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The Fourth-Century Debates



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# The Life in the Word and the Light of Humanity: The Exegetical Foundation of Hilary of Poitiers' Doctrine of Divine Infinity

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## ABSTRACT

The doctrine of divine infinity has been recognized as a primary theological and philosophical category in Hilary of Poitiers' *De trinitate*, but its true significance for Hilary's own thought has yet to be thoroughly explored. This study seeks to demonstrate the exegetical foundation for Hilary's understanding of divine infinity, namely his theological reading of *John* 1:4, which will yield a much fuller appreciation of the doctrine in the context of his work. His intertextual reading of *John* 1:4 demonstrates a key dynamic in his theology between the eternal birth of the Son and the creation of the world. The Son, as the living Image of the Living, has all life in himself through his eternal birth from the Father, because of which Hilary sees a potential creation of all things in the generation of the Son. Further, in light of this idea of potential creation, he makes an advancement not seen previously in the Christian tradition in his interpretation of *Proverbs* 8:22 by developing a positive reading of the eternal generation from the 'creation' language therein. Lastly, we shall examine the theological, and particularly soteriological, significance divine infinity has for Hilary. Only by recognizing the place of *John* 1:4 as the exegetical foundation for his understanding of divine infinity can one realize the full implications of this doctrine for Hilary.<sup>1</sup>

Recent Hilary scholarship has demonstrated an appreciation for both the novelty and significance of his doctrine of divine infinity. John McDermott called infinity Hilary's 'primary philosophical weapon',<sup>2</sup> and most recently, Mark Weedman has convincingly shown how this doctrine, argued in virtually all patristic scholarship on the subject as a product of the pure ingenuity of Gregory of Nyssa, was simply further developed by Gregory in a continuing polemical context against Homoian and Eunomian theologies in which Hilary and Basil of Caesarea preceded him.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I would like to contribute to the

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, English translations of Hilary's text are from Stephen McKenna, trans., *The Trinity*, Fathers of the Church 25 (New York, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> John M. McDermott, 'Hilary of Poitiers: The Infinite Nature of God', *VC* 27 (1973), 172-202, 173. McDermott exposes the development of the idea in Hilary's thought chronologically in his writings, as well as some of the trinitarian implications of this development.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Weedman, 'The Polemical Context of Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Divine Infinity', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010), 81-104.

scholarship on Hilary's doctrine of divine infinity by investigating its exegetical foundation, namely, Hilary's interpretation of the Life in the Word in *John* 1:4, understood in light of the focal point of his entire theological project, the eternal birth of the Son. His intertextual reading of this verse and the theological reflection therein of the relation of the Father to the Son and of God to creation informs a positive reading of the eternal generation in *Proverbs* 8:22. Finally, we will see the significance this doctrine has for Hilary's own theological contemplation.

### Hilary's Interpretation of *John* 1:4

Hilary's understanding of the eternal birth is that that which is in the Son is definitive of his nature. It is not that the Father has given the Son aspects of the divine life which he now possesses, but he fully possesses the divine nature from his birth, and this full possession of divinity demonstrates his fully divine nature. Though there is a giving and receiving between the Father and the Son, because it is by the eternal birth, there is no diminution in the Father and no subordination of the Son. Therefore, God the Son is life and was born as life, not made life following his birth. This connection of life and birth, of the Son being life by virtue of his birth, is essential to Hilary's overall theological project.

In *De trinitate* 2.20, he writes concerning *John* 1:4:

'That which was made in him was life' (*Quod factum est in eo, uita est*) ... All things were created through him and in him. They were created in him, because he was born God the Creator (*quia nascebatur creator Deus*) ... There is no time between his birth and maturity (*Non habet inter se tempus et natiuitas et profectus*). Of these things which were made in him nothing was made without him, for he is the life (*quia uita est*) in which they were made, and God, who was born from God, was God not after he was born, but by being born God (*sed nascendo Deus extitit*). For being born the Living from the Living (*Nascens enim a uiuente uiuus*), the True from the True, the Perfect from the Perfect, he was born with the power of his birth (*non sine potestate natiuitatis suae natus est*).<sup>4</sup>

Hilary's understanding of the Son being of simple divine nature, perfect and complete in his birth, particularly in relation to 'life', will bring great clarity to the significance of his doctrine of divine infinity. 'Life' is eternally in the Son as he is eternally begotten of the Father.

An important aspect of the interpretation of this passage is the reading of the passage itself. Our common reading of, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity', assumes punctuation between verses 3-4 which was often not assumed in patristic readings. With punctuation in verse 3 after 'without

<sup>4</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 2.20 (CChr.SL 62, 55-6). My translation.

him nothing was made' rather than at the end of the verse the passage reads not, 'In him was life', but, 'That which was made in him was life'.<sup>5</sup> Many prominent theologians in the second and third centuries read *John* 1:4 in this way, including Irenaeus and Tertullian, and Origen insists on this reading. Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom and others later insist that the reading of '... which was made. In him is life...' is the proper reading.<sup>6</sup> Augustine demands this reading because, as all things are made in him, the former reading would mean that everything is life.<sup>7</sup> Origen insists on the former reading however, as it is not that life was in him in a simple or necessary sense, as he was in the beginning only in as much as he is Wisdom.<sup>8</sup> It is significant for Origen that the life is something added to the Word.<sup>9</sup> As the life is the light of humanity, the light has not always been in the Word as the light of humanity could not exist before mankind itself existed. Life is inseparable from the Logos, but once it comes to him and not eternally.<sup>10</sup> So, 'that which has been made in him, not what was in him, was life'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This seems to be in agreement with the oldest Greek and Latin manuscripts. The common Old Latin reading being: *omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est in ipso uita erat et uita erat lux hominum*, with no punctuation, as should be expected, and could support either reading (as the Vulgate). The Greek text reading: πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, with punctuation before ὁ γέγονεν rendering the text as 'that which was made in him was life'. It should be noted however that, though not the majority, some mss in *Vetus Latina Iohannes* intentionally read the text as *Quod factum est in ipso uita erat*, at times even beginning a new paragraph with *Quod* (see VL4: *Codex Veronensis*, Folia 122r; VL6: *Codex Colbertinus*, Folio 68r; VL34: *Pericope Cryptoferatensis*, p. 336; see also the placement of medial and high point punctuation markings in VL29: *Coda Sangermanensis Secundus*, Folio 120r and VL10: *Codex Brixianus*, Folio 152r).

<sup>6</sup> See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III 11.1; Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 7; Chrysostom, *Hom. on John* 5.1-2; Jerome, *Hom.* 87, on *John* 1:1-14.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Io. eu. tr.* 1.16 (CChr.SL 36, 9-10): *Vtquid dictum est: Quod factum est in illo, uita est? Si enim omnia in ipso facta sunt, omnia uita sunt. Non te abducant: pronuntia sic: Quod factum est; hic subdistingue, et deinde infer: in illo uita est. Quid est hoc? Facta est terra, sed ipsa terra quae facta est, non est uita: est autem in ipsa sapientia spiritualiter ratio quaedam qua terra facta est; haec uita est.*

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Commentaire sur Saint Jean* (SC 120, 112), I 120: ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν. As Origen's reading is heavily informed by his theological concern, or more properly speaking exegetical concern, that the Word is in the beginning in so far as he is Wisdom (SC 120, 111), I 118: καθ' ὃ σοφία ἐστὶ, which he sees as a proper reading of the passage in line with *Prov.* 8:22, so the change in the common reading of the passage from the late fourth century onwards is naturally heavily effected by the theological concerns of those engaging with the text. The Son is fully divine and eternal in all things, he shares in all things with the Father, including divine simplicity (The tense of the verb ἦν was even changed to the present ἐστιν in some manuscripts, reflecting the desire to force tense disagreement with ὁ γέγονεν to oblige the reading of 'that which was made. In him is life', see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [New York, 1971], 196).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* (SC 120, 112-131), II 282-95. XVI-XIX. NPNF 2.10-3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* (SC 120, 129), II 292: II.XVIII.129, 292: Αὕτη δὴ ἡ ζωὴ τῷ λόγῳ ἐπιγίνεται, ἀχώριστος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τὸ ἐπιγενέσθαι τυγχάνουσα.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* (SC 120, 131), II 294: οὕτως ὁ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ, οὐχὶ ὁ ἦν ἐν αὐτῷ, ζωὴ ἦν. It is also important to note that Hilary reads *John* 1:4 as 'that which was made in him was life' (see

### The Potential Creation ‘In Him’

In *De trinitate* 2.20, quoted partially above, Hilary gives an intertextual reading of *John* 1:3-4 in order to demonstrate a key dynamic in his theology between the eternal birth and the creation of the world in, by and through the Word. He writes: ‘[All things] were created in him, for he was born God the Creator’. Hilary does not mean here that all things are eternal, that there is a literal creation in the birth of the Son as Creator. He means that in the eternal birth, there is a potential creation of all things. By virtue of the Son’s birth he is Life from Life, the living Image of the Living, as God from God. A string of verses are used to expand his exegesis of *John* 1:3-4 (and 1:1-5 generally) in this passage, governed principally by *Colossians* 1:16, all things made through him is extended by Paul, ‘in him and through him’. *John* 10:30, ‘I and the Father are one’, along with *John* 14:9, 16:15, 5:26, *Matthew* 11:27 and *Colossians* 2:9: ‘In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily’, are used to expand his exegesis of *John* 1:3-4 to explain that all things are created ‘in’ him because he is Life, and thus all existence is conditioned upon him. The Scriptures speak of all things being made through and in the Son because he is Life, and in his eternal birth, there is a sense in which Life has gone forth from the Father. For Hilary, it is necessary that life was not added to the Word at any point, but rather that he was born perfect God and was never without anything which he possesses. *John* 1:1-5 read through these other verses seals the surety of Christ’s eternal and infinite divinity through his birth for Hilary.

### Hilary’s Interpretation of *Proverbs* 8:22

It has been said that the Johannine prologue and *Proverbs* 8 have such a strong similarity that one can speak of a literary dependence.<sup>12</sup> This is evident in Hilary’s reading of the *Proverbs* passage, which is in a sense governed by his understanding of the eternal birth in John’s prologue. In his reading of *Proverbs* 8, which Hilary calls the ‘dreadful billow’ of his opponents’ ‘swirling tempest’, and ‘the most powerful wave of their storm’,<sup>13</sup> the eternal birth is firmly secured within his understanding of the infinity of God.<sup>14</sup> With the eternal birth set in the context of divine infinity Hilary is enabled to develop an interpretation of

*De trin.* 2.20 above). He does not seem to have the same problem Augustine would with this reading, that it would mean that everything is life. It will become clear in what follows how this older reading of the verse can lend to interpretations like that of both Hilary and Origen.

<sup>12</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, Volume One: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden (London, 1975), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 12.1 (CChr.SL 62A, 579; McKenna, 501): *haec tortuosi turbinis grauis unda est.*

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Mark Weedman for seeing Hilary’s move in Book Twelve to understanding and explaining eternal generation primarily in the context of causation within the divine



this ‘dreadful billow’ of *Proverbs* 8:22 which actually makes a defense for eternal generation.

Hilary begins his interpretation of *Proverbs* 8:22 by stating precisely what it absolutely cannot mean – that the Son is created. He uses a number of biblical passages in *De trin.* 12.3-5 to demonstrate that the Son cannot be a creature as he is the Creator.<sup>15</sup> If the language of creation in *Proverbs* 8:22 cannot mean that he is created, it must certainly be interpreted to refer to the incarnation. This is not entirely surprising for someone like Hilary in his day, as this interpretation, in varying forms, has already been introduced into Christian thought.<sup>16</sup> But Hilary is also able to do far more with his interpretation of the verse because of his understanding of the potential creation of all things in the eternal birth of the Son in *John* 1:4.

When Hilary comes to interpret *Proverbs* 8, he reads the passage as governed by this principle of potential creation. He observes that though the text claims that Wisdom was created for the beginning of the ways and for the works of God, this is not to be understood in terms of the generation of the Son. Wisdom declared itself to be established before the ages (v. 23), so that one must recognize that it is one thing to be created for the beginning of the ways and for the works, and another thing to be established before the ages.<sup>17</sup> Verses 24-30 prove to Hilary that the establishment of Wisdom before the ages in verse 23 (seen as referencing the eternal birth) and the creation of Wisdom in verse 22 (seen in reference to incarnation) show us that the Son was not generated merely prior to temporal things, but is co-eternal with infinite things.<sup>18</sup> Wisdom was present with God when the heavens were prepared, and

nature, not the idea that the Father must always have a son to be a father as previously argued in *De trin.* (‘The Polemical Context’ [2010], 94).

In Book Twelve of *De trinitate*, which contains Hilary’s most elaborate defense of eternal generation, the argumentation for the Son’s eternity is developed in light of infinity. What had previously been primarily explained in the context of the traditional arguments of Father/Son analogy: a father cannot be father unless there is a son, nor a son unless there is a father, is adjusted (as Hilary’s opponents could use the same Father/Son analogy, in reference to human birth, to argue for a production of the Son after the eternal existence of the Father, arguing one must exist alone before one exists as Father). In Book Twelve, the eternity of the Son is argued primarily from the eternality of the Father in infinite divine life. Hilary’s removal of the generation of the Son outside of and previous to time to the eternal infinity of the life of God safeguards the Son’s eternality and provides for a positive reading of the eternal birth in *Prov.* 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Rom.* 1:25; *Gen.* 14:19; *Hos.* 13:4; *1Pet.* 4:29 and *Rom.* 8:19-20

<sup>16</sup> This interpretation was most likely introduced by Marcellus of Ancyra (see Eusebius of Caesarea, *c. Marc.* II 3.43-45), and is also seen in the writings of Eustathius of Antioch (*frag.* 65), and adopted, at least partially, by Athanasius, though altered to avoid any modalistic tendencies seen in Marcellus’ reading, and introducing an interpretation of the passage which rejects Marcellus’ (and indeed the predominant tendency for previous Christians, though in a different way than Marcellus) understanding of the Word as cosmological mediator (*i.e.* a mediating position within the Godhead for the purpose of creation) (*c. Ar.* II 73,74).

<sup>17</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 12.36 (CChr.SL 62A, 606): *Vt dum aliud est in uiarum initium et in opera creari et aliud est ante saecula fundari, anterior intellegetur esse creatione fundatio...*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 12.39 (CChr.SL 62A, 608-10).

Hilary asks: 'Is the preparation of the heavens a matter of time for God, so that a sudden movement of thought crept into his understanding, as if it had been previously inactive and dull, and in a human way he searched for material and instruments for the building of the world?'<sup>19</sup> His answer is of course no, the preparation of creation is 'perpetual and eternal'.<sup>20</sup>

He uses *Isaiah* 45:11, 'O God, thou who has made all things that shall be', to further support his interpretation. 'The things that shall be', writes Hilary, 'although they are yet to be in so far as they must be created, have already been made in so far as God is concerned, for whom there is nothing new and unexpected in things to be created',<sup>21</sup> for 'there is nothing whatsoever in things that was not always with God'.<sup>22</sup> For Hilary, Wisdom proves its eternity by its presence with the Father as he prepares.<sup>23</sup> This preparation of creation, the potential creation of the world, 'has been brought about as the result of a like infinity of eternity with God',<sup>24</sup> and it is brought about in the Life of the Word who is with him for the preparation in an infinite eternity.

Hilary must then deal with the language of creation (*creavit*) in the passage. This language should disturb us, Hilary thinks, if we did not understand the birth before time and the creation for the beginning of the ways of God and for his works in time. Verse 21 aids his interpretation: 'If I shall make known to you the things that are done each day, I shall not forget to enumerate those that are in time'. Wisdom reveals things done every day and those done within time. Hilary writes: 'Wisdom therefore asserted that it would not forget to speak of those things which are in time when it said: "The Lord created me for the beginning of his ways and for his works". Hence, it is a reference to the deeds which have been done in time (*a saeculo gestarum*); it is not a teaching about the generation which has been proclaimed before time (*neque generationis ante saecula praedicatae*)'.<sup>25</sup> This then, he contends, speaks of the Incarnation, wherein Christ was created in bodily form, and declared that he was the way of the works of God (Hilary references *John* 14:6). But Hilary also reads the language of 'creation' in a positive sense to uphold the eternal birth. In *De trin.* 12.50, he relates this language to its usage in reference to Christ being 'made from woman' (*factum de muliere*) in *Galatians* 4:4. Here the language of Christ being 'made' or 'created' from the Virgin Mary clearly

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 609; McKenna, 527.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 12.40 (CChr.SL 62A, 610): *Perpetua enim et aeterna rerum creandarum est praeparatio.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 12.39 (CChr.SL 62A, 609-10; McKenna, 528): *Quae enim futura sunt, licet in eo quod creanda sunt adhuc fient, Deo tamen, cui in creandis rebus nihil nouum ac repens est, iam facta sunt.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 609; McKenna, 528: *Nihil enim non semper cum Deo fuit quidquid in rebus est.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 608-10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 12.40 (CChr.SL 62A, 611-2; McKenna, 529): *eorum praeparatio aequabili paenes Deum infinitatis aeternitate constiterat.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 12.44 (CChr.SL 62A, 615; McKenna, 532-3).

refers to him being born of her, but the language ‘made’, says Hilary, is used to remove the birth from human passions, it is a birth from the woman only, from one parent, as the eternal generation of God from God. The language of ‘creation’ can be understood then to actually emphasize the eternal birth, and the uniqueness of it; to demonstrate the birth of one from one, as it does in regards to the Incarnation in *Galatians* 4:4, rather than being understood to deny the eternal birth and state the Son as created or born in time.<sup>26</sup>

Hilary’s interpretation of *Proverbs* 8 is so firmly set in his understanding of the infinite and simple nature of God that it supports and upholds the Son’s eternal generation. He writes: ‘[The Son] has been born in such a manner that he points out no one else but [the Father] as his author; at the same time, he does not cast aside the faith in infinity (*fidem infinitatis*), because we are informed that he was born before the eternal ages (*ante tempora aeterna*)’.<sup>27</sup> Divine infinity allows Hilary to speak of the generation of the Son, of the Father as the Origin and Source of the Son, of a causal relationship, while at the same time affirming the infinite existence of God as Trinity. One born from an infinite and eternal source must be infinite and eternal.<sup>28</sup>

### What Does this mean for Hilary’s Theology?

Hilary’s understanding of eternal generation within the context of divine infinity, which is sustained by his interpretation of these verses, is absolutely central to his overall theological project. In it, he is ultimately constructing a doctrine of God, but within this he is certainly saying something about how humanity relates to this God as well; about how and why this finite humanity is created out of nothing by this infinite God in the first place. Essentially, for Hilary, to form a doctrine of God is to also form something of a soteriology.

For Hilary, divine infinity does not just mean that God is transcendentally, vertically suspended above time, but that he is understood as containing it all within himself, not entirely divorced from the finite and temporal, but possessing it. A horizontal view of infinity, in which the life of God extends eternally before and after time,<sup>29</sup> ‘an eternity embracing all of time rather than an atemporal moment removed vertically from the temporal flow’.<sup>30</sup> He writes that the infinite God ‘contains all things’, that he is confined by no part of the universe but pervades it all (*neque in aliquo ipse neque non in omnibus est*), and that

<sup>26</sup> The struggle of the Latin church to deal with this language is reflected in the Vulgate’s avoidance of the language of *creavit* entirely, giving preference to *possedit* instead: *Dominus possedit me initium uiarum suarum*. Compare to Hilary’s reading: *Dominus creavit me in initium uiarum suarum* (e.g. *De trin.* 12.35 [CChr.SL 62A, 606]).

<sup>27</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 12.52 (CChr.SL 62A, 622; McKenna, 539).

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.* 12.21 (CChr.SL 62A, 595).

<sup>29</sup> M. Weedman, ‘The Polemical Context’ (2010), 95.

<sup>30</sup> J. McDermott, ‘Hilary of Poitiers’ (1973), 183.

he, as the infinite one, is present in all things and all things are present within him (*neque infinitus abesset a cunctis, neque cuncta ei qui infinitus est non inessent*).<sup>31</sup> He ‘swallows up whatever pertains to time’.<sup>32</sup> The ineffability and incomprehensibility of the birth of the Son is what initially leads Hilary to its eternity.<sup>33</sup> That he is born *ante tempora aeterna* means that one cannot say of him ‘he was not before he was born’ as what is before times eternal is beyond the power of comprehension, nor can it be said that he was ever unborn.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, ‘if our mind turns back upon itself and examines anything about the Son, nothing else will appear before our probing mind except that he was born and always is.’<sup>35</sup> As all that is within time is contained by him, this includes all reason and thought. Therefore what precedes the existence of human reason and all thought cannot be comprehended. Our thoughts, existing within time, cannot grasp the infinite God, as one cannot grasp what it is grasped by: that is, the finite cannot comprehend the infinite.

This incomprehensibility is a positive aspect of Hilary’s theology. In this ‘horizontal’ infinity, Hilary is not saying that our minds cannot consider God, as Mühlberg claims,<sup>36</sup> but, he writes: ‘That which is infinite in God is for-

<sup>31</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 1.6 (CChr.SL 62, 6-7).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 12.31 (CChr.SL 62A, 603; McKenna, 522): *Ergo et infinitas temporum aeternorum quod est temporis, id est non fuisse, consumit.*

<sup>33</sup> M. Weedman, ‘The Polemical Context’ (2010), 95.

<sup>34</sup> ... *non admittit sensum de se diiudicantem esse aut non fuisse antequam nascitur: quia et esse antequam nascitur non sit nativitatis, et non fuisse iam temporis sit* (*De trin.* 12.31 [CChr. SL 62A, 603]). As he is before times eternal, neither him not existing before he is born or him existing previous to his birth can be admitted to our minds. It is unthinkable for something which is born to exist before it is born, and no existence prior to his birth places the birth in time. Being that God is infinite, the only logical conclusion for a begotten-God for Hilary is that he is eternally begotten; otherwise he is not truly begotten, not God from God, or time is admitted into the Godhead.

<sup>35</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 12.32 (CChr.SL 62A, 603; McKenna, 522): ... *si quid de Filio mens retroacta scrutabitur, nihil aliud scrutantis sensui quam natum esse semper occurret.*

<sup>36</sup> Ekkehard Mühlberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa; Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik* (Mainz, 1966), in his insistence that no one prior to Gregory of Nyssa held an idea of a progressus in infinitum, claims that Hilary’s understanding of God’s infinity and incomprehensibility means the dissolution of the mind, that there is no movement, no progressus in infinitum of the mind. He writes of *De trin.* 2.6 (‘God is everywhere, and is everywhere entirely’) that thought itself must be content with the realization that God cannot be known (daß Gott nicht erkannt werden kann). He contends that in Hilary no progressus in infinitum is required, that reason comes to rest and nothing remains of it as faith steps into its place (71). There is a forgetting of the mind (not as Hilary actually says – *mens infinita*), a dissolution of the mind and a leaping into what one cannot know by faith (71). Hilary directly contradicts this however, it is not the forgetting of reason in faith, but rather a reasonable faith. He says a ‘reasonable faith is akin to reason and accepts its aid’, and this reasonable faith leads one to know that ‘quam ut tantum eum esse intellegeret, quantum et intellegi non potest et potest credi’ (*De trin.* 1.8 [CChr.SL 62, 8]). In other words, it is perfectly reasonable for a finite being to realize that it cannot grasp the infinite, and indeed the only reasonable conclusion. It is unreasonable to assume that as a finite being one can have full knowledge of God, but not having complete knowledge of the infinite is what leads the finite creature to contemplation of God’s

ever drawing away from the contemplation of our infinite perceptions'.<sup>37</sup> Our minds continually progress infinitely in the knowledge of God without ever reaching an end. That God is incomprehensible, allows our knowing of God to continue infinitely, never arriving and always increasing in the infinite life of God. McDermott rightly understands Hilary here when he writes: 'One senses that the mind is progressing through time to touch the positive infinity of God'.<sup>38</sup>

The idea of a *progressus in infinitum*, of perpetual increase in the knowledge and life of God, and its significance for Hilary's theology can be clearly seen in the interpretation of *John* 1:4, and *Proverbs* 8:22 in light of it, discussed above. Both the idea of potential creation in the Life of the Word and that of the eternal birth being understood in the category of divine infinity greatly further our understanding of Hilary's connection of the doctrine of God and soteriology.

Hilary understands the potential creation of all things in the eternal birth in *John* 1:4 to be a salvific reality. The text of John itself evidences this for Hilary as the verse continues: 'This life is the light of humanity...', which Hilary addresses in *De trin.* 2.21 (the very next paragraph following his discussion in 2.20 quoted at the beginning of our argument above) which of course, not seeing the idea of potential creation in the living Image, is why Origen, understandably, must reject the idea that the Word always had life in him. But Hilary's argument is much more sophisticated than simply referencing the rest of the verse. It is important to note the connection of this potential creation with the idea of divine infinity. That the preparation for creation is perpetual and eternal and that this potential creation is seen in the one who is Life, means that this creation is meant for life and not death. Hilary further argues that it would be unworthy of God to 'have given existence to him who did not exist in order that when he had come into existence he might not exist. For, this can be regarded as the sole purpose of our creation: that what did not

infinite life, and indeed makes that contemplation infinitely possible, leading the creature to infinite progression in the divine life. It is not daß Gott nicht erkannt werden kann, but rather, for Hilary, God's incomprehensibility is what mysteriously allows him to be known by finite creatures as the infinite Creator.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 12.24 (CChr.SL 62A, 597-8; McKenna, 517): *quia id quod infinitum in Deo est semper se infiniti sensus nostri recursui subtrahat.*

<sup>38</sup> J. McDermott, 'Hilary of Poitiers' (1973), 176. While McDermott recognizes the idea of a *progressus in infinitum* in Hilary's doctrine of divine infinity, I argue that without the recognition of Hilary's exegetical foundation of *John* 1:4, and more specifically his understanding of the potential creation of all things in the Word in *John* 1:4, the full theological and soteriological implications of divine infinity for Hilary are left unexplored. The connection of the Life in the Word in *John* 1:4 and divine infinity is an essential one, and recognition of this essential connection is necessary for a full appreciation of the salvific ramifications this doctrine has for Hilary, as the remainder of this paper seeks to demonstrate.

exist began to exist, not that what had begun to exist would cease to exist'.<sup>39</sup> Durst rightly assesses that for Hilary, 'Die Ewigkeit der Geschöpfe ist das Ziel der Schöpfung'.<sup>40</sup> Simply because life infinitely exists in the Word, that the Son is himself infinite life and humanity is created 'in and through him', humanity is then destined for life, for progress and not death and regress. The potential creation of all things in the one who is Life purposes that creation towards infinite progress in the infinite. It is therefore absolutely necessary for the salvation of the world for the Son to eternally have life in him, and this necessity demonstrates the life and light of humanity eternally in the infinite God.

Hilary further supports this argumentation with his understanding of Christ as the Image of God and the First-born of all creation. In *De trinitate* 8.50, he explains that Christ can be called the first-born of every creature 'because in him all things are created' (*quia in ipso creata omnia sint*).<sup>41</sup> He quotes *Colossians* 1:15-20 to point out that the Son, as the image of the invisible God, is the first-born in the resurrection of every creature while at the same time the first-born for eternity (*dum qui primogenitus creaturae est, idem primogenitus ad aeternitatem est*). First-born in resurrection, but also of every created thing, 'containing in himself the origin of the universe (*continens in se uniuersitatis exordium*)...'<sup>42</sup>: first-born, in other words, in his eternal birth from the Father as all things are potentially created in him. By his very existence as the living Image, as Life from Life, all things are created and reconciled in and through him, both potentially in his eternal being and as the Life and the Light of humanity.

In Hilary's interpretation of *John* 1:4, not only does he lay the exegetical foundation for his doctrine of divine infinity, which is further expressed through his reading of the eternal generation in *Proverbs* 8:22, but he sets infinity in a soteriological context which, for Hilary, is revealed by the nature of God himself. As God is Father and Son, Begetter and Begotten, God exists as eternally Life-giving, as infinitely Self-giving, and the potential creation of all things in the eternal birth of the Son means something good, indeed, infinitely good, for that creation.

<sup>39</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 1.9 (CChr.SL 62, 9; McKenna 10): *cum constitutionis nostrae ea sola esse ratio intellegetur, ut quod non esset esse coepisset, non ut quod coepisset esse non esset*. Similar argumentation is found in Athanasius, *De inc.* 6, yet based upon humanity in sin, and not necessarily humanity in its originally created state: a good God would not create humanity if only to leave her in sin and not redeem.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Durst, *Die Eschatologie des Hilarius von Poitiers: Ein Beitrag zur Dogmengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts* (Bonn, 1987), 73.

<sup>41</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 8.50 (CChr.SL 62A, 362-3).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 363. My translation. McKenna's rendering is also insightful: 'He is also the first-born of every creature who contains within Himself the beginning of every creature', 315.

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