

CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT: ATHANASIUS' BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN *CONTRA ARIANOS*

DONALD FAIRBAIRN*

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT. This article examines Athanasius' argument in his work *Contra Arianos*, focusing on the reasons for the order in which he addresses the biblical texts he considers. While the choice of which texts to discuss is dictated by the need to consider those texts that were evidently important in the Arians' own exegetical arguments, the order in which Athanasius discusses them derives from his desire to begin with biblical texts that clearly describe the whole sweep of biblical redemption. Texts such as Philippians 2:5-11 and Hebrews 1-2 describe in some detail the movements of humiliation and exaltation which the Son undergoes as he becomes man, and thus these texts demonstrate the need to apply any given assertion about the Son either to his eternal existence as God or to his temporal existence as man. In such texts, the literary context—the subject of the passage itself—explicitly describes the broader redemptive context. As a result, these texts constitute the starting point from which to develop interpretive principles applicable to other biblical texts in which the redemptive context is not as obvious. The article concludes with reflection on the significance of Athanasius' starting point: the story of redemption begins not with the Gospels or even with Genesis 1, but with the eternal relationship of Father to Son, a relationship we were created to share and redeemed that we might share it anew.

KEY WORDS: Context, Literary context, Redemptive context, Humiliation Exaltation

Introduction

When one considers Athanasius' arguments in opposition to those whom he styles 'Arians', there are two striking facts that stand out. First, Athanasius bases his arguments largely on biblical interpretation rather than philosophical or logical arguments, and second, that biblical interpretation has been rather understudied by scholars. A pair of *Studia Patristica* papers from the last decade amply illustrate these two points. First, James Ernest summarizes his extensive statistical research [reported in more detail in a subsequent book (Ernest, 2004)] by stating that Athanasius uses Scripture far more often and quotes it more precisely in his dogmatic-polemical writings than in any other class of his works (Ernest, 2001: 505). It seems that theological polemics drive Athanasius to the Bible and demand that he give the Bible his most careful attention. As an assertion of the second fact, Khaled

* DONALD FAIRBAIRN (PhD 1999, University of Cambridge) is the Robert E. Cooley Professor of Early Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, United States of America. Email: dfairbairn@gordonconwell.edu

Anatolios argues: 'Despite the fact that Athanasius' trinitarian doctrine is heavily invested in scriptural exegesis, close analysis of the methods whereby he anchors his trinitarian doctrine in scripture and defends this doctrine in light of problematic texts has been disproportionately scarce' (Anatolios, 2006: 117). Anatolios gives a bibliography of the few sources that do focus on Athanasius' interpretation, and he suggests that part of the reason for such lack of attention to his hermeneutics is that his exegetical arguments are couched in polemical terms, thus offending many modern readers enough that they are unlikely to give the exegetical arguments themselves much credence (Anatolios, 2006: 117).

In this article, I seek to add to the relatively small amount of literature on Athanasius' hermeneutics by attending carefully to his hermeneutical argument in *Contra Arianos*. As is well known, this crucial work, perhaps written in the early 340s, contrasts the doctrine of Arius' lost writing *Thalia* with Athanasius' own teaching, and the bulk of *Contra Arianos* consists of his own interpretation of biblical texts that are problematic for Nicene theology—perhaps the very biblical texts that Arius and others have used to argue for the inferiority of the Son to the Father. I write 'perhaps' because Athanasius' quotes from the *Thalia* in *Contra Arianos* do not show Arius directly interacting with any biblical texts, and scholars have long assumed that Arius was concerned primarily with metaphysics rather than with exegesis or soteriology. However, scholars such as Gregg and Groh (1981: 8), and Behr (2004: 14), demonstrate the importance of biblical exegesis for the thought of Arius and the Arians, and I believe we can reasonably assume that Athanasius' selection of biblical texts to consider in *Contra Arianos* is guided by the fact that these texts were the ones Arius and the Arians themselves used, even though Athanasius cites only Arius' conclusions from the *Thalia*, not his actual use of the texts in question.

My purpose in this article will be to show that Athanasius' argument amounts to an assertion that Arius and the Arians are taking these biblical texts out of context, but that what Athanasius means by the concept of context is more comprehensive and nuanced than what we perhaps mean by that word. Indeed, I believe that the way Athanasius develops his concept of context has a few important lessons to teach us today about the hermeneutical task. I will attempt to achieve my purpose by doing four things. First, I will briefly survey the conclusions of a few scholars who have focused on Athanasius' biblical interpretation, conclusions on which I will build and to which I will make some additions. Second, I will outline the overall thrust of Arius' apparent biblical argument and Athanasius' response. Third, I will explain how Athanasius forges his understanding of context at the end of *Contra Arianos*, book 1 and the beginning of book 2. Fourth, I will consider the way Athanasius applies his understanding of context to a text that is very problematic for him, Proverbs 8:22.

Part I: Scholarly Views on Athanasius' Hermeneutics

Perhaps the most important study of Athanasian hermeneutics comes in a paper by T. F. Torrance, originally published in 1970 and reprinted in 1995. Torrance asserts:

Athanasius keeps on insisting that interpretation of the Scriptures must be carried out in accordance with a right (*ὀρθός*, *rectus*) theological judgment (*γνώμη*, *διάνοια*, *φρόνημα*), in which by thinking out of the divine Word and not out of a centre in ourselves we refer human forms of thought and speech in the Scripture beyond themselves to the divine reality they signify... If we think from a centre in the incarnate Word, following the ways and works of God himself, then interpretation must allow the Incarnation to provide us with the basic centre of reference or object (the *scope*), and so we must frame our understanding and order our statements in accordance with the nature and mode of God's saving work, or *economy* (Torrance, 1995: 234).

Torrance continues:

Hence interpretation is proper and correct when it does the following: (1) keeps to the scope of the divine revelation in the Scriptures (2) respects the economical nature of God's acts and words (3) keeps to the orderly connection signified by the words and sentences of Holy Scripture in order that they may yield their own interpretation, and (4) checks and proves its statements in accordance with the rule of faith that arises out of the Church's understanding of the *kerygma* as mediated to us through the apostolic writings (Torrance, 1995: 234-5).

Of these principles (which Torrance elaborates at great length) the most important are the first and second. Interpreters must recognize that the words of Scripture point beyond themselves, that the Bible's proper scope is the divine reality of God and his Son Jesus Christ (Torrance, 1995: 235). As a result, interpreters must pay careful attention to the person to whom a given passage refers, to the circumstances of time and place, and to the subject matter of the passage (Torrance, 1995: 272).¹

Torrance's discussion grows out of Athanasius' famous distinction (not unique to him, but widely used by the church fathers) between the Word considered 'as God' and the same person considered 'as man'. In order to understand a biblical passage correctly, one must grasp whether it is referring to the Word prior to the incarnation or after the incarnation, whether it is referring to him as God or as man. All scholars who attend to Athanasian hermeneutics recognize the significance of this principle to his thought. For example, W. H. K. Boulos argues,

¹ Other scholars who have noted the significance of person, circumstance, and subject matter for Athanasian hermeneutics include Gonnett (1997: 21) and Boulos (2001: 480).

Athanasius stresses that using statements related to the Incarnation of the Logos / Son of God to draw conclusions about the preincarnate Logos / Son is erroneous. Athanasius supplies several biblical references to show preincarnate manifestations of Christ to the saints in the Old Testament (Abraham, Moses, and Daniel). In conclusion, he shows that Christ in the Church's view was not a man who afterwards became God, but one who, being God afterwards became man that he might deify us (Boulos, 2001: 479).

Margaret Beirne argues much the same thing on the basis of Athanasius' *Letter to Marcellinus*, demonstrating that he uses the Word's eternal relationship to God and his incarnation from John 1 to provide the context for many statements in the Psalms (Beirne, 2013: 96-97).

But where does this hermeneutical principle originate? Is it simply a way of forcing the texts into a Nicene theology, or does the principle actually derive from Scripture itself? Torrance insists on the second when he argues, 'Interpretation must give careful attention to the *whole context* of each passage' (Torrance, 1995: 272; emphasis mine). Torrance's contention is that for Athanasius, 'the whole context' is more than just the immediate literary context of a given passage, and I would like to build on that contention by exploring Athanasius' understanding of context in *Contra Arianos*.

Part II: Arius' Apparent Biblical Argument and Athanasius' Response

Athanasius begins *Contra Arianos* with a general treatment of the difference between Arius' understanding of the Son and his own, a treatment that spans most of Book 1. Then, in 1.37, he writes: 'Since they put forth divine declarations as a pretext, and in accord with their own interpretations force upon them a misreading, it is necessary to reply to them, to vindicate the passages, to show that they contain the correct belief [ὀρθὴν ἔχοντα τὴν διάνοιαν], and to show that our opponents are thinking wrongly [κακῶς φρονούντας]' (Athanasius, 1980: 100). From this point until the end of Book 3, Athanasius treats a series of biblical texts, apparently the very ones on which Arius and the Arians base their interpretation. Again we should remember that Athanasius does not actually cite passages from the *Thalia* in which Arius uses these biblical texts. Nevertheless, in the passage just quoted, Athanasius asserts that the Arians are basing their teaching on 'divine declarations' and states his intention to reply to them and vindicate the passages they misunderstand. From this assertion we are quite safe, I believe, in assuming that the passages Athanasius chooses to discuss are the ones Arius and others have used. The following table (derived in part from Archibald Robertson's chapter headings in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* translation of *Contra Arianos*) demonstrates the scope of Athanasius' exegetical project in this work:

Biblical Text(s)	Arius' Assertions Seemingly Based on this Text	Section of <i>Contra Arianos</i>
Philippians 2:9-10	God exalted Jesus.	1.37-45
Psalm 45:6-7	God anointed Jesus.	1.46-52
Hebrews 1:4	Jesus has become superior to angels.	1.53-64
Hebrews 3:2	Jesus was faithful to God who appointed him, just as Moses was.	2.1-11a
Acts 2:36	God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ.	2.11a-18a
Proverbs 8:22	God has created his Wisdom.	2.18b-82
John 14:10, Acts 17:28	Jesus is in God the same way we are in God.	3.1-6
John 17:3	The Father is the only true God.	3.7-9
John 10:30, 17:11	The similarity between Jesus and God lies only in the will.	3.10-25
Matthew 11:27, John 3:35, 5:30	The Son possesses only what the Father gives him.	3.26-41
Mark 13:32, Luke 2:52	Jesus did not know all things and had to grow in wisdom.	3.42-53
Matthew 26:39, John 12:27	That Jesus' soul can be troubled means he is mutable.	3.54-67

Again, the selection of these texts for consideration is driven by the apparent fact that Arius and the Arians use them. If Athanasius were to have chosen the texts himself, he would doubtless have given prominent attention to John 1, but the Arians make little use of it (for fairly obvious reasons), and so rather than treating the prologue of John's Gospel in its own section, he refers to it throughout his discussions of the passages on which Arius seemingly relies. But if the selection of texts comes from Arius' apparent fondness for them, what about the order in which Athanasius chooses to discuss them? It seems to me that Athanasius begins with those texts which most clearly demonstrate the hermeneutical principles that refute Arianism (that is, the texts in which Arius' misinterpretation is most obvious), and then he uses these principles to refute Arian interpretation of other texts

in which those principles are perhaps less obvious from the individual texts themselves. Accordingly, it is important for us to examine closely the texts Athanasius chooses to discuss first. From the passages of *Contra Arianos* dealing with these texts, I believe, we shall see what Athanasius means by context. Then I believe it will be instructive to examine the most difficult text for Athanasius' argument—and the one to which he gives the most attention—Proverbs 8:22.

Part III: Forging the Athanasian Understanding of Context

Philippians 2: The Starting Point for Athanasian Hermeneutics

Immediately after announcing his intention to refute the Arian interpretation of certain texts, Athanasius quotes Philippians 2:9-10 (dealing with the exaltation of Christ to receive the name above all names) and Psalm 45:7 (indicating that God has anointed the addressee with the oil of gladness beyond his partners), and he claims in 1.37 that the Arians—he subsequently names Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia—assert, 'If on account of this he was exalted, and received grace and on account of this he was anointed [εἰ διὰ τοῦτο ὑψώθη καὶ χάριν ἔλαβε καὶ διὰ τοῦτο κέχρισται], he received a reward of his purpose. He, having acted by purpose, is entirely of a mutable nature [τρεπτῆς ἐστὶν ὄντως ψύσεως]' (Athanasius, 1980: 100). Athanasius continues by explaining the Arian logic further: 'For if those things he had received as a reward of his purpose, he would not have received them unless he was in need. His work disclosed it then, because he had these things from virtue and improvement [ἐξ ἀρετῆς ἄρα καὶ βελτιώσεως ταῦτα ἐσχηκώς]. With reason, on account of these things, he was called both Son and God, and is not a true Son [εἰκότως ἐλέχθη διὰ ταῦτα καὶ υἱὸς καὶ θεὸς καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθινὸς υἱός]' (Athanasius, 1980: 100). Athanasius then explains that in the Arian understanding, Christ can be called 'God' only in the same way that men are called 'gods' in Psalm 82:6; that is, by virtue and grace. The fundamental issue, in his mind, is whether Christ obtained his sonship from the outside (in which case he cannot *give* us sonship with God, but can only *lead* us to it), or whether he was always and naturally the Son of God.

With this understanding of the issue in mind, in 1.40 Athanasius quotes the entire paragraph (Philippians 2:5-11), rather than just the two verses on which Arius has seemingly concentrated. He concludes:

For not from lesser things did he become better [οὐ γὰρ ἐξ ἐλαττόνων βελτίων γέγονεν], but rather, being God, he took the form of a slave, and in the taking he was not improved but humbled himself [ἐν τῷ λαβεῖν οὐκ ἐβελτιώθη, ἀλλ' ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν]. Therefore, where in these things is there a 'reward for virtue', or what kind of improvement and advance in humiliation? For if being God, he became man [εἰ γὰρ θεὸς ὦν γέγονεν ἄνθρωπος], and having come down from the height he is said 'to be exalted', where is he exalted, being God? It is clear that since God is the highest, his Word is also the highest. Therefore, how is one who is in the Father able to be exalted more and be 'like the Father in all things'? (Athanasius, 1980: 103-4).

Here Athanasius indicates, in effect, that the Arians are reading only half of the biblical passage. They argue—apparently on the basis of verses 9-10 alone—that Christ is exalted and therefore he was not originally truly God. Athanasius indicates that the passage begins with Christ who *is* equal with God and involves two movements, first a downward movement of humiliation as the Son becomes human, and then an upward movement of exaltation back to the status he had originally had as God. The Arians are missing the obvious intent of the passage by reading it out of context, indeed, by reading only the second half of it.

In 1.41 Athanasius goes on to quote Psalm 72:17 and John 1:1, 14 in support of his contention that the Word was originally equal with God, and he continues:

The statement 'he will be highly exalted' does not indicate that the substance of the Word is exalted [οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν τοῦ λόγου σημαίνει ὑψουμένην]. He was always and is 'equal to God' [Philippians 2:6], but the exaltation is of the humanity. These things were not said before, only when the Word became flesh, that it might become clear that 'he was humbled' and 'he will be exalted' are said about the human nature [ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου]... Therefore, because he was the image of the Father and because he was immortal, the Word 'took the form of a slave' [Philippians 2:7] and for us as man in his flesh [δι' ἡμᾶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐν τῇ ἑαυτοῦ σαρκί] endured death, that thus on our behalf through death he might offer himself to the Father. Therefore also as man [ὡς ἄνθρωπος], on account of us and on our behalf, he is said to be highly exalted, so that in his death we all have died in Christ so that in Christ himself again we may be highly exalted (Athanasius, 1980: 104).

In this important passage, Athanasius indicates that if the words 'humbled' and 'exalted' are to be used of One who was eternally equal to the Father, those words cannot apply to him in terms of his divine substance. Instead, we must speak of Christ in two ways, in terms of his deity and in terms of his humanity, or 'as God' and 'as man'. The humiliation and exaltation apply to him as man, in terms of his humanity.

In the same way, Athanasius believes one must speak of Christ in terms of different time periods: prior to the incarnation, during his incarnate life (in which he is humbled as a man, while yet remaining equal to God considered in his deity), and after his exaltation (in which he receives, in his humanity, the exaltation he has always had considered in terms of his deity). Athanasius writes in 1.42:

For just as man Christ died and was exalted, so as man he is said 'to receive' that which as God he always had [ὡς ἄνθρωπος λέγεται λαμβάνειν, ὅπερ εἶχεν ἀεὶ ὡς θεός], in order that such a grace given might come even to us. Having received a body, the Word was not diminished so that he should seek 'to receive' grace; rather, he deified that which he put on, and more, he offered this to the human race... this is our grace and great exaltation that even having become man the Son of God is worshiped, and the heavenly

powers will not be surprised seeing us all united in his body entering their regions (Athanasius, 1980: 105-6).

In this passage, Athanasius indicates the intent of the humiliation and exaltation. Christ went through these movements for our sake, in order that he might grant exaltation to us by granting it to his own humanity. Salvation is accomplished through the double movement of humiliation and exaltation within the person of God the Logos.

In the conclusion of his discussion of Philippians 2 (in 1.45), Athanasius elaborates even further:

Both events [death and exaltation] are said to be his, because it was his body and not another's [ἐπειδὴ αὐτοῦ ἦν καὶ οὐχ ἑτέρου σῶμα] which was exalted from the dead and taken up into heaven. And again, since the body is his and the Word is not outside it, naturally when the body is exalted he himself as man, because of the body [αὐτὸς ὡς ἄνθρωπος διὰ τὸ σῶμα], is said 'to be exalted'. If therefore he did not become man, let these things not be said about him. But if 'the Word became flesh', it is necessary that as concerning a man his resurrection and exaltation be mentioned, so that his death, also mentioned, might be an atonement for the sin of men and an abolition of death, and because of him the resurrection and exaltation remain secure for us [βεβαία δι' αὐτὸν εἰς ἡμᾶς διαμείνῃ] (Athanasius, 1980: 108-9).

A key assertion in this passage is that one would not speak of death and exaltation if the Word had not become man. But since he did become human, we must speak in this way, and indeed, his becoming human was crucial to his making atonement on our behalf.

One might wonder why Athanasius belabors these points—the need to speak of the Word both as God and as man, and the corresponding need to speak of him before the incarnation, during the humiliation, and after the exaltation. After all, the problems with the Arian interpretation of Philippians 2 are fairly obvious: as I have already stated, they are interpreting only half of the passage and clearly taking it out of context. Athanasius needs to do little more than quote the entire paragraph in order to refute Arius' interpretation here, and he does that as far back as 1.40. What does he accomplish with his extended discussion from 1.41-45?

I think the answer to this question is that Athanasius is here giving the reader a fuller understanding of what 'context' means (although admittedly without using the word itself). In Athanasius' mind, there are at least two major levels of context that govern the way one should interpret a biblical text. First, and most obvious, is the immediate literary context—the subject of the paragraph of which a given verse is a part. But second, and for Athanasius at least as important, is the context of the passage in the economy of salvation. In Athanasius' mind, a key to interpreting *any* biblical text is understanding whether it is referring to the situation before the incarnation, during the humiliation of Christ, or after the exaltation. This aspect of context is especially critical when the Word (or the Son, or Christ) is

the subject of the text in question. One must distinguish texts that describe Christ in terms of his eternal existence as Word from texts that describe him in terms of his human life, suffering, and death. Failing to do this inevitably leads one to interpret texts that speak of Christ in human terms as if they implied the eternal, ontological inferiority of the Son to the Father. This, in brief, is where Arian interpretation goes wrong.

I suggest, therefore, that Athanasius deliberately begins with Philippians 2 because in the case of this passage, the immediate literary context directly reveals the broader redemptive context. In other words, the two aspects of context are merged in this passage, since the paragraph itself describes the broader history of redemption in some detail. This in turn is why the problem with the Arian interpretation is so clear in the case of this passage. But Athanasius is doing more than simply starting with his most obvious argument first. Precisely because the two aspects of context are merged in Philippians 2, this passage serves as the most appropriate introduction to the way Athanasius will use context to refute Arian interpretation of other texts as well. Even when the biblical text in question does not directly mention the different time periods of redemptive history or the different ways of considering the Word (as God or as man), Athanasius will insist that we need to ask which time period and which state of the Word is in view. The context of redemptive history thus becomes his key hermeneutical principle, even when the text in question does not state that redemptive history is its subject. Let us now turn our attention to the way he applies this principle.

Psalms 45:6-7: A Companion Text to Philippians 2

This is a perplexing biblical text, because it is addressed to God, and yet it speaks of someone else as God, who has anointed the addressee with the oil of gladness beyond his partners. Athanasius has already mentioned this text at the beginning of his discussion of Philippians 2, and now he turns to it directly. In fact, it may be that the reason he turns to it now is that in his mind, the ideas of God exalting Christ (Philippians 2:10) and of God anointing Christ (this text) are very similar and call for the same kind of treatment. The Arians apparently take the text to mean that since Christ was anointed with the oil of gladness, he must have received that anointment as a reward, and thus he must be lower than God. In contrast, Athanasius writes in 1.46:

See, O Arians, and recognize the truth there. The psalmist said that we are all 'partners [μετόχοις] of the Lord. But if he were 'from nothing' and one of the originated things, he himself would be one of those who partake [ἦν ἓν τῶν μετεχόντων καὶ αὐτός]. But since he hymned him as God eternal, saying, 'Your throne, God, is forever and ever' (Psalm 45:6-7, Hebrews 1:8-9), and showed that all other things partake [τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα μετέχειν αὐτοῦ] of him, what is it necessary to think other than that he is different from originated things, that he alone is of the Father, the true Word, reflection, and wisdom, of which all originated things partake [ἦς τὰ γενητὰ πάντα μετέχει] and are sanc-

tified by the Spirit? Therefore, ‘he is anointed’ here not that he might become God, [for he was thus even before this], and not that he might become King, [he was so eternally, ruling, being the image of God (2 Corinthians 3:3, Colossians 1:15)], as the declaration points out) but on our behalf (Athanasius, 1980: 109).

In this passage as well, Athanasius uses both the literary and redemptive contexts to refute the Arian interpretation. At one level, his assertions amount to a claim that the Arian interpretation (focusing on the words ‘anointed’ and ‘partners’, and thus arguing for a substantial similarity between the Word and us, and a substantial dissimilarity to God) misses the most decisive element of the immediate context—the initial statement, ‘Your throne, God, is forever and ever’. This assertion demonstrates that the addressee of the Psalm is himself God, even if it is puzzling how there could be another also named God who can anoint him. The eternity of the addressee’s throne also substantiates the fact that he is God. Athanasius argues that this clear-cut affirmation at the beginning of the passage needs to govern the way one reads the latter assertion that the addressee is anointed.

At another level, however, in order to explain how God can be anointed and how he can have partners, Athanasius must turn to the redemptive context, which the passage does not clearly mention but which Athanasius has derived from elsewhere in Scripture. He claims that the Word was anointed not for his own sake, but on our behalf, and in the process he locates the anointing in the Son’s becoming human for our salvation. Athanasius goes on in 1.47 to describe Christ’s baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, arguing that both of these were for our sake, as he cleansed us and sent the Holy Spirit to anoint us by cleansing and anointing his own humanity. Thus, Jesus’ own later anointing—clearly a part of the drama of redemption, and equally clearly an event that pertains to his humanity—becomes the key for understanding the anointing of Psalm 45:7. Thus in Athanasius’ mind the Psalm is speaking prophetically of the human ministry of the incarnate Son, who is himself God and yet will be anointed in his humanity by God at his baptism.

Hebrews 1:4 and 3:2: Part of a Parallel to Philippians 2

These two biblical texts affirm that Christ has become better than the angels and that he has been faithful to God who appointed him, and the Arians apparently use the texts to argue that the Son is a creature and a work (see *Contra Arianos* 1.53, 2.1). These are two of several statements in Hebrews 1-3 that—if read apart from the economy of salvation—might imply that the Son is less than God, a creature, or mutable. But the overall movement of Hebrews 1-2 is a movement of God the Son down to us, not a movement of a creature up to the status of God. The One who was equal with God (the exact representation of God’s being and the one by whom he made the world) came to us (becoming for a little while lower than the angels)—becoming human without ceasing to be God—and lived in two ways at once, as God and as man. In doing so, he accomplished our redemption. In this

way, the early chapters of Hebrews closely parallel Philippians 2, which means that they too suit Athanasius' purposes well. Here, as in Philippians, the extended passage describes redemptive history clearly and comprehensively enough that the literary context supplies the redemptive context that one needs to understand the specific assertions of individual texts correctly.

In the process of responding to the Arian interpretation of Hebrews 1:4, Athanasius explicitly articulates an interpretive principle that we have previously seen him develop implicitly. He writes in 1.54, 'And it is necessary, as it is fitting to do for all of divine Scripture, even here to expound faithfully the time when the apostle spoke and the person and subject about which he spoke, lest the reader, being ignorant of these and other matters, might miss the true meaning' (Athanasius, 1980: 118). As mentioned in part II, several scholars have noted these three criteria. Most significant here is Dominique Gonnert, who also notes that Hebrews is close to the theology of humiliation and exaltation in Philippians 2 (Gonnert, 1997: 21). To his claims I think it is fair to add that this similarity to Philippians 2 is likely the reason Athanasius chooses to discuss these passages early in his journey through Arius' (seeming) favorite texts. If the two aspects of context that he believes one needs to consider in interpreting any passage are the immediate literary context and the redemptive context, then any passage that contains both of those within itself is fruitful to consider sooner rather than later.

In his discussion of Hebrews 3:2, Athanasius further emphasizes that the Word has always been the Father's Son, but that he later became flesh and was made a faithful servant through the incarnation. In 2.7, he emphasizes that the text in question is dealing with the time after the incarnation, and thus with the Word as man, not the Word in his eternal existence. Then in 2.8 he asserts:

The expressions 'He became' [in John 1:14] and 'He was made' (in Hebrews 3:2), must not be understood as if the Word, considered as the Word, were made [οὐχ ὅτι ὁ λόγος, ἢ λόγος ἐστὶ, πεποιήται], but that the Word, being Framer of all, afterwards was made High Priest [ὅτι λόγος ὦν δημιουργός ὑστερον πεποιήται ἀρχιερέως], by putting on a body which was originate and made, and such as He can offer for us; wherefore He is said to be 'made' (Athanasius, 1994: 352).

Finally, in 2.9 Athanasius calls the readers' attention to the early chapters of Hebrews in their entirety, and concludes:

Who can read this whole passage (going back to chapter 2) without condemning the Arians, and admiring the blessed Apostle, who has spoken well? for when was Christ 'made', when became He 'Apostle', except when, like us, He 'took part in flesh and blood'? And when became He 'a merciful and faithful High Priest', except when 'in all things He was made like unto His brethren'? And then was He 'made like', when He became man, having put upon Him our flesh. Wherefore Paul was writing concerning the Word's human Economy [περὶ τῆς κατὰ τὸν ἀνθρώπου οἰκονομίας], when he said,

‘Who was faithful to Him that made Him’, and not concerning His essence (Athanasius, 1994: 353).

Acts 2:36: A Companion Text to Hebrews 1-3

Athanasius’ treatment of this text (which indicates that Jesus was ‘made’ both Lord and Christ) after the two texts from Hebrews is very much akin to his treatment of Psalm 45:7 after Philippians 2:9-10. In both cases, the major focus of his attention is a passage which describes the economy of salvation fairly completely (Philippians 2 and Hebrews 1-2), and in both cases he also deals with a short passage that has obvious verbal parallels to the longer passage that is foremost in his mind. I suggest, then, that there is a thoroughly logical order to the texts Athanasius chooses to address first, among the many texts congenial to Arius with which he must deal. He wishes to begin with the texts that form a part of, or are closely related to, the biblical passages that most clearly describe the whole economy of redemption.

Conclusions to Part III

From the biblical texts Athanasius chooses to discuss first, and from the way he handles them, we can begin to glimpse his convictions about the nature of biblical context. It is not merely that he insists a given text be read in light of the economy of redemption, rather than just in light of its immediate context. That of course is true (and well known), but there is more going on here. Rather, it is that he sees the economy of redemption as being *part of* that immediate context. For Athanasius, context is not just a concept that describes words in relation to the words surrounding them. It also describes *realities* as they are situated in the realities of eternity, time, and space. To say this a different way, a biblical text is not merely a group of words to be interpreted in light of other words. It is a referent pointing to the One who stands at the center of Scripture, and thus at the intersection of eternity and human redemptive history. In order to describe this One accurately, an exegete must situate each biblical statement about him in the context of his divine, eternal existence, his incarnation, and his human ministry as a man. In some biblical passages, the literary context itself directly describes the entire history of redemption that constitutes the ultimate context to any biblical passage.

Thus, such biblical passages deserve one’s first and most scrupulous attention, because they lay out the redemptive context—the person, the event, and the time—which one will need in order to interpret other passages. Such passages constitute the *logical* starting point for interpretation, because one needs to grasp the whole of redemptive history in order to understand Scripture’s individual statements well. This is especially the case when one is considering difficult Old Testament passages like Proverbs 8:22, to which Athanasius turns next.

Part IV: Proverbs 8:22 in Light of Athanasius' Understanding of Context*Grappling with the Ancient Debate about Proverbs 8*

Patristic discussions about Proverbs 8 are often baffling to modern readers, for two major reasons. First, most contemporary Old Testament scholars do not think the 'Wisdom' who is lauded in the chapter is the Son (although one should note a major exception in Treier (2014: 44-57), who argues not so much that Lady Wisdom *is* the Son, as that the Son is the resolution of the mystery Proverbs 8 presents). Second, ancient Greek commentators like Athanasius rely on points of grammar and word choice in the Septuagint that have no parallels in the Hebrew text. The crucial verses are 22-26, reproduced below from the ESV, the Septuagint, and an English translation of the Septuagint:

English Translation from Hebrew (ESV)	Septuagint	English Translation of Septuagint
The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. (8:22)	κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ (8:22)	The Lord made me the beginning of his ways for his works. (8:22)
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (8:23)	πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐθεμελίωσέν με ἐν ἀρχῇ (8:23)	He established me before time <i>was</i> in the beginning. (8:23)
When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. (8:24)	πρὸ τοῦ τὴν γῆν ποιῆσαι καὶ πρὸ τοῦ τὰς ἀβύσσους ποιῆσαι πρὸ τοῦ προελθεῖν τὰς πεγὰς τῶν ὑδάτων (8:24)	Before he made the earth; even before he made the depths; before the fountains of water came forth. (8:24)
Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth. (8:25)	πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη ἐδρασθῆναι πρὸ δὲ πάντων βουνῶν γεννᾷ με (8:25)	Before the mountains were settled, and before all hills, he begets me. (8:25)
Before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. (8:26)	κύριος ἐποίησεν χώρας καὶ ἀοικήτους καὶ ἄκρα οἰκούμενα τῆς ὑπ' οὐρανόων (8:26)	The Lord made countries and uninhabited <i>tracks</i> , and the highest inhabited parts of the world. (8:26)

We should note here that the Septuagint translates the Hebrew verb in 8:22 (יָנִיךְ) with ἔκτισέν με, 'he created me', whereas the word could also be rendered 'he possessed me' (so the ESV) or 'he acquired me'. The central issue between the Arians and Athanasius is the interpretation of ἔκτισεν in verse 22 and γεννᾷ ('he begets') in verse 25.

Athanasius' Response to Arius' Interpretation of Proverbs 8

The Arian insistence that the Son is a creature apparently derives from their taking the verbs ἔκτισεν and γεννᾷ as synonyms and their referring both to the existence of the Son. Athanasius, in contrast, places great emphasis on the fact that the first verb (ἔκτισεν) is aorist and the second (γεννᾷ) is present, and he argues at length (*Contra Arianos* 2.18b-56) that Proverbs 8:25 is referring to the Son's eternal relationship to the Father, but 8:22 is referring to the economy of salvation. He who is eternally begotten from the Father has been made or created as a man for our salvation.

This argument raises the urgent hermeneutical question of how Athanasius knows where to place these verses in the economy of salvation. After all, 'he created me' *does* come earlier in the passage than 'he begets me'. Athanasius uses the verb tenses ('he begets me' in the present, indicating a timeless state, versus 'he created me' in the aorist, representing an action in time) as well as other clues from the literary context to situate these two states / events in their eternal or redemptive context. He writes in 2.56:

For what ought He, when made man, to say? 'In the beginning I was man?' this were neither suitable to Him nor true; and as it beseemed not to say this, so it is natural and proper in the case of man to say, 'He created' and 'He made' him. On this account then the reason [ἡ αἰτία] of 'He created' is added, namely, the need of the works; and where the reason is added, surely the reason rightly explains the lection. Thus here, when He says 'He created', He sets down the cause [τὴν αἰτίαν], 'the works'; on the other hand, when He signifies absolutely the generation from the Father [τὴν δὲ ἐκ πατρὸς γέννησιν ἀπολελυμένως σημαίνων], straightway He adds, 'Before all the hills He begets me'; but He does not add the 'wherefore [οὐ διὰ τί]', as in the case of 'He created', saying, 'for the works', but absolutely [ἀπολελυμένως], 'He begets me', as in the text, 'In the beginning was the Word' [John 1:1]. For, though no works had been created, still 'the Word' of God 'was', and 'the Word was God'. And His becoming man would not have taken place, had not the need of men become a cause [εἰ μὴ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἡ χρεία γέγονεν αἰτία]. The Son then is not a creature (Athanasius, 1994: 379).

Here Athanasius emphasizes that the begetting of the Word has no 'wherefore [διὰ τί]', no cause [αἰτία], attached to it, as does the creation of the Word as man. Furthermore, the begetting is described with a present-tense verb and yet is located 'before all the hills', thus indicating that it is an eternal begetting, not an action in time tied to a particular purpose. In contrast, the creation of the Word in time, his becoming man, is tied to a 'wherefore', the need of humanity for salvation.

In addition, Athanasius dwells significantly on the statement in Proverbs 8:22 that the Lord created me (the Word) as a beginning of his ways. He ties this idea to John 14:6, arguing that the Word was created as man in order to inaugurate a new way of salvation. In 2.65 Athanasius claims:

And thus since the truth declares that the Word is not by nature a creature, it is fitting now to say, in what sense He is 'beginning of ways'. For when the first way, which was through Adam, was lost, and in place of paradise we deviated unto death, and heard the words, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (Genesis 3:19), therefore the Word of God, who loves man, puts on Him created flesh at the Father's will [namely ὁ φιλόανθρωπος τοῦ θεοῦ λόγος βουλήσει τοῦ πατρὸς ἐνδιδύσκειται τὴν κτισθεῖσαν σάρκα] that whereas the first man had made it dead through the transgression, He Himself might quicken it in the blood of His own body, and might open 'for us a way new and living', as the Apostle says, 'through the veil, that is to say, His flesh' (Hebrews 10:20).

Here again, Athanasius finds specific clues in the immediate literary context to enable him to locate a given assertion in the redemptive context.

Conclusions to Part IV

Given the ancient assumption that Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 is the Word, the seemingly direct statement that the Word is a creature in 8:22 poses a great exegetical challenge for a Nicene theologian. It is here, perhaps, that Athanasius is most vulnerable to the charge of simply reading his own theology into the passage, when the Arian interpretation might seem to be more faithful to the text. But as we have seen, even here Athanasius can make a plausible claim that the Arians are reading the passage out of context. The verb tenses and the clues from the immediate context serve to place the different assertions in Proverbs 8:22 and 8:25 into their proper places in time or eternity. Therefore, the link between the literary context and the redemptive context—while not nearly as obvious as in Philippians 2 or Hebrews 1-2—is still sufficient to enable Athanasius to refer one assertion to the incarnation and the other to the Son's eternal existence.

It must be said, of course, that the differences between the Hebrew text and the Septuagint here—most notably the fact that in Hebrew both verbs [יָצַד and יָצַד] are perfective—make it rather difficult for modern interpreters to appropriate Athanasius' argument directly. Be that as it may, however, the way Athanasius tackles this difficult text—using the Greek as he has it, and working from legitimate clues in the immediate context to tie different assertions to their place in the broader redemptive context—commends itself as a rigorous and helpful method.

After his lengthy treatment of Proverbs 8 (comprising more than a third of the entire space he spends on biblical passages apparently important to the Arians), Athanasius turns his attention in Book 3 of *Contra Arianos* to statements in the Gospels that Arius uses to argue for the inferiority of the Son to the Father. After the rigorous exegetical exercises required by Proverbs 8:22, these Gospel statements are relatively straightforward, and Athanasius is able easily to demonstrate that they apply to the economy of salvation, not to the Son's eternal existence. Here again, the principle is the same: Athanasius applies each individual state-

ment to the Word either in his divine nature or in his human nature, to his eternal existence or to the economy of redemption.

Overall Conclusions

It is well known, of course, that Athanasian interpretation revolves around assigning biblical statements to either eternity or economy, and in that sense there should have been few surprises in this article. What I hope our attention to *Contra Arianos* has shown, though, is how thoroughly and directly Athanasius' hermeneutical principle grows out of the texts themselves. If one wishes to distinguish the appellations 'exegetical' and 'hermeneutical', one can affirm that Athanasius' hermeneutical principle *is* exegetically-derived. He begins his understanding of Scripture from the passages which provide a sweeping view of the entire movement from eternity to time, from God's existence to his work on behalf of our salvation. Working from these texts, he elaborates his exegetical-hermeneutical principle, and with that principle in mind, he looks for clues in other texts indicating where they should be placed in the redemptive framework. Such an approach can hardly be called arbitrary, and may even deserve to be considered a sophisticated interpretive method.

It is also noteworthy that Athanasius' method (if one chooses to call it that) stands as a gentle indictment of our contemporary approaches to Scripture, in at least two ways. First, his approach gives a mild rebuke to those methods which confine themselves too narrowly to the immediate context of a given passage, failing to see that passage in its proper place in the grand drama of redemption. Second, and perhaps a good deal less obviously, Athanasius' approach stands at odds even with some contemporary 'theological hermeneutics'. While Athanasius would surely agree with those who argue for the importance of intentionally bringing theology into the sphere of interpretation, he might very well look at the various theological starting points (covenant, community, the people of God, even dispensations by which God interacts with people) and suggest that we are beginning in the wrong places. The drama of redemption, in Athanasius' mind, does not begin with us—whether one considers us individually or in community—nor does it even begin with creation. It begins with the life of God, the eternal relationship of God to his own proper Son. Thus, the story of Christianity does not begin with the Gospels or even with Genesis 1. It begins earlier, before there was even time. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Relatively few biblical texts actually take the story back that far, but those which do are the ones Athanasius believes should constitute our starting point in biblical interpretation. From these passages—most notably John 1, Philippians 2, and Hebrews 1-2—he derives the structure that provides the key to situating other texts in their proper context. Perhaps we would do well to learn from Athanasius (and others like him in the early church) the significance of starting there.

Bibliography

- Athanasius (1980) *Against the Arians 1. The Trinitarian Controversy*. In Rusch, WG (ed), *Sources of Early Christian Thought*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980.
- Athanasius (1994) *Against the Arians 2.1-25, 3.42-67*. In Schaff, P and Wace, H (eds) *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 4*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Reprint 1994.
- Athanasius (1998) *Contra Arianos 1-2*. In Metzler, K and Savvidis, K (eds) *Athanasius: Werke, Band I. Die Dogmatischen Schriften, Erster Teil, 2. Lieferung*, 109-260. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Athanasius (2000) *Contra Arianos 3*. In Metzler, K and Savvidis, K (eds) *Athanasius: Werke, Band I. Die Dogmatischen Schriften, Erster Teil, 3. Lieferung*, 305-381. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Anatolios, K (2006) When was God without Wisdom? Trinitarian Hermeneutics and Rhetorical Strategy in Athanasius. *Studia Patristica* 41:117-123.
- Behr, J (2004). *The Nicene Faith: Formation of Christian Theology*, volume 2. New York, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Beirne, MM (2013) St Athanasius and the Scriptures, Exemplified in his Letter to Marcellinus. *Phronema* 28: 89-106.
- Boulos, WHK (2001) St. Athanasius' Doctrine of Grace in *Contra Arianos I*. *Studia Patristica* 36: 477-481.
- Ernest, JD (1993) [Athanasius of Alexandria: The Scope of Scripture in Polemical and Pastoral Context](#). *Vigiliae Christianae* 47(4): 341-362.
- Ernest, JD (2001) Athanasian Scripture Citations. *Studia Patristica* 36: 502-508.
- Ernest, JD (2004) *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gonnett, D (1997) L'Utilisation Christologique de l'Épître aux Hébreux dans les *Orationes Contra Arianos* d'Athanase d'Alexandrie. *Studia Patristica* 32: 19-24.
- Gregg, RC and Groh, DE (1981) *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress.
- Sumner, D (2012) The Instrumentalization of Christ's Human Nature. *Studia Patristica* 52: 129-138.
- Torrance, TF (1995) The Hermeneutics of Athanasius. In *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Kannengiesser, C (1982) *Holy Scripture and Hellenistic Hermeneutics in Alexandrian Christology: The Arian Crisis*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture.
- Treier, DJ (2011) *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* [Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible]. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos.
- Twomey, V (1995) Saint Athanasius: *De synodis* and the Sense of Scripture. In *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers*, 85-118. Dublin: Four Courts Press.