later. So then the man would not have possessed the charism of wisdom perfectly if the future was not included equally in his understanding, by the charism of prophecy. And since it is not a purely human wisdom that Solomon attributes to himself when he says, ‘God taught me wisdom’ (Prov 24.26), and when he relates all that he says to God, ‘All my words are said on the part of God’ (Prov 24.65), it is appropriate to investigate in the text of Proverbs the portion of prophecy mixed with wisdom.”⁴⁰

³⁷ 34-36, pp. 15.21-16.14.

³⁸ 41, pp. 18.5-11.

³⁹ 42-43, pp. 18.11-19.3.

⁴⁰ 42-43, pp. 18.17-19.3.

There is no doubt that Gregory of Nyssa alludes in this passage to the controversy between Eusebius of Caesarea and Marcellus of Ancyra over the book of Proverbs. Marcellus of Ancyra affirmed that Solomon was also a prophet and he interpreted the Proverbs from this viewpoint, such that Eusebius responded to him that king Solomon had only received the charism of wisdom.⁴¹ On this point, then, Gregory follows Marcellus of Ancyra against Eusebius of Caesarea.⁴²

The bishop of Nyssa then proposes his own personal interpretation of Prov 8.22.⁴³ Prov 9.1 (Wisdom has built herself a house: *ἡ σοφία ὠκοδόμησεν ἑαυτῇ οἶκον*)⁴⁴ is prophetically related to the mystery of the Incarnation. But above Solomon had spoken to us about the power and pre-eternal activity of Wisdom.⁴⁵ Which brings Gregory to compare Prov 8.23ff to the prologue of the Gospel according to St. John, which announces to us equally the whole economy of salvation⁴⁶ in speaking first about the creation by the Word and then of his Incarnation. So, it is impossible to relate Prov 8.22 to the eternal generation of [372] the Only-begotten Son, because no attribute of God (Wisdom) can be posterior to him (ontologically and chronologically), or be created.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Apud Eusebius of Caesarea., ed. E. Klostermann, *GCS* 4, pp. 189, 4; 196, 8; 212, 15-17.

⁴² *C. Marcellum*, I, 2, ed. E. Klostermann, *GCS* 4, p. 13.13-26. Cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos*, II, 44, PG 26: 241B.

⁴³ 44-51, pp. 19.3-21.24.

⁴⁴ Cf. Hippolytus of Rome, M. Richard, *Les fragments de S. Hippolyte sur les Proverbes de Salomon*, in *Muséon*, t. 79 (1966), fragment 37, p. 82 : *Ἡ σοφία ὠκοδόμησεν ἑαυτῇ οἶκον. Ἰππολύτου. Τὴν νέαν Ἱερουσαλήμ καὶ ἁγίαν σάρκα* [“Wisdom has built herself a house. Hippolytus. The new Jerusalem and holy flesh.”]; cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos*, II, 44, PG 26 : 241B.

⁴⁵ 46, p.19.20-23.

⁴⁶ 46, p. 19.20: *τὸ τῆς οἰκονομίας μυστήριον* [“the mystery of the economy/Incarnation”].

⁴⁷ This type of argument is common in Gregory, but here he connects with the remarks of Denys of Rome on the subject of those who were claiming that the Son was a *ποίημα* [“work”] in his letter to Denys of Alexandria in 257;

The result is that Prov 8.22 speaks prophetically about the Incarnation.⁴⁸ In fact this verse is a summary of the whole divine economy on behalf of humanity. The “works” of which he speaks are the men who were driven away from God by sin. The incarnate Son became the path by which men straying far from God could return to the Father. This whole passage recounts the exegesis of Athanasius of Alexandria,⁴⁹ that of Marcellus of Ancyra also⁵⁰ perhaps already begun by Eustathius of Antioch.⁵¹ The theological context of Marcellus of Ancyra is different however. That of Athanasius is much more apparent to him. To illustrate this fact it is sufficient here for us to cite a page of *Contra Arianos*:

“As now the truth showed that the Word is not a creature by his nature, we must thus explain in what sense He is called ‘first of his ways.’ Because the first way, that of Adam, ended in failure and because we turned ourselves away from paradise to death ... The Word of God out of love for man and in accordance with the will of the Father assumed created flesh, such that this flesh, which the first man had put to death by his transgression, might be vivified by the blood of his own body and thus to inaugurate for us [373] a new and living way ... It is such that out of love for men ... the Lord himself is created as the first of the new

PG 25:461C-465B. Cf. Marcellus of Ancyra, *Sermo maior de fide*, fragment 97, ed. H. Nordberg, *Athanasiana I*, Helsingfors 1962, p. 68.

⁴⁸ 50-51, p. 21.5-24.

⁴⁹ *C. Arianos* II, 51, PG 26: 256A-C; II, 65, PG: 285A-C. See J. Roldanus, *Le Christ et l’homme dans la théologie d’Athanasie d’Alexandrie*, Leiden 1968, pp. 138-141.

⁵⁰ Marcellus of Ancyra, *Expositio fidei*, ed. Nordberg, *Athanasiana I*, Helsingfors 1962, p. 55.5: ἀρχὴ γὰρ ὁδῶν ἐκτίσθη ὁ κυριακὸς ἄνθρωπος, ὧν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἡμῖν ἐφανερώσε [“For the Lord’s man was created a beginning of ways, he who appeared for our salvation”]. Cf. apud Eusebius of Caesarea, *Contra Marcellum*, ed. Klostermann, I, 2, p. 11.10-26; II, 3, pp. 44.12-45.14; 45.15-29; 46.12-30; apud Eus. Caes. *Eccl. Theol.* ed. E. Klostermann, III, 2, p. 144.14-145.29; *De Incarn.* and *C. Ar.*, 6, PG 26, 992C-993A.

⁵¹ Fragment 63, ed. M. Spanneut: Ἀρχὴ γὰρ τοι τῶν καλλίστων τῆς δικαιοσύνης ὁδῶν γεγένηται ἡμῖν ὁ ἄνθρωπος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῖς κρείττοσι τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων προσάγων ἡμᾶς [“For surely the man of Christ was made for us a beginning of the most beautiful ways of righteousness, leading us to the best things to be pursued”].

creation, as the ‘way,’ and it is deservedly that he says: ‘The Lord created me as the first of his ways, in view of his works’ such that man might no longer live according to the first creation, but such that, since the first of the new creation exists and Christ is the first of these ways, we might follow from then on He who says, ‘I am the path.’”⁵²

The texts of the New Testament on the new creation in Christ confirm this interpretation of Prov 8.22: Rom 13.14 + Eph 4.24 + 2 Cor 5.17 + Gal 6.15.⁵³

It is for the intelligent reader now to choose between the explication of heretics and that which knows how to discern in Christ that which concerns his nature and his *οἰκονομία* [“Incarnation/economy”].⁵⁴

This exegesis supports in turn a more profound (i.e., allegorical) *θεωρία* [“contemplation”] of the following verses of chapter 8 (v. 23-31),⁵⁵ since the Incarnation of the Son inaugurated eschatological time and eternal life for humanity. It is thus deservedly that the expression “the Lord created me first of his ways, in view of his works” can signify the birth of Christ in the Christian soul.⁵⁶ The mountains, the hills, the earth, the depths, the heights of the earth, the clouds on high, refer then to as many virtues which develop after the birth of Christ in

⁵² *Contra Arianos*, II, 65, PG 26: 285A-B.

⁵³ 52-53, pp. 21.25-22.18. Cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *C. Arianos*, 44-72, for whom the *ἀνανέωσις* [“renewal”] is the key to the interpretation of the controversial text. This notion is scarcely present in Gregory of Nyssa, as it was already absent in Gregory of Nazianzus.

⁵⁴ 54, pp. 22.9-23.2.

⁵⁵ 55-65, t. II, pp. 23.2-27.8; *συμβαίνει δὲ καὶ ἡ τάξις τοῦ λόγου τῆ θεωρίας τοῦ δόγματος* [“But indeed the order of the passage corresponds with the contemplation of the teaching”]: 55, t. II, p. 23.2-3.

⁵⁶ Cf. H. Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche. Die Ekklesiologie der Väter*, Salzburg, 1964, p. 47-51.

us. Each of these “tropic” connections are made by virtue of the other texts of Scripture⁵⁷ to bring us [374] up to the summit of union with God. There it is, a veritable mini-treatise, quite unexpected in this context, on the spiritual life. Gregory of Nyssa was not the first to propose a spiritual interpretation of Prov 8.22-31. He was preceded by in this by Athanasius of Alexandria,⁵⁸ who speaks equally on this point of the imprint of Wisdom in the soul of Christians and extends it to the entire creation. But the theological context of Athanasius is distinctly different: it is noetic and cosmological and not mystical as with Gregory. In a brief remark concerning Prov 8.23 Epiphanius of Salamis had noted that ἐν ἀρχῇ [“in the beginning”] was equivalent to ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ [“in the soul”].⁵⁹ But the more interesting point of comparison comes to us from Marcellus of Ancyra,⁶⁰ who proposes to us an interpretation that one could characterize as ecclesiological. This is particularly clear in the *De Incarnatione et contra Arianos* which is accepted today as being from Marcellus or his entourage. The creation in question in Prov 8.22 is that of the human body of the Word and in turn of the Church, the Body of Christ, the true humanity who extends his incarnation in the world.

“Likewise when he says, ‘The Lord created me the head of his ways,’ he speaks of the Church created in him. As such, He who made the universe is neither a

⁵⁷ Note the details of these applications: v. 24: The depths relate to the judgment of God (cf. Ps 35.7; 56, t. II, p. 23.19-20), and the earth is the one who is inseminated by the Word and bears abundant fruit (cf. Matt 13.8; 56, t. II, p. 23.20-21). V. 25: The mountains and the hills refer to justice and peace (cf. Ps 35.7 and 71.3; 56, t. II, p. 23.18-23). V. 26: the region (χώρα) is the one who receives the sowing and plowing of the Word (cf. Matt 13.18-23; t. II, p. 24.4-5); the uninhabited earth (ἀοίκητος) is the heart purified of its evil inhabitants (cf. Matt 12.43-45; 57, t. II, p. 24.5-6); the inhabited heights/summits of the world (τὰ ἄκρα οἰκούμενα) indicate a manner of life that is nearly heavenly (57-58, t. II, p. 24.6-17). Vv. 27-28: The clouds on high are the divine teaching which we make solid in us when we practice them (59, t. II, p. 24.17-25); the winds indicate the completely spiritual manner of life which makes us the throne of God (59, t. II, pp. 24.25-25.6). Vv. 30-31: Consequently Wisdom can rejoice in us, his saved children (60-61, t. II, p. 27.7-21).

⁵⁸ *C. Arianos*, II, 77-82, PG 26: 309B-321A.

⁵⁹ *Panarion* 69.24, ed. K. Holl, p. 173.29-174.2. One recalls that the *terminus ad quem* of this work is the year 377.

⁶⁰ Fragments 19-27, ed. E. Klostermann. *Eusebius' Werke*, IV pp. 188-189. Cf. M. Simonetti, *Studi sull' Arianesimo*, pp. 38-43.

creature nor a work, but the work is renewed in him who made it. This is what Paul says: ‘We are his work, created in Christ Jesus’ (Eph 2.10). Again he says, ‘So that the principalities and heavenly powers might now have knowledge, by means of the Church, of the pluriform wisdom of God in this eternal plan which He concealed in Christ Jesus our Savior; in him we dare to approach with all confidence by the path of the faith to Christ’ (Eph 3.10-12). He says again: ‘It is such that he chose us in him, from before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his presence, in love, determining in advance that we would be for him adopted sons by Christ Jesus’ (Eph 1.4-5). And again he says of the two peoples: ‘So as to create in his person the two into one new Man, to make peace, and reconcile them with God, both of them in one Body by the cross: in his person he has killed the enmity’ (Eph 2.15-16).”⁶¹

What a unique exegesis, of which we encounter no trace anywhere else!

The spiritual interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa is thus absolutely original and new, and without any doubt commends itself to him as valuable, since he takes it up by way of allusion in his “Refutation of Eunomius’s profession of faith.”

This book, written in 383, takes up the long developments of C. Eunomius I and III.⁶² One might possibly observe in this passage a slight change in emphasis in relationship to the developments of C. Eunomius III.1. What is at issue is the more central place that the idea of

⁶¹ PG 26: 992C-993A; cf. 1004B-1005A.

⁶² C. *Eun.* IV, 110-113, t. II, pp. 358.7-360.4. Note the movement:

A. Remark about the textual order: the reading *ἐκτήσατο* [“he acquired”] and its interpretation (110, pp. 358.7-360.4).

B. The reading *ἔκτισε* [“he created”] and its interpretation: it relates to the Incarnation of Christ in whom the new man has been created (110-112, pp. 358.17-359.14).

C. Spiritual interpretation of Prov 8.22ff: the birth of Christ in the soul (112-113, pp. 359.15-360.4).

Christ as new human occupies, incarnated so as to re-create us, which connects us back to the Athanasian idea of *ἀνανέωσις* [“renewal”].

The *De fide ad Simplicium* offers the last witness to this exegesis which seems established from this point on.⁶³

There remains one last text to examine. Among the writings transmitted under the name of Gregory of Nyssa, the opusculum *Adversus Arium et [376] Sabellium*⁶⁴ raises some particular problems. The authenticity of this writing is not certain. What is certain, though, is that the interpretation of Prov 8.22 is very different from all the other attempts at exegesis that we have encountered up to this point from the Cappadocian Fathers.

“And so that the word ‘The Lord created me the head of his ways in view of his works’ does not support the reflections of those whose intelligence is deprived, we should not disregard this word. Indeed, the translators somewhat influenced the exact sense of the Hebrew text of the Scriptures when translating it into Greek, and they wrote: ‘He created me.’ But if one examines the matter which closer attention one will find: ‘He made me.’

Nevertheless the translation ‘He created me,’ when understood well, does not differ in anything from the translation ‘He made me.’ For if it was only written, ‘The Lord created me,’ that could have caused a problem in some respects. But since it is added, ‘first of his ways in view of his works,’ one can

⁶³ Gregory of Nyssa, t. III, 1, pp. 62.16-63.21. This could constitute a *terminus a quo* for the dating of this work.

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, t. III, I, pp.71-88 (F. Mueller). F. Mueller is quite favorable to the authenticity (GN III, I, p. LXI) and considers this work as one of the first of Gregory’s writings. J. Daniélou is even more favorable still: “« L’Adversus Arium et Sabellium » de Grégoire de Nysse et l’Origénisme cappadocien,” *RSR* 54 (1966), pp. 61-66, and situates this treatise in the years 374-375. The authenticity of this writing has been denied by K. Holl, *Ueber die Gregor von Nyssa zugeschriebene Schrift “Adversus Arium et Sabellium,”* in *ZKG* 25 (1904), 380-398, who readily attributes paternity to Didymus of Alexandria.

easily understand that Scripture is saying: the Lord made me so as to preside over his works and he entrusted me the principle of his ways.

When then did the Father obtain a beginning of his ways, or when was he ever inactive, or from whom did he receive power and activity? For the fact of not always having had all of this with him shows that he received it from another, in such a way that it is necessary to suppose another God more ancient than him. ‘Who first gave to him, so as to be able to be paid in return?’ says the Scripture (Rom 11.35). So if everything was made by him, one will never then find a beginning of his ways and of his works except that is always active. And if everything was made by the Son and if nothing was made apart from him (Jn 1.3), it is evident that God has always had Wisdom for the work with him. And if the Father works always (cf. Jn 5.17), and if nothing has been made without the Son, it is fallacious for them to deduce from the expression ‘he has been created’ that he has been made after, in order to work. But the expression, [377] ‘He created me beginning of his ways,’ signifies, ‘He entrusted me his ways,’ in order that they might be under my power. For the word ‘arche’ indicates not time but dominion.”⁶⁵

The author of this writing thinks that the Greek translation does not exactly render the signification of the original Hebrew and that *ἐποίησε με* [“he made me”] is a more faithful translation than *ἔκτισέ με* [“he created me”]. He affirms next that even the translation *ἔκτισέ με* [“he created me”] does not present a difficulty in light of the sequence of the phrase “beginning of his ways in view of his works.” Prov 8.22 thus signifies: the Lord made me to preside over his

⁶⁵ T. III. I, pp. 74.29-75.25.

works and he entrusted me the beginning of his ways.⁶⁶ Indeed, the expression “beginning of his ways” is not able to indicate the notion of temporaneity as the Arians would have it, since it is inconceivable that the creative power of God not be co-eternal with him. So, God created by his Son, who is thus co-eternal with the Father. In the context of Prov 8.22, *ἀρχή* [“beginning”] signifies then the power of dominion. This interpretation differs completely from the explications which we found up to this point according to the Cappadocian Fathers. Though it is resolutely anti-Arian, it does not breath a word either of the “economic” exegesis or of the hypothesis of a personification of Wisdom, nor of the difficulty of comprehension of the book of Proverbs. Conversely it does retain the principle of cosmological exegesis (Word and creation; connection of Prov 8.22 and Col 1.15) which was that of Eusebius of Caesarea.⁶⁷ This fact can only revive the doubts about the Nyssan authenticity of this writing. To situate it among the works of Gregory’s youth is certainly a common solution, and provisionally of good method, so long as a meticulous comparison with the authentic writings will not have been completed successfully. But on this particular point nothing [378] speaks in favor of the attribution to Gregory of Nyssa, in the light of the other explications of Prov 8.22 we have recounted.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of this inquiry into the interpretation of Prov 8.22 according to the Cappadocian Fathers can be straightforward:

⁶⁶ GN III, I, p. 75.9-10 (... *κύριος ἐποίησέ με ἐπιστατεῖν τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ ἐνεχείρισέ μοι*) [“The Lord made me to preside over his works and he entrusted to me a beginning of his ways”].

⁶⁷ *Eccles. Theol.*, III, 2, ed. Klostermann, p. 140.13-14 and p. 141.27-28 (*τὸ Κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ ἀντὶ τοῦ κατέταξέν με εἰς τὸ ἄρχειν τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ λέλεκται* [The text reads “The Lord created me beginning of his ways unto his works” instead of “he appointed me so as to rule over his works”]); see: Denys of Rome, PG 25: 464C, *ἔκτισε = ἐπέστησε τοῖς ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ γεγονόσι ἔργοις, γεγονόσι δὲ δι’ αὐτοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ* [he created = he established the works which had come into being by him, but which came into being through the Son himself]. Cf. A Weber, *APXH. Ein Beitrag zur Christologie des Eusebius von Cäsarea* 1965, pp. 70-81; 127-131 and M. Simonetti, *Studi sull’ Arianesimo*, pp. 48-56.

1. It is only step by step, and not without hesitations, that they arrived at an exegesis of this controversial verse which was in harmony with their Trinitarian and Christological theological synthesis inspired by the dogma of Nicaea and by the theology of Athanasius of Alexandria. The explications proposed by Basil of Caesarea are significant by their silence: they chart an exegesis of a cosmological type on the model of that of Eusebius of Caesarea, all the while resorting to his philological remarks concerning the text of the Septuagint, and they no longer retained the principle of the application of this verse to the “creation” of the Word in the flesh, advocated by Athanasius of Alexandria, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Eustathius of Antioch. Timidly, Basil seems even more to turn towards the interpretation of “semi-Arian” circles. Gregory of Nazianzus, in his celebrated theological discourses, will adopt the Athanasian principle of explication. The position of Gregory of Nyssa is much more complex. After a period of hesitations, marked by a fidelity to the exegesis of his brother Basil, he turns towards that of Athanasius which he adopts in terms of the foundation, but without keeping all the elements, so as to propose to us an interpretation marked by the stamp of his strong theological and mystical personality.

2. These hesitations, advances and these developments are closely tied to the theological maturation of the Cappadocian Fathers. The Nicene dogma of the consubstantiality of the three divine Persons acquired with them a scale and an equilibrium of conceptual expression and of biblical rooting which was the fruit of fifteen years of intense meditation, exemplified by the great doctors of the fourth century, spanning the theological and political-ecclesiastical lights, on the mystery of the Trinity. They are also the generation which saw the birth of the great [379] Christological controversies and their writings reflect that. In terms of Prov 8.22, this fact makes it the more clear to perceive in Gregory of Nyssa starting from *Contre Eunome* III,I. Prov 8.22

refers to the *οἰκονομία* [“Incarnation”] of the Lord, the new Adam, recreating in himself the new man. From the example of Athanasius, the bishop of Nyssa endeavors to clarify the relation between the Son, creation, and redemption, without betraying the dogma of Nicaea. But in taking into fresh consideration the human nature of Christ, mixed with the divinity (*ἀνάκρασις*) [“mixture”], Gregory totally moves away from a cosmological aspect of the thought of Athanasius that is still not entirely disconnected from certain categories of ante-Nicene thought. In sum, “*θεολογία*” [“theology”] and “*οἰκονομία*” [“economy”] become less intertwined and more distinct, so as to better adjust, and to better clarify [matters]. This matrix of theological problems allows and provides the basis for, and here one might remember Origen, a theological rooting of the spiritual and mystical life in the Christian life, the Word of God residing in the Church through the sacraments, the liturgy, and the orthodoxy of the faith.

3. In the end, the impulse for this change of direction seems to come back to what was of concern in Gregory of Nazianzus’ exegesis of Prov 8.22, followed after some hesitations by the brother of Basil. His interpretation, as we have seen, echoes all the previous attempts, without reproducing any of them integrally. The essentials come from Athanasius of Alexandria, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Eustathius of Antioch, and perhaps even further yet, from Denys of Rome. The influence of Epiphanius of Salamis does not seem to be negligible either. Gregory of Nyssa is the only one to have developed, with Marcellus of Ancyra, a spiritual interpretation of Prov 8.22-31. But this exegesis remains very different. He does not seem to have made great use of the developments from Eusebius of Caesarea. The concern about giving a solid exegetical base to the economical interpretation of this controversial verse led him to take into consideration the context and parallel passages of the New Testament. In this way this effort

constitutes a beautiful patristic example of the fruitful reciprocity between exegesis and theology.

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