CHAPTER 4

Proof of Hilary’s Physicalism

While there is a trend in Hilary scholarship toward greater acceptance of Hilary’s soteriology as physicalist, there is not yet a general consensus on the importance of this claim. In his 2002 monograph on Hilary’s soteriology, Buffer accepts Hilary’s physicalist teaching of Christ’s assumption of all humanity but mentions it only in passing.¹ Doignon, in his voluminous writings on Hilary, never once mentions the question of physicalism but translates a passage from the In Matthaeum in a way that would seem to exclude the possibility.² Likewise the phenomenon of connecting physicalism with Platonism, begun with Harnack (et al.) has not completely disappeared.³

In this chapter, I will show that Hilary’s soteriology, throughout his entire career, manifests the characteristics of a physicalist model of redemption. From his earliest work, the In Matthaeum—before he had any contact with non-Latinized Platonism (which I discussed in the previous chapter)—to the late Tractatus super Psalmos, Hilary teaches that Christ assumes all of humanity in the incarnation.

Hilary is a Latin, non-Platonic physicalist, an anomaly not allowed in the standard classifications of patristic soteriology that trace back to the nineteenth century German Protestant division of patristic redemptive models into the Greek physicalist model and the Latin moral or atonement model. The critique of physicalism outlined by the nineteenth century German Protestants was only one part of their larger project that served to codify “Latin” and “Greek” soteriological systems.⁴ In short, according to this codification,

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¹ For Buffer’s acceptance of Hilary as a physicalist, see Salus in St. Hilary, 124: “In taking flesh, Christ assumed ‘all flesh,’ all humanity, so that all men are ‘in Christ’ by that very fact.” However, Buffer offers no treatment or explanation of Hilary’s teaching of Christ’s assumption of all humanity, considering it to be of minor importance.

² Doignon translates an ambiguous passage from the In Matthaeum in a way that may indicate, not only indifference, but even denial of the presence of this teaching in Hilary’s thought. He translates “Erat in Iesu Christo homo totus . . .” as “Il y avait en Jésus-Christ totalement un homme” (SC 254, p. 109). The question here is whether “homo totus” in this context means “an entire man” or something like “the entirety of humanity humanity.”

³ Anyanwu, Christological Anthropology in St. Hilary, 97; Schwager, “Salvation,” 1426.

the Greek theory, termed “physicalist” or “mystical,” lends so much weight to the hypostatic union and its transformative power that it places humanity’s key salvific moment in the incarnation. This centrality of the incarnation is complemented by the Greek soteriological emphasis on deification or divinization. In contrast to Greek emphases, the Latin theory, termed the “moral” or “atomenment” theory of redemption, understands the key soteriological moment as Christ’s atoning death. This theory has a juridical, rather than a mystical, nature.

Harnack includes Hilary as the single Latin to participate in what he and his predecessors term the Greek trajectory. Harnack’s placement of Hilary on the “Greek” side, along with Irenaeus, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria has encouraged the connection of Hilary with Platonism and/or the Greek physicalists that has marred much of 20th century scholarship on Hilary’s soteriology.

Curiously, Harnack’s placement of Hilary, a Latin, on the Greek side of the soteriological codification has not led to a re-evaluation of this Greek/Latin division. Not only is Hilary himself not a Greek but, while Hilary’s exile does lead to a productive interaction with the Greek homoiousians, Hilary’s physicalism pre-dates his exile and is not influenced by Greek Platonism or other Greek physicalists; certainly not by Cappadocian theology as Harnack argues. In this skewed scholarship, if Hilary is a physicalist, he must somehow be “Greek.” As with all generalizations, the systemization of Latin and Greek soteriologies is useful only to a point. The case of Hilary, a Latin with what has been termed a “Greek” theology, is an important example of the limits of this codification. Hilary’s soteriology, which shows that physicalism is neither the exclusive property of the Greeks nor dependent on Platonic influence, calls for a reevaluation of the classification of patristic soteriology.


6 For a discussion of these two different theories by advocates of this system of classification, see Wild, Divinization of Man, 57–65; and McMahon, De Christo Mediatore, 63–64.

7 See Chapter 1 for a detailed treatment on problems in twentieth century Hilary scholarship. Harnack is not the only scholar to include Hilary with the Greek physicalists. See J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 375, 377–86, 397. See also, Jossua, Salut: Incarnation ou mystère pas- cal, 13: “Il se propose surtout de résumer les positions classiques en histoire des doctrines sur la sotériologie des Pères grecs à laquelle on associe en général saint Hilaire de Poitiers . . .”