

## Proverbs 8:22-31 in the Christology of the Early Fathers

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### The Ante-Nicene Fathers

In Patristic Christology, the concept of Wisdom became very prominent, and the portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 - especially vv.22-31 - was one of the most popular OT passages applied to Christ. Even though some early writers occasionally identify Wisdom with the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>, this is not typical of the Fathers in general. Most Fathers assume without question that the OT Wisdom passages speak of the Son (or Word) of God.<sup>2</sup>

Justin Martyr quotes Proverbs 8:22ff as part of his argument that the Word (who is divine Wisdom) is distinct yet also inseparable from God:

God begat before all creatures a Beginning, [who was] a certain rational power [proceeding] from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos...

He was begotten of the Father by an act of will; just as we see happening among ourselves: for when we give out some word we beget the word; yet not by abscission, so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Eg. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.20.3 (A.Roberts & J.Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p.488). Theophilus in *Ad Autol.* 2.15 appears to think of the Spirit as Wisdom when he describes the divine *trias* as 'God, his Word, and his Wisdom' (ibid. Vol. 2, p.101), but in 2.10 he applies Prov. 8:22ff to the Son/*Logos* (ibid. p.98).

<sup>2</sup> Some non-canonical Wisdom passages also find their way into the Patristic repertoire, eg. Baruch 3:29-37 and Wisdom 7:22ff.

lessen the word [which remains] in us, when we give it out: and just as we see also happening in the case of a fire, which is not lessened when it has kindled [another], but remains the same; and that which has been kindled by it like wise appears to exist by itself, not diminishing that from which it was kindled. The Word of Wisdom, who is Himself this God begotten of the Father of all things, and Word, and Wisdom, and Power, and the glory of the begetter, will bear evidence to me, when he speaks by Solomon the following: 'If I shall declare to you what happens daily, I shall call to mind events from everlasting, and review them. The Lord made me the beginning of His ways for His works...' [quoting in full Proverbs 8:21-36; v.21 in the LXX is very different from the MT].<sup>3</sup>

Athenagoras and Tertullian use the Proverbs passage in the context of their 'two-stage' history of the Word: there is the Word immanent in the mind of God from all eternity, and there is the Word expressed or sent forth for the purposes of creation. Athenagoras and Tertullian make Proverbs 8:22ff refer to the latter 'stage', namely, the extrapolation of the Word for the purpose of creating the world<sup>4</sup>. Athenagoras says:

That we are not atheists, therefore, seeing that we acknowledge one God, uncreated eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason, who is encompassed by light, and beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable, by whom the universe has been created through His Logos, and set in order, and kept in being - I have sufficiently demonstrated. [I say 'His Logos'], for we acknowledge also a Son of God. Nor let anyone think it ridiculous that God should have a Son. For though the

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<sup>3</sup> Justin, *Dial.* 61 - *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p.227f

<sup>4</sup> The two stages correspond to the distinction between λόγος ἐνδιάθετος and λόγος προφορικός in Theophilus, *Ad Autol.* 2.22

poets, in their fictions, represent the gods as no better than men, our mode of thinking is not the same as theirs, concerning either God the Father or the Son. But the Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation; for after the pattern of Him and by Him were all things made, the Father and the Son being one. And, the Son being in the Father and the Father in the Son, in oneness and power of spirit, the understanding and reason [νοῦς καί λόγος] of the Father is the Son of God. But if, in your surpassing intelligence, it occurs to you to enquire what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind [νοῦς], had the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos [logikos]); but inasmuch as he came forth to be the idea and energizing power of all material things, which lay like a nature without attributes, and an inactive earth, the grosser particles being mixed up with the lighter. The prophetic Spirit also agrees with our statements. 'The Lord', it says, 'made me, the beginning of His ways to His works.'<sup>5</sup>

The identification of Wisdom and Logos is even clearer in Tertullian

Now, as soon as it pleased God to put forth into their respective substances and forms the things which He had planned and ordered within Himself, in conjunction with His Wisdom's Reason and Word, He first put forth the Word Himself, having within Him His own inseparable Reason and Wisdom, in order that all things might be made through Him through whom they had been planned and disposed, yea, and already made, so far forth as [they were] in the mind of God. This, however, was still wanting to

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<sup>5</sup> Athenagoras, *Leg. 10 - Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p.133

them, that they should also be properly known, and kept permanently in their proper forms and substances.

Then, therefore, does the Word also Himself assume His own form and glorious garb, His own sound and vocal utterance, when God says, 'Let there be light'. This is the perfect nativity of the Word, when he proceeds forth from God - formed by Him first to devise and think out all things under the name of Wisdom - 'The Lord created, or formed, me as the beginning of His ways'...The Son likewise acknowledges the Father, speaking in His own person under the name of Wisdom: 'The Lord formed me as the beginning of His ways, with a view to His own works; before all the hills did He beget me'. For if indeed Wisdom in this passage seems to say that she was created by the Lord with a view to His works, and to accomplish His ways, yet proof is given in another Scripture that 'all things were made by the Word, and without Him was there nothing made'.<sup>6</sup>

In Justin, the Proverbs passage is used to demonstrate the distinction between the Logos and the Father, and the priority of the Logos over creation; in Athenagoras and Tertullian it is used to present a picture of the Logos passing from an 'immanent' to an 'expressed' state. The passage is also of some importance for Origen. In his commentary on John 1, Origen expounds his concept of the *ἐπίνοιαι* or different aspects of the person and work of Christ. Among the various *ἐπίνοιαι*, Wisdom occupies a special place, and Origen makes a connection between the words of Proverbs 8:22 in the LXX, κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἔθεμελίωσέν με ἐν ἀρχῇ, and those of John 1:1, Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος. In Origen's understanding, Wisdom is the beginning of all the ways of God 'inasmuch as she contained within

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<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 6-7 - *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, 9.601f

herself either the beginnings or forms or species of all creation'<sup>7</sup>. This Wisdom, Origen emphasizes, is not an impersonal attribute of God but is in fact the first-born Son of God.<sup>8</sup> Origen makes use of two meanings of ἀρχή the idea of an actual 'beginning' in the chronological sense, and the idea of a 'principle' according to which the world was made.

Wherefore we have always held that God is the Father of his only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of him, and derives from him what he is, but without any beginning, not only such as may be measured by any divisions of time, but even that which the mind alone can contemplate within itself, or behold, so to speak, with the naked powers of the understanding. And therefore we must believe that Wisdom was generated before any beginning that can either be comprehended or expressed. And since all the creative power of the coming creation was included in this very existence of Wisdom (whether of those things which have an original or of those which have a derived existence), having been performed beforehand and arranged by the power of foreknowledge; on account of these very creatures which had been described, as it were, and prefigured in Wisdom herself, does Wisdom say, in the words of Solomon, that she was created at the beginning of the ways of God, inasmuch as she contained within herself either the beginnings, or forms or species of all creation.<sup>9</sup>

For Christ is, in a manner, the demiurge, to whom the Father says, 'Let there be light', and, 'Let there be a firmament'. But Christ is demiurge as a beginning [ἀρχή] inasmuch as he is Wisdom. It is in virtue of his being Wisdom that he is called ἀρχή. For Wisdom says in

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<sup>7</sup> *De Princ.* I:2:2 - *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, p.246

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* I:2:1

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* I:2:2

Solomon: 'God created me, the beginning of his ways, for his works'...Consider, however, if we are at liberty to take this meaning of ἀρχή for our text, 'In the beginning was the Word', so as to obtain the meaning that all things came into being according to Wisdom and according to the models of the system which are present in his thoughts. For I consider that as a house or a ship is built and fashioned in accordance with the sketches of the builder or designer, the house or the ship having their beginning [ἀρχή] in the sketches and reckonings in his mind, so all things came into in accordance with the designs of what was to be, clearly laid down by God in Wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

The first hint that Proverbs 8:22ff might be the occasion of controversy comes with 'the affair of the two Dionysii' in the third century, an affair which may be said to have anticipated the Arian controversy of the fourth. In the fragments which remain from Dionysius of Alexandria, there is no direct allusion to Proverbs 8, but from the letter of Dionysius of Rome to his Alexandrian namesake, it would appear that the latter had used Proverbs 8 as part of his argument against the Sabellians.<sup>11</sup> Dionysius of Alexandria apparently interpreted the word ἔκτισέν of Prov.8:22 too literally for the liking of the Roman bishop. In his zeal to refute the Sabellians, the Alexandrian Dionysius so stressed the distinction between the Father and the Son, with the help of Proverbs 8 and other texts, that he gave the impression that they belonged to distinct orders of being - the Father being the Creator and the Son being created - and he used two illustrations which seemed to confirm this impression: the relationship between the farmer and the vine and that between the ship and the shipbuilder. Athanasius, in *De sententia Dionysii*, works hard to present Dionysius of Alexandria in the best possible light, arguing that the Arians have

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<sup>10</sup> *Comm. in Ioh. I:22 - Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 10, p.307f

<sup>11</sup> The Roman Dionysius' letter is preserved in Athanasius, *De Decretis* 26 - *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series* (P.Schaff & H.Wace), Vol. 4, p.167f

no right to claim him as their 'partisan'<sup>12</sup>, whereas Basil of Caesarea felt that Dionysius had fallen into 'the opposite error' to Sabellius<sup>13</sup>. Whatever may have been the precise beliefs of Dionysius of Alexandria, that particular 'affair' ended peaceably. The same cannot be said of the Arian controversy.

### The fourth century

Arius and his kin appealed to a number of Biblical texts in order to support their subordinationist Christology. They made use of any passage which described the Father as the one and true God, or which represented the Son as in any way inferior or subordinate to the Father, or which portrayed Christ as being subject to limitations and emotions incompatible with being divine, or which suggested that the Son did in fact have a beginning. Inevitably, Prov.8:22ff proved to be an important weapon in the Arian arsenal. The three main verbs of vv.22-25 were treated as synonyms: 'The Lord created (ἐκτίσεν) me...established (ἐθεμελίωσεν) me...begets (γεννᾷ) me.'<sup>14</sup>

As far as the Arians were concerned, the meaning of this passage was clear. The Son (i.e. the Word or Wisdom of God) was a creature. The key verbs of Prov.8:22ff occur in Arius' letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, where he writes of the Son: 'Before he was begotten or created or ordained or established he was not, for he was not unbegotten.'<sup>15</sup> There is also a clear echo of the Proverbs passage in Arius' letter to Alexander:

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<sup>12</sup> *De sent. Dion.* 19 - *ibid.* p.183.

<sup>13</sup> Basil, *Ep.* 9 - *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, Vol. 8, p.123

<sup>14</sup> A.Rahlfs, *Septuaginta*, Vol.II, p.196

<sup>15</sup> H-G.Opitz, *Urkunden zur Geschichte des Arianischen Streites, 318-328 (Athanasius Werke III:1, Leipzig, 1934)*, p.3

God, being the cause of all things, is unbegun and altogether unique, but the Son, being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and established before ages, was not before being begotten.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Eusebius of Nicomedia wrote to Paulinus of Tyre in the following terms:

We have learned that [the Son] was created and established and begotten in substance and in an unchangeable and inexpressible nature and in likeness to him who made him, as the Lord himself says: 'God created me the beginning of his ways, and he established me before time began; he begets me before all the hills'.<sup>17</sup>

Proverbs 8:22ff was a passage which, in the opinion of the Arians, spoke plainly of the creaturely nature of the Son and his inferiority to the Father. In their eyes, the text obviously referred to the pre-incarnate Son; it could not be made to refer to the humanity of Christ. The Arians found a powerful weapon in Proverbs 8. They were following the standard line of interpretation in applying these verses to the pre-incarnate Son, and Marcellus of Ancyra's attempt to counter the Arians by applying the passage to the Incarnation suffered from all the disadvantages of apparent novelty. Marcellus' interpretation could be regarded as not only novel, but also forced. Certain other 'subordinationist' texts, particularly those referring to the person of Jesus Christ (e.g. 'The Father is greater than I'), could with some justification be interpreted as references to the *οἰκονομία κατὰ σάρκα* rather than to the being of the Son himself. This device was not so convincing when applied to Proverbs 8.

We shall consider in more detail Marcellus' interpretation of the Proverbs passage, because he was one of the principal opponents of Arianism in the period 320-345, although he is much less well

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.13

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p.16

known than Athanasius<sup>18</sup>. Before doing so, we should note that, with the exception of people mentioned, but not named, by Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>19</sup>, the Arians' opponents did not attempt to outflank them on the interpretation of Proverbs 8 by the strategy of arguing that this passage speaks figuratively and poetically of a divine attribute, rather than concretely of a divine person. Fourth-century readers generally accepted without question that the personal language of the Proverbs passage indicated a divine person, and that, since Christ was the Wisdom of God (as explicitly stated in I Cor.1:24), it was obviously Christ that the passage was describing. One way of countering the Arian interpretation was foreshadowed by Origen, whose Christology makes important use of the concepts of 'generation' and 'eternal generation'. Origen saw the phrase 'begets me' of Prov.8:25 as the key to the whole passage. It is clear from several parts of Origen's work that for him the relationship between the Father and the Son was most fitly described using the verb γεννάω, rather than κτίζω or θεμελιόω. Origen points out that Prov.8:25 makes a significant use of the present tense, 'begets' indicating a continual generation.<sup>20</sup> There is a hint of a similar approach to Proverbs 8 in a letter of Dionysius of Rome which Athanasius has preserved. Referring to Prov. 8:22, the Roman bishop insists that the verb 'to create' may have different meanings and that in this passage it cannot possibly mean 'to make' in the sense of 'to bring into being'. In support of his argument, Dionysius cites Ps.110 (LXX Ps.109):3, Prov.8:25 and Col.1:15. He comments: 'In many passages of the divine oracles the Son is said to

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<sup>18</sup> References will be made to the fragments of Marcellus preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea and found in E.Klostermann (ed.), *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte. Eusebius Werke IV* (Leipzig, 1906).

<sup>19</sup> *Catachetical Orations* 4:2

<sup>20</sup> *Hom. in Ierem* 9:4 (GCS Origen 3, p.70). In contrast to his use of γεννάω, Origen betrays a certain diffidence about using κτίζω when speaking of the Son: 'God having created the Son, as it were... (*Comm. in Ioh.* 1:19; GCS Origen 4, p.24)

have been begotten (γενευνῆσθαι) but nowhere to have come into being (γεγονέναι).<sup>21</sup>

During the course of the Arian controversy, a number of writers had occasion to comment on Proverbs 8:22ff, and some followed a line similar to what we find in Origen and Dionysius. Eusebius of Caesarea in effect argued that the verb ‘created’, of v.22, did not mean what the Arians claimed. The context of Eusebius’ principal discussion of the Proverbs passage is his polemic against Marcellus in *De Ecclesiastica Theologia* 3. Although he does not mention Arius by name here, Eusebius is clearly arguing that the Church is not faced with a stark choice between Marcellus’ exegesis (ie. applying Proverbs 8 to the Incarnation) and that of the Arians. In fact, some time before the controversy over Marcellus’ views, and possibly before Arius had become notorious, Eusebius had had occasion to comment on Prov.8:22 in his *Demonstratio Evangelica*. Here he comments that, although v.22 indicates that Wisdom is a γενητόν, this term is to be understood in a qualified sense, making it closer in meaning to γέννημα.<sup>22</sup> When dealing with the proverbs passage in more detail in *De Ecclesiastica Theologia* 3;2, Eusebius argues that the passage proves that God and the Wisdom which figures in Proverbs 8 are not one and the same: the Wisdom of this text is not merely an accident or a predicate ( a σύνθεμα - a word rarely found in early Christian writers)<sup>23</sup>. This Wisdom is, in fact, the Word or Son of God, of whom Paul said, ‘...Christ, the power of God and the Wisdom of God’<sup>24</sup>. Eusebius has no doubt that the words of Prov.8:22ff are spoken by the Son, and he argues:

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<sup>21</sup> Dionysius is quoted in Athanasius, *De Decretis* (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 25, 464D-465A).

<sup>22</sup> *Dem.ev.* 5:1 (GCS Eusebius 6, p.210ff).

<sup>23</sup> GCS Eusebius 4, p.139

<sup>24</sup> I Cor.1:24

Even if he says that he was created, he does not mean this in the sense of passing from non-existence into existence, not that he too, like all the other creatures, was made out of nothing, as some have supposed in error; but rather that he subsists and lives, being before and existing before the creation of the whole world, having been ordained to rule over all things by the Lord, his Father, and the passage says 'created' rather than 'ordained' or appointed'.<sup>25</sup>

Eusebius cites other passages from Scripture to show that 'to create' is not always used in the absolute sense of 'to bring into being out of nothing'; it is sometimes used μεταφορικός.<sup>26</sup> However, Eusebius' main point of originality lies not so much in these arguments as in his appeal to the Hebrew text, no doubt through the medium of Origen's *Hexapla*. Eusebius points out that in the Greek versions produced by Aquila, Theodotion and Symmachus, we find that Prov.8:22 has ἐκτήσατο - 'possessed' or 'acquired' - rather than the ἔκτισέν of the LXX. Eusebius agrees that ἐκτήσατο (from κτάομαι) is a more accurate rendering of the original Hebrew (i.e. the verb *qanah*, which Eusebius does not mention as such), and he argues that, whereas κτίσις is popularly understood as implying the transition from non-existence to existence, κτήσις on the other hand indicates a relationship between that which is already in existence and the one who does the 'possessing':

Therefore, when the Son of God says: 'The Lord possessed (ἐκτήσατο) me as the beginning of his ways for his works', he was declaring both his pre-existence and his unique relationship to the Father, and at the same time the value

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<sup>25</sup> GCS Eusebius 4, p.140. In answer to these comments, the Arians might well have asked why, if the Son was in fact 'ordained' to rule over all things, the text in question does not actually say 'ordained' but rather 'created'!

<sup>26</sup> GCS Eusebius 4, p.141. Eusebius quotes Amos 4:13, Ps.51:10, Eph.2:15; 4:24, II Cor.5:17.

and necessity of his own personal care and control of his Father's works.<sup>27</sup>

Eusebius points out at some length Marcellus' insistence that the whole passage refers to the flesh which the Saviour assumed.<sup>28</sup> The amount of space which Eusebius devotes to Marcellus' interpretation is an indication of the strong feelings which he held on the matter. What annoyed Eusebius was not that Marcellus took issue with the Arians over Proverbs, but rather the way in which he did so.

The factor which shapes Marcellus' interpretation of Prov.8:22-31 is the conviction that the passage refers to the Incarnation of the Word. He appears to accept without question the reading ἔκτισέν με, of v.22, but he insists that this refers to the δεύτερα οἰκονομία. When we refer to the origin of Christ's humanity 'it is fitting to speak of "creation"'.<sup>29</sup> The Lord created the Saviour through the Virgin Mary<sup>30</sup>, and in this connection Marcellus has no difficulty accepting that the ἔκτισέν of Prov.8:22 means 'brought into existence':

God our master, when he made what had not existed, truly created. For what 'he created as the beginning of his ways'

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<sup>27</sup> GCS Eusebius 4, p.143. Gregory of Nyssa, writing against the latter-day Arian Eunomius, also draws attention to the original Hebrew behind Prov.8:22. However, Gregory is prepared to accept the rendering which Eunomius is using and his main thrust is that the verse does in fact refer to the Incarnation: 'He was created when he became man'; 'The words "created me" do not proceed from the divine and immortal nature but from that which was commingled with it in the Incarnation from our created nature...The sense of "created me" has reference to the humanity'. (*Cont. Eunom.* 2:10; 3:2)

<sup>28</sup> GCS Eusebius 4, p.144

<sup>29</sup> Marcellus, fragment 9. Klostermann, p.187

<sup>30</sup> Marcellus, fragment 10. Klostermann, p.187

was not flesh which already existed and which the Word then assumed, but rather that which did not exist.<sup>31</sup>

According to Marcellus, when Scripture speaks of Christ prophetically in the words: 'The Lord created me the beginning of his ways', we are to see this as relating to the 'ways' established by the incarnate Lord:

It was therefore right, since old things had passed away and all things were about to become new through the new life of our Saviour, that our master Christ should declare through the prophet, 'The Lord created me the beginning of his ways'.<sup>32</sup>

For to us who intend to live righteously he is the way to the fear of God, the beginning of all ways that lead from here.<sup>33</sup>

He rightly calls our master and Saviour 'the beginning of ways', because he is the beginning also of all the other ways that we have had that come after the first way. This signifies the traditions of the holy apostles who have, in accordance with the prophecy, proclaimed to us this new mystery 'in the most exalted of proclamations'.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, when Proverbs 8:22 says: 'The Lord created me the beginning of his ways *for his works*', we are to understand these 'works' as meaning those of the incarnate Word, the works to which Christ referred when he said: 'My Father works until now, and so do I', and: 'I have completed the work which you gave me'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Marcellus, fragment 11. Klostermann, p.187

<sup>32</sup> Marcellus, fragment 12. Klostermann, p.187

<sup>33</sup> Marcellus, fragment 13. Klostermann, p.187

<sup>34</sup> Marcellus, fragment 14. Klostermann, p.187

<sup>35</sup> Marcellus, fragment 15. Klostermann, p.187

Moving on to Proverbs 8:23 - πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἔθεμελίωσέν με ἐν ἀρχῇ - Marcellus says that the use of the singular αἰῶνος is significant. In his opinion, it refers to the 'age' which follows the ministry of the incarnate Word. The text does not say πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων (plural) and so Proverbs 8 cannot be referring to the foundation of the Son 'before the ages'.<sup>36</sup> Asterius, the 'Arian' against whom Marcellus was writing, had obviously interpreted the verbs 'created', 'established' and 'begets' in terms of the creation of the Son 'before the ages', just as Arius himself had said of the Son: 'Begotten outside time by the Father, created and established before the ages, before being begotten he was not'.<sup>37</sup> As well as insisting that there is a fundamental difference between 'age' and 'ages', Marcellus argues that the verb 'established', like 'created', refers to the incarnation, the κατὰ σάρκα οἰκονομία. The Apostle Paul had said: 'No man can lay any other foundation than the one laid, which is Christ Jesus', and so it is obvious that Proverbs 8:23 speaks of the laying of a 'foundation' in Christ.<sup>38</sup> Marcellus anticipates his opponents' argument that the phrase 'before the age' (πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος) implies a divine activity at some time before the incarnation; in other words they would interpret the text as meaning: 'Before the age [of the incarnation] he established me'. Marcellus responds by saying that, because both the purpose of God and also the prophesying of the new dispensation existed *before* the age of the incarnation, the phrase 'before the age' is quite appropriate.

Just as the Almighty God long ago foreordained the Church, so in his thought he first laid the foundations of the dispensation of Christ in the flesh, through whom he purposed to call the race of godly men 'unto adoption'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Marcellus, fragment 17. Klostermann, p.187f

<sup>37</sup> Arius to Alexander. Opitz, *Urkunde* 6 (p.13)

<sup>38</sup> Marcellus, fragments 17-18. Klostermann, p.187f

<sup>39</sup> Marcellus, fragment 19. Klostermann, p.188

Though this new mystery has been revealed in what are indeed the last times, yet because this was foreordained before this age it was appropriate that the prophecy should say, 'Before this age he laid my foundations'.<sup>40</sup>

Eusebius preserves for us Marcellus' allegorical interpretations of the various phrases used in Proverbs 8:24-25. According to Marcellus, 'before the earth was made' refers to human flesh, which Scripture describes as 'earth' ('dust').<sup>41</sup> Marcellus rather tortuously applies this phrase to the healing of human nature through the work of Christ, rather than simply to the flesh which Christ assumed.<sup>42</sup> 'Before the oceans were made' (v.24) refers to 'the hearts of the saints, which in their depths have the gift of the Spirit'.<sup>43</sup>

As for what is said next - 'Before the springs of water came forth' - Marcellus takes this as a reference to the Apostles. Why he should do so is not immediately obvious, but it becomes clearer when we bear in mind a traditional interpretation of the twelve springs of Elim mentioned in Exodus 15:27. Tertullian<sup>44</sup> and Origen<sup>45</sup> saw the twelve springs as a type of the Apostles, who were commissioned to evangelize and to baptize all nations, and, going a step further than them, Marcellus links together Exodus 15:27, Matthew 28:19 and Proverbs 8:24b: 'And so the Saviour said to the holy springs, 'Go and make disciples of all nations'.<sup>46</sup> The next verse, v.25, is also interpreted as referring to the Apostles:

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<sup>40</sup> Marcellus, fragment 20. Klostermann, p.188

<sup>41</sup> An allusion to Genesis 2:7 and 3:19.

<sup>42</sup> Marcellus, fragment 21. Klostermann, p.188

<sup>43</sup> Marcellus, fragment 22. Klostermann, p.188.

<sup>44</sup> *Adv. Marcionem* IV:13:4 (*Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, Tertullian Vol.1, p.572f)

<sup>45</sup> *Hom in Ex.* 7:3 (*GCS Origen* Vol.6, p.207f)

<sup>46</sup> Marcellus, fragment 25. Klostermann, p.189

He says, 'Before the mountains were set in place, and before all the hills, he begets me'. By 'mountains' and 'hills' he means the Apostles and the Apostles' successors, indicating by a figure of speech how righteously they lived compared with other men.<sup>47</sup>

Again, Marcellus was following a line of interpretation which was not altogether novel. In Hippolytus<sup>48</sup> and in Origen<sup>49</sup>, we find examples where the mountains and hills mentioned in the Old Testament are seen as prophetic references to the Apostles.

As for the latter part of Proverbs 8:22-31, Marcellus has to make a rigid division between vv.22-25 and the rest of the passage. Verses 22-25 are made to refer to the Incarnation, with the help of a good deal of typological exegesis. However, Marcellus would have found himself in real difficulties if he had tried to force this line of interpretation consistently in the following six verses. He is content, it seems, to accept that vv.26-31 refer to the creation of the world through the Word:

Since it was not possible that God should consider the creation of the heavens apart from his Word and the wisdom the belongs to the Word, Scripture has rightly said, 'When he set out the heavens I was with him'.<sup>50</sup>

For before the world existed the Word was in the Father. When Almighty God decided to make all things in heaven and on earth, the origin of the universe required an active, efficient force. For this reason, since there was no one apart from God (for, as everyone agrees, all things were made by him), the Word came forth and became the maker of the

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<sup>47</sup> Marcellus, fragment 27. Klostermann, p.189

<sup>48</sup> *De Benedic. Jacobi* 27, C.Diobouniotis & N.Beis ed., p.12

<sup>49</sup> *Comm. in Cant.* 3 (GCS Origen Vol.8, pp.201, 205)

<sup>50</sup> Marcellus, fragment 59. Klostermann, p.195

universe, he who first of all prepared it in thought within his own being, as Solomon the prophet teaches us when he says...[Prov.8:27-30].<sup>51</sup>

Eusebius of Caesarea points out the obvious fact that '[h]e who said, 'When he set out the heavens I was with him', was the same as he that said, 'The Lord created me the beginning of his ways for his works'.<sup>52</sup> He points out the basic weakness in Marcellus' interpretation: 'If it was the flesh which said, 'Before the oceans were made, before the springs of water...', it follows that, 'When he set out the heavens I was with him', must also be said on behalf of the flesh!'<sup>53</sup> How Marcellus would have replied to this charge of inconsistency we can only guess.

Marcellus' interpretation of Proverbs 8 is an excellent example of his opposition to Arianism and of his desire to maintain the unity of the Godhead at all costs. However, he is rather vague as to who exactly is speaking in this passage. If the Word is the subject of the whole passage then he appears to speak as someone who has a distinct existence - something which does not fit easily into Marcellus' theology. If the incarnate Word (ie., in Marcellus, the Son) is the subject, then v.27ff would mean that the *incarnate* Word, and not simply *the Word*, co-operated with the Father in the work of creation. If the whole of the passage is essentially poetic language, where divine wisdom is personalized and the role of divine wisdom in creation and providence is dramatized, then many of the problems created by the Arian interpretation are solved. Marcellus tackles the passage with the assumption that it speaks specifically of the divine Word (as distinct from the Father) rather than of wisdom as a divine attribute. Consequently, he rather ties himself in knots by arguing that vv.22-25 speak of the incarnate Word, whereas vv.26-30 speak of the Word or Wisdom through which the world was made.

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<sup>51</sup> Marcellus, fragment 60. Klostermann, p.196

<sup>52</sup> *De Eccles. Theol.* 3:3. (GCS Eusebius Vol.4, p.153)

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* (p.154)

Athanasius attempted a similar line of interpretation of Proverbs 8, although he made a strict distinction between ἔκτισέν (v.22) and γεννᾷ (v.25). Anxious to counter the Arian argument that, according to v.22, the Son is a creature, Athanasius claimed that ἔκτισέν με referred to the humanity of Christ.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the clause πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐθεμελίωσέν με referred, Athanasius says, to the purpose which the which God had of building his church upon Christ;<sup>55</sup> γεννᾷ με, on the other hand, refers to the unique relationship between the Father and the Son, a relationship which distinguishes the Son altogether from the category of created beings<sup>56</sup>. Athanasius' interpretation of these verses is in some ways more satisfying because it avoids the strained exegesis which we find in Marcellus, but Athanasius too is open to the charge of inconsistency in his handling of Proverbs 8:22-31.

Another interpretation - also involving a sharp distinction between ἔκτισέν and γεννᾷ - is that of Gregory of Nazianzus. In the *Fourth Theological Oration*, he argues that in studying what Scripture says about the Son we should adopt the principle of 'attributing to the deity the higher and diviner expressions, and the lower and more human to him who for us men was the Second Adam.'<sup>57</sup> Gregory is prepared to accept the view of 'the sacrilegious robbers of the Bible and the thieves of the sense of its contents' that Proverbs 8:22 refers to 'our Saviour himself, the true Wisdom'.<sup>58</sup> But whereas 'created me' refers to the humanity of Christ' (because 'created' implies a cause and therefore cannot refer to his deity), the phrase 'begets me' (v.25) does not admit the idea of a cause. Therefore: 'Wisdom is called a creature in connection with the lower generation, but

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<sup>54</sup> *Contra Ar.* 2:46 - *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, Vol.4, p.373

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* 2:73-77 (p.388ff)

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* 2:57-61 (p.379ff)

<sup>57</sup> *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, Vol.7, p.309

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p.309f

begotten in respect of the first and more incomprehensible.<sup>59</sup> Gregory is aware of people who interpret the words of Proverbs 8 'as those of Wisdom herself...For Scripture personifies many even lifeless objects'.<sup>60</sup> But he does not specify which writers he has in mind and he makes it clear that he does not agree with them.

## **Conclusion**

A major feature of the controversies of the fourth century was the tendency to make certain passages of Scripture into battlefields, or strategic points which must be captured if the campaign as a whole is to be successful. Certainly, the exegesis of Scripture is not a task which Christian theology can afford to neglect. If Scripture means anything at all, then it is worth taking the trouble to find out what that meaning is. However, it has perhaps been overlooked that what is important is the totality of the Biblical witness. In doctrinal controversies there is always the danger that certain passages become isolated as all-important, while the rest of Scripture is treated as almost superfluous. The exegesis of Scripture obviously entails the exegesis of specific passages and, indeed, of individual words, but too often this exercise can become a scouring of Scripture for proof-texts to be used in defence of established positions. This article has concentrated on one passage which was used as a weapon by different sides during the Arian controversy. One wonders if the energy expended in pressing such a text into service really contributed to a better understanding of the passage in its Biblical context.

Maurice Dowling

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p.309

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*