Christology in the Early Church

A Brief Examination of the Christian Fathers*

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The emphasis on the Shema is as central to the New Testament as to the Old. Asked about the first and greatest commandment, "Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."'"[1] In harmony with this emphasis on the Shema, Jesus prayed to his Heavenly Father in John 17:3, 4: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." The apostle Paul, echoing this stress on the oneness of God, stated, " yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6).

In Hebrew, the word for one is *echad* (אחד). It means a singular one. In certain circumstances it can modify a set of one. But there is no sense of a composite nature to *echad*; it is "one."[2] Hence there is no way in which the oneness of God as stated in Hebrew can be inferred correctly to mean a triunity. Nor can its Greek equivalent.

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[1] Mark 12:29, 30. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are from the NRSV.

[2] For a simple examination of how the word is used in the Hebrew Bible, see אחד in *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament*, 41.

We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls and other late pre-Christian Jewish materials that the Messiah of Judaism was expected to be a king in the line of David, or a priest in the line of Aaron, or both.[3] There is no suggestion there, or in any of the Old Testament for that matter, that he was to be a God-man or to have been preexistent. The synoptic Gospels make no reference to Christ as God or divine, nor as having preexisted. I think, however, that the concept of preexistence is developed in the Pauline epistles, in Hebrews, and above all in the Gospel of John. Certainly it is clearly arguable that this is so.

In the Pauline epistles, for example, it seems that Christ's preexistence is talked about in Philippians 2:6-11. Of course, some would argue that this text is to be understood in terms of "Adam Christology." But while that is a possibility, I feel that there are strong reasons to discount it.[4] Perhaps, though, a better example of reference to Christ's preexistence is to be found in Colossians 1:15-20 which reads:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

I would also argue that preexistence is taught in Hebrews 1:10-12 which quotes Psalm 102:25-27. These verses say: "And, in the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end." Significantly, the writer of Hebrews applies these verses to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Yet in the Psalm from which they are quoted, it is clear that what is said refers to Yahweh or God the Father, a fact which has caused Trinitarians to assume that Yahweh is

[3] For a discussion of this concept, see the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 9, 509-10 under the subheading "Messianic Ideas in Later Judaism."

[4] See L.W. Hurtado, "Pre-existence," in *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, particularly on pages 744-5 under the subheading "Philippians 2:6-11."

the name of the triune God.[5] A more plausible suggestion here, however, is that what we may well have is the preexistent Christ serving as a divine agent in the fullest sense.[6]

I. Three References in John

In John's Gospel Jesus is referred to — either as the Word or personally in his resurrected state — as θεός, or, in English, "God," just two or three times. These are at John 1:1, 1:18, and 20:28.

John 1:1 tells us regarding the Word, ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος or "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This text, as used by Trinitarians, has caused them to conclude that the Word was God in the fullest sense. But the Greek is not specific enough to assert that. The Rev. J. W. Wenham states concerning the statement καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος:

> as far as grammar is concerned, such a sentence could be printed: θεὸς ἐστιν ὁ λόγος, which would mean either, "The Word is a god," or "The Word is the god." The interpretation of John 1:1 will depend upon whether or not the writer is held to believe in only one God or in more than one god. It will be noticed that the above rules for the special uses of the definite article are none of them rigid and without exceptions.[7]

Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that the Word is the same God as the One with whom he was existing.[8]

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[5] This is a difficult proposition to maintain in view of the Old Testament usage of Psalm 110:1, the most commonly quoted and cited Old Testament passage in the New Testament. That the term God in the New Testament signifies the Father and that Yahweh is the name of the Father in the Old Testament has been recognized in recent years by eminent Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan.

[6] L.W. Hurtado deals with the concept of divine agency in his masterful study, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

[7] J.W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 35. Wenham also refers his readers to Blass-Debrunner-Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, Part 3, 8, especially paragraph 273; and Moulton-Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3, 182 ff.

[8] For a discussion of this matter, see Raymond Brown's note on John 1:1, *The Gospel According to John* I-XII, Anchor Bible, 4.

In John 1:18, the most weighty textual evidence indicates that the Word is called μονογενὴς θεός,[9] an expression which may be translated "the only begotten god." Some translators, in trying to deal with the problem of an "only begotten god" from a Nicene sense, have translated μονογενὴς θεός as "God, the only" or "God the unique who is in the bosom position of God." This will not do, however, for even from a Trinitarian standpoint such translations make no sense. They make the Word the "only God" or the "unique God" and thus deny Godhood to God the Father or the Holy Spirit. Such renderings lead logically to Modalism. Professor John Dahms has surveyed the ancient literature on this matter and has come to the definite conclusion that the most accurate translation of μονογενὴς is "only begotten."[10]

In John 20:28 we read Thomas' famous cry of astonishment at the sight of the risen Jesus: ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου, that is, "My Lord and my God." Thus it seems certain that Thomas was addressing Jesus as his θεός (God or god). But again, in what sense? To assert that because Thomas was using the definite article before θεός it can be inferred that Jesus is *the* God, is a poor argument. Thomas was using the vocative case or the case of address, and thus the article ο or "the" was necessary before the words "Lord" and "God" in the above text from the standpoint of Greek grammar.[11] However, there can really be no objection to calling Jesus θεός (God or god). In addition, there can be no objection to worshipping him in the sense of *proskynesis*.[12]

II. Second- and Third-Century Teachings

The texts that I have just discussed are given specific and often dogmatic interpretations by various theological camps, but all such interpretations are somewhat problematic. For example, do the texts in question teach Jesus' preexistence beyond a shadow of a doubt? We cannot say definitively, but what we can do is look at what Christians in the second and third

[9] For a discussion of this text and the reading μονογενὴς θεὸς, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975, 198.

[10] Prof. John V. Dahms, "The Johannine Use of Monogenes Reconsidered," *New Testament Studies* 29: 2 (April 1983), 231.

[11] A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934, 461.

[12] The word does not just mean "worship" in the English sense. It means to do homage or obeisance to those representing divinity as well as to God Himself. This is shown by the verbal use of the word, that is προσκυνήσουσιν, in Revelation 3:9 where Christ makes false Jews do homage to the church of Philadelphia.

centuries thought about this matter and others. While what they believed is not always clear, and there were various opinions among them, two things can be said about them. First, they were much closer to "the twelve," the original disciples of Christ, than are we; and, second, there do seem to have been clear concepts regarding Christology among the majority of them, although these grew fainter as time went by.

Second- and third-century Christians were familiar with the thought that Jesus' Messianic title, "the son of man," was taken from Daniel 7:13. More important to them, however, was the Wisdom motif, which appears so prominently in Proverbs and various other pre-Christian Jewish works as well as those of Jesus' contemporary, Philo of Alexandria. Scholars generally assume that this motif, as dealt with in Proverbs 8:22-31, is the basis for the prologue of the Gospel of John, Colossians 1:15-20, and Hebrews 1:10-12, and, by extension, for the second-century Christian belief in the personal preexistence of Christ. It is therefore not surprising that the early ante-Nicene Fathers of the church quoted Proverbs 8:22-31 over and over again.

There were other concepts that these Fathers used to buttress their idea of the preexistence of Christ. These included the word of God,[13] the beginning (**ראשׁית** or ἀρχῇ) of creation,[14] and the angel of Yahweh.[15] Nonetheless, the idea that seemed basic to their preexistence teaching was that of Wisdom. Significantly, though, in their discussions of the Christ's preexistence, there is no direct evidence to suggest that they considered him to have been "the only true God" of John 17:3 or the "one God" of 1 Corinthians 8:6.

The term "God" was not exclusive to Yahweh in the Old Testament. Really, what we have there is more of a form of henotheism than pure monotheism. In other words, the Israelites believed that there was one true God among many gods. He was almighty; they were mighty ones. This is

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[13] Reference here is to the **דבר יהוה** (*davar Yahweh*) as the divine word of creation. For further on this, see the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 5, 99 under the subheading "The Divine Word of Creation."

[14] W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, revised edition, New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967, 151-2.

[15] See Genesis 16:7-14; 22:11-18; Exodus 14:19-20; and especially Exodus 23:20-21 which reads: "I [Yahweh] am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him."

shown by a number of passages. In Exodus 7:1 Yahweh Himself calls Moses "a god." In Psalm 8:5 angels are called "gods," or at least that was the understanding of the writer of the book of Hebrews. Men are referred to as gods. Psalm 82:6, 7 says, "I say, 'You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals and fall like any prince.'"

The Greek term for God or god was equally, if not more, inclusive than the Hebrew term, coming as it did out of a polytheistic milieu. So when Trinitarians argue that because Ignatius of Antioch called Jesus "our God," he was implying that Jesus was God in the highest sense, they are ignoring the historical-linguistic context in which Ignatius used the expression. By reading Ignatius alone, we cannot tell just what he understood the Christ to be. Ignatius could have been a proto-Modalist, a proto-Arian, or a proto-Trinitarian; we have no way of knowing. But we do know that most of his ante-Nicene successors in the early church were not Trinitarians, at least in a Nicene sense.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr, who was martyred about 165 CE, developed what may be called the twofold-stage begetting of the Christ.[16] First, Justin held that God the Father had existed by Himself throughout eternity. However He had always had within Himself His wisdom or reason. But at a certain point in eternity, He begot His reason as a second being (without losing reason internal to Himself). In asserting this, Justin engaged in a play on words. In Greek the word λόγος does not simply mean "word," its usual translation. It also means *ratio* or "reason" as well as *verbum*, *sermo*, or "word." It means that which is in the mind, but, when projected, it becomes the spoken word, because "reason" of the mind is expelled from the person as "word" or "speech." Of course, this complemented the father-son analogy that is used so commonly in the New Testament to describe the relationship of God the Father to His Christ. Just as reason precedes and generates speech, so does a father precede and generate a son. Later, when the Word

[16] I am indebted to Harry Austryn Wolfson for this terminology, which he discusses at length in his *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, Vol. 1: *Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964, 192-4, 204-17. Although the twofold stage theory deals (1) with the begetting of the Logos from the Father, and (2) with the Logos becoming flesh, it is possible to see further begettings at Jesus' baptism and resurrection.

became flesh, this was seen as a second begetting. Concerning the first begetting, Justin wrote:

> "I shall give you another testimony, my friends," said I, "from the Scriptures, that 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; and on another occasion He calls Himself Captain, when He appeared in human form to Joshua the son of Nave (Nun). For He can be called by all these names, since He ministers to the Father's will, and since He was begotten of the Father by an act of will."[17]

Then almost immediately thereafter, Justin also quoted Proverbs 8:21-31. He stated:

> 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. From everlasting He established me in the beginning, before He had made the earth, and before He had made the deeps, before the springs of the waters had issued forth, before the mountains had been established. Before all the hills He begets me. God made the country, and the desert, and the highest inhabited places under the sky. When He made the heavens, I was along with Him, and when He set up his throne on the winds when He made the high clouds strong, and the springs of the deep safe, when He made the foundations of the earth, I was with Him arranging. I was that in which He rejoiced; daily and at all times I delighted in His countenance, because He delighted in the finishing of the habitable world, and delighted in the sons of men."[18]

Note here that Justin treated the terms "begot" and "made" with respect to the "the Word of Wisdom" as interchangeable. Therefore, like Arius who lived nearly two centuries later, he had no difficulty in seeing the Word

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[17] *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 61 as found in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, Vol. 1, 227. Hereafter the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* will be referred to as *ANF*.

[18] *Ibid.*, 227-8.

as created and numerically distinct from the Father. On this latter point he is most clear. He says:

> Then I replied, "I shall attempt to persuade you, since you have understood the Scriptures, [of the truth] of what I say, that there is, and that there is said to be, another God and Lord subject to the maker of all things; who is called an Angel, because he announces to men whatever the Maker of all things — above whom there is no other God — wishes to announce to them."
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> Then I replied, "Reverting to the Scriptures, I shall endeavor to persuade you, that He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things — numerically, I mean, not distinct in will. For I affirm that He has never at any time done anything which He who made the world — above whom there is no other God — has not wished Him both to do and to engage Himself with."[19]

Athenagoras the Athenian

Athenagoras, who lived and wrote during the second half of the second century, quite evidently held much the same sort of Christology as did Justin. In his *A Plea for the Christians*, he wrote:

> But the Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and 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 of power and spirit, the understanding and reason (νοῦς καὶ λόγος) of the Father is the Son of God. But if, in your surpassing intelligence, it occurs to you to inquire 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 eternal mind [νοῦς], had the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos [λογικός]; 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 agrees with our statement. "The Lord," it says, "made me, the beginning of His ways to His works."[20]

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[19] *Ibid.*, ch. 55, 223-24.
[20] *A Plea for the Christians, ANF* Vol. 11, ch. 10, 133.

Athenagoras' idea is, then, that God brought forth His Logos (λόγος) or reason by an act of will, and this Logos, His Son, came to serve as a pattern or an archetype of all creation. Significantly, too, Athenagoras' concept — like that of Justin — fits nicely into the conceptual paradigms of the prologue of John and of Colossians 1:15-20, which, as stated earlier, seems to be based on Proverbs 8:22-31. Thus it was possible for Athenagoras to regard the preexistent Christ (the Logos) as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him."

As an aside, it is important to recognize that if Athenagoras' idea of the nature of the Logos is followed, it negates a favorite Trinitarian argument. Trinitarians assert that since the Logos created "all things," he must have been the Creator rather than a creature since he could not have created himself. But if we follow Athenagoras' logic, just as is stated in Colossians, everything was created "in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ) and "through him" (δἰ αὐτοῦ), not by him.

Theophilus of Antioch

Theophilus of Antioch, a contemporary of Athenagoras, was the first of the Fathers to use the word Trinity. He followed Justin and Athenagoras in his Christology. Like them, he quotes the famous Wisdom passage from Proverbs 8:22-31. After writing about God's creation of man, Theophilus asserted:

> God, then, having his own Word internal within His own bowels, begat Him, emitting Him along with his own wisdom before all things. He had His Word as a helper in the things that were created by Him and by Him He made all things. He is called "governing principle" [ἀρχῆ] because He rules, and is Lord of all things fashioned by Him. He, then, being Spirit of God and governing principle, and wisdom, and power of the highest, came down upon the prophets, and through them spake of the creation of the world and of all other things.[21]

Hippolytus

In Hippolytus, who lived from about 170 to 235 CE, we again find practically the same thinking about the preexistent Christ. In his *Refutation*

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[21] *Theophilus to Autolycus*, Book 2, *ANF* Vol. 2, ch. 10, 98.

of All Heresies, he tells us that God the Father was a unity, not a trinity, and that He created the Word, or Wisdom. He is most emphatic on these points.

> The first and only (one God), both Creator and Lord of all, had nothing coeval *with Himself;* not infinite chaos, nor measureless water, nor solid earth, nor dense air, not warm fire, nor refined spirit, nor the azure canopy, but He was One, alone in Himself. By an exercise of His will He created things that are, which antecedently have no existence, except that He willed to make them.[22]

In the next chapter of the same work, Hippolytus stated:

> Therefore this solitary and supreme Deity, by an exercise of reflection, brought forth the Logos first, not the word in the sense *of being articulated* by voice, but as a ratiocination of the universe, conceived and residing *in the divine mind*. Him alone He produced from existing things; for the Father Himself constituted existence, and the being born from Him was the cause of all things that are produced. The Logos was in *the Father* Himself, bearing the will of His progenitor, and not being unacquainted with the mind of the Father. For simultaneously with His procession from His Progenitor, inasmuch as He is this *Progenitor's* first-born, He has, as a voice in Himself, the ideas conceived in the Father. And so it was, that when the Father ordered the world to come into existence; the Logos, one by one, completed *each object of creation*, *thus pleasing God*.[23]

III. A Shift in Thinking

Changes began to develop in this paradigm held so commonly by many early Christian Fathers with the appearance of Gnosticism on one hand and Modalism on the other. Irenaeus dealt extensively with Gnosticism, while Tertullian dealt with both Gnosticism and Modalism. There is an important point to be recognized here: Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach) 13:1 tells us, "Whoever touches pitch gets dirty." So, in effect, you cannot handle ideas without some of them sticking to your thinking. This, I feel, is what happened in part to Irenaeus and Tertullian. However, I will pass over Irenaeus because much of what he has written is difficult to interpret, and also because we only have a Latin translation of most of what he originally

[22] *Refutation of All Heresies, ANF* Vol. 5, ch. 28, 150.
[23] *Ibid*., ch. 29, 150-1.

wrote in Greek. But it is necessary to deal with Tertullian before moving on to figures such as Origen and Arius.

Tertullian

Tertullian, who wrote during the last decade of the second century and the first decades of the third, developed the language of later Trinitarianism, but his concept of the Trinity — developed in his conflict with Modalism after he had become a Montanist — was far different from that of Nicene Trinitarianism. Despite his hostility to philosophy, he was strongly influenced by Stoicism.[24] So to Tertullian, God was fundamentally "stuff" or matter. Consequently, he developed the term *substantia* or "substance" to denote what amounts to the physical nature of God, and in explaining the Trinity, he used the analogy of a tree with the Father as the root, the Son as a branch, and the Holy Spirit as the fruit of the tree. The Son and Spirit are "prolations" — extensions or developments. What this means, of course, is that the Father, who precedes the Son and Spirit, is eternal and before them and, hence, superior to them. Thus they are neither coeternal nor coequal with the Father. Interestingly, Tertullian's use of the term "prolation" is taken from Valentinian Gnosticism, and in his attack on Praxeas, a Modalist, he seems to be a semi-Modalist himself.[25]

Origen

Origen (c. 185 to c. 251) had a great impact in the third century with the thoroughgoing Platonizing of Christianity. Origen was the first of the Fathers to espouse the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. But to Origen, although the Son is coeternal with the Father, he is unquestionably subordinate to Him. In fact, Origen speaks of the Son as a "second god."[26] Thus Origen, like Tertullian, was a Trinitarian of a sort, but he definitely was not a Nicene Trinitarian before Nicaea. Like Justin Martyr, he believed that the Father created the universe through the Son, and when God appeared to the ancient Hebrew patriarchs, it was actually the Son, not the Father, whom they saw.

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[24] "Tertullian," *Encylopedia of Early Christianity*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990, 883.

[25] *Against Praxeas, ANF* Vol. 3, ch. 8, 602-3.

[26] *Origen Against Celsus, ANF* Vol. 4, Book 5, ch. 39, 561.

Arius

At this point, I should say something about Arius (c. 260-336), although he is much later. Trinitarians have long regarded him as the great heresiarch, but in many ways he was more conservative and more in harmony with earlier Christianity than were his opponents. Like Justin, other early Fathers, and even Irenaeus, Arius used Proverbs 8:22-31 in which, according to the Septuagint, Wisdom is said to have been made, or created, and hence is a creation or creature. Like them also, Arius regarded the terms beget and create as synonymous. Arius was, however, daringly innovative in suggesting that the Father brought forth Wisdom or the Word *ex nihilo* — a concept foreign to the early Fathers. As already shown, they considered that the Father brought forth the Son from Himself. Nonetheless, it was because of Arius' general conservatism that a majority of Eastern bishops supported him until Trinitarianism was decreed "orthodox doctrine" at Nicaea thorough the intervention of the Emperor Constantine.[27]

IV. Conclusion

Various modern theologies and Christologies pay little attention to the writings of the early Christian Fathers. In general, they attempt to look back on the Scriptures either through what has been declared "orthodox" or, going to the Scriptures themselves without putting them in their historical context, they attempt to interpret them from their own perspectives. Unfortunately, this often amounts more to eisegesis than exegesis. It is my belief, therefore, that Christians of all backgrounds must give more attention to how those Fathers understood the relationship between God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

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[27] For positive evaluations of Arius' thought, see Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981; and Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, 58-64.