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BOOK REVIEW

FLORIAN ZACHER, *MARIUS VICTORINUS ALS CHRISTLICHER PHILOSOPH: DIE TRINITÄTSTHEOLOGISCHEN SCHRIFTEN DES GAIUS MARIUS VICTORINUS UND IHRE PHILOSOPHIE-, KIRCHEN- UND THEOLOGIEGESCHICHTLICHEN KONTEXTE* (PTS 80; BERLIN / NEW YORK: DE GRUYTER, 2023)

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BOOK REVIEW

Zacher, Florian, *Marius Victorinus als christlicher Philosoph: Die trinitätstheologischen Schriften des Gaius Marius Victorinus und ihre philosophie-, kirchen- und theologiegeschichtlichen Kontexte*. Patristische Texte und Studien 80. Berlin und New York: De Gruyter, 2023. VIII+588 pages. ISBN: 978-3-11-099277-9.

With this *opus magnum* of nearly 600 pages on Marius Victorinus' *Theological Treatises* ("die trinitätstheologischen Schriften des Marius Victorinus"), a PhD thesis in Theology, completed in 2021 under the direction of Charlotte Köckert at Erlangen, Florian Zacher (Z.), has established himself among the currently leading experts on Victorinus. The book is an impressive achievement, which reaps the benefits of many decades, if not centuries, of (particularly textual) scholarship. In its first section, Z. himself points out how long it took from the 16th to the 20th century to prepare a textual basis for the study of Victorinus' writings and then to develop a comprehensive understanding of his work and thought. All this time Victorinus remained in so many respects an obscure author of a complexity and depth that was, if not entirely overlooked and ignored for its opaqueness, misunderstood. Victorinus-scholarship was a niche pursuit and even in the late 20th and early 21st century the number of experts remains small. Among this group Z.'s reputation has been growing for about a decade, even preceding the publication of the present book. As a glance in its bibliography reveals, Z. began publishing substantial work on Victorinus around 2016. Thus, readers can be assured that the present book, especially if they consider its length, has not been rushed but is a work of maturity and depth. Its quantity and sheer size does not belie its quality as a work of impressive scholarship and theological ingenuity.

Victorine scholarship is fairly niche, even by the standards of early Christian studies, and it is in many respects a borderland, if not a 'twilight zone,' or a 'no man's land' (what ancient Greeks might have called μεθόριον), an area where the paths of those studying different fields cross and where they look at the same material from often very different perspectives. Experts interested in Victorinus for one reason or another include historians of Latin grammar and rhetoric, ancient and medieval philosophy, biblical exegesis and theology, especially the so-called Arian controversy and Augustine, and philosophers and theologians. Z. skilfully navigates the minefields laid by all these specialists and although it is clear that as a patristic scholar and graduate of the 'Erlangen school' of Arian studies he has his focus sharpened on studying Victorinus in the context of a certain period during the the rise of the Homoiousians around Basil of Ancyra in the late 350s, against whom in particular Victorinus writes, and the waning of radical 'Old Nicenes' such as Marcellus of Ancyra, against whom Victorinus delimits himself on the other side, without being, as a radical champion of the ὁμοούσιος, entirely hostile to them, Z. does also do justice to other aspects of Victorinus' work and thought. The final chapters of the book, which deal with Victorinus' theology, on the Trinity, on matter and the human body, and on the soul (pp. 236-523), are masterpieces in their own right.

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The book is divided into seven chapters, which are, oddly, not numbered but given letters, A to H. The first chapter deals with the history of research (pp. 1-49) beginning with Johann Sichard's *editio princeps* from 1528 and ending with a positioning of the present book (aims, methodology and outline of the work). The second chapter (B) is a discussion of the very few ancient biographical testimonies on Victorinus in the works of Jerome and Augustine (pp. 50-101). In addition to discussing these Z. asks whether one might also glean biographical information from Victorinus' *Commentary on Cicero's Rhetoric*. Biography also looms large in Chapter C (pp. 102-156), where the intellectual milieu is explored in which Victorinus thrived. Questions regarding dates and addressees of his works are discussed here and specifically also the ecclesiastical situation in the late 350s. The investigation then moves on to the literary structure of the *Theological Treatises* (D, pp. 157-235), before Victorinus' theological thought is put under the microscope, the Trinity (E, pp. 236-354), matter and the human body (F, pp. 355-439), and the soul (G, pp. 440-523). In Chapter H (pp. 524-536) the results of the study are summarised; the final pages, 537-588, are dedicated to bibliographies and indices. Taking into account that the book is already 588 pages long it may be frivolous to point out that readers might also have hugely benefited from a subject index, perhaps even, dare one mention it, an index of names. As it is, there are only indices on biblical references and references of ancient and mediaeval authors, although, needless to say, these are of course enormously useful too. Perhaps indices of subjects and names are nowadays deemed unnecessary as names and subjects can easily be searched in the e-book version, although this is not the same as when a hard copy is equipped with a set or two of well compiled indexes.

Z. is to be commended for using Albrecht Locher's Teubner edition of the *Theological Treatises* from 1976. He does acknowledge the importance of Hadot's 1971 CSEL edition and points out that the 1960 SC edition by Hadot and Henry too is of continued relevance, not least for its translation and extensive notes. But he recognises the philological acuity of Locher and rightly rebukes (p. 20) those who may think that his work was superfluous, or who go as far as calling it a "waste of time." Z. then continues, criticising in turn Hadot's *Quellenforschung* approach (pp. 20-9). In his view it had a destructive effect on Victorine studies. He speaks of Hadot "smashing up" ("zertrümmerte") the *Treatises*, fragmenting them into short pieces of source texts whose origins were rather diverse (Gnostic, Biblical, Neoplatonic). In Z.'s view this risks losing sight of Victorinus' own focus and agenda. Z.'s assessment of Hadot's work seems however exaggerated and is itself at risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Far from tearing up Victorinus' works Hadot uncovered a rich philosophical and religious discourse in which Victorinus was engaged and which involved more than Christian bishops exchanging blows over the rights and wrongs of how precisely to formulate the relationship between God Father, Son and Spirit. Victorinus did that too, to be sure, but he was using a much more colourful toolbox than his episcopal contemporaries, with whom he engaged in the *Treatises*. What Hadot's work underlines is that Victorinus should not be reduced to just another voice in the Arian debate.

Z. is right rejecting (p. 46) the view expressed in earlier scholarship that Victorinus' thought was not fully Christian because Victorinus' conversion and baptism took place very late in his life. But while he is keen to disperse doubts about the orthodox nature of the *Treatises*, the question may be asked whether identifying them as orthodox exhaustively characterises them. True, as author of a dissertation in historical theology Z. is not wrong

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focusing on that aspect of Victorinus' work and for slotting it into the mechanism of the Arian debates of its day. But readers should note the limitations of that approach. It does not familiarise us, in Matthias Baltes' words, with "the whole Victorinus."

Z. insists that it would be wrong to separate philosophy and theology in Victorinus. He therefore intends to present him as a Christian philosopher, as stated in the title of the book. However, he should perhaps have presented him more accurately and to the point as a philosopher of a particular kind of orthodox Christian theology; for it is that which Z. sees in Victorinus. He is looking at the final stage of his *Theological Treatises* and ignoring the development that enabled him to complete this masterpiece and is still evident in it. Z. is meticulous in sorting Augustine's account of Victorinus' conversion in *Confessions* 8 (p. 69) into plausible and implausible parts. For example, Victorinus' engagement with Christian thinking before his baptism, according to Z.: plausible. But Victorinus' adherence to pagan religion with elements of mystery cults and Egyptian 'zoolatry', "absurd forms of polytheism:" implausible. Z. parades here what appears to be a lack of understanding of what religion may have been in late-antique Rome. He gives the impression that for Victorinus, being "rhetor urbis Romae" was in religious terms a neutral occupation. However, one has to ask, what was socially and culturally expected of a man in such a position in fourth century Rome? Were there no obligations that would have been anathema to Christians, while there were no such limitations from a pagan perspective regarding Christian material? Would it not have been possible for the pagan Marius Victorinus to ask what difference baptism would make for him, since he was already fully versed in Christian thinking, while being equally versed in pagan, Gnostic, Manichaean and Egyptian Hermetic thinking? Later, once baptised, he could display the relevant material as 'mere learning'. But he did still use it in his *Theological Treatises*.

Z.'s assessment of Victorinus' philosophical training and his view of philosophy as rhetor (p. 70) is similarly myopic. Z. observes that Victorinus' concept of philosophy is removed from Cicero's. What he does not consider is that both philosophy and rhetoric have moved on since Cicero. Their form and purpose in fourth century Rome is starkly different from the first century BCE. It is revealing that at the end of the relevant section (p. 95 fn. 175) Z. remarks – almost as if it was an afterthought – that the relationship of philosophy and rhetoric in Victorinus might be looked at more thoroughly in the context of Neoplatonism.

Z. briefly considers Victorinus as a commentator in the context of his commentary of Cicero's *De inventione*. But he does so merely in technical terms. He revisits Victorinus the commentator in a section on his Pauline commentaries (p. 140-1). There he observes the link which Victorinus himself makes between exegesis and prophecy, in an exegesis of Ephesians 4:11-12. At this point he speculates that Victorinus perhaps saw his role as that of a prophet in the sense of an ecclesiastical office and that this could have been a motivation for him when writing his *Theological Treatises*. This is a very good point to be sure. However, when dealing with the *Theological Treatises* Z. does not look at their commentarial features as significant for his investigation but treats them as products of *Kontroverstheologie*. Again, this is not really a criticism, because Z. does an excellent job in Chapters E-G, except perhaps that he could have said more clearly that this is what he is doing.

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Regarding Victorinus' the commentator's prophetic self-perception: This is certainly plausible, also regarding his motivation when writing the *Theological Treatises*. But in order to take this more seriously one would have to treat the *Treatises* more than Z. does as commentary, which would also involve identifying and discussing lemmata, authoritative texts, as Hadot did, though in a way Z., as already mentioned, rejects. And one ought to be under no illusion that even though Victorinus may have seen himself in that role, it is doubtful that the bishops engaging in the debate would have had a similar view of him. Z. is initially upbeat about the reception of Victorinus' work (p. 140-1) but has in the end to admit: "…Victorinus [wurde] kaum rezipiert" (p. 534-5).

But not only was there hardly any reception of Victorinus in the later theology of the Church, Victorinus, the illustrious "rhetor urbis Romae" with a statue on the Forum of Trajan seems to have sunk into obscurity as a Christian thinker even during his lifetime. Were it not for Augustine's account in *Confessions* 8, problematic as it is, there would be hardly anything that we know of his time in Rome, especially around the mid-350s, the years during which his conversion and involvement in theological controversy took place and his *Theological Treatises* were written. An externally attested historical event during this period was the famous visit to Rome of the emperor Constantius II in spring 357, elaborately narrated by Ammianus Marcellinus. Z. retells the wellknown narrative but is starved of details on Victorinus, because there are none (pp. 144-46). It is striking that we hear nothing about Victorinus in connection with this event, especially since we hear of him again in connection with the emperor Julian's law against Christian teachers four years later. Given such lack of sources there is a risk of indulging in speculation. Did Victorinus hold an oration on the occasion of that visit? Ammianus reports that orations were held. But although one can speculate about an oratorial involvement of Victorinus in one form or other, doubts are in order (p. 145 n. 193). Conversely, of Themistius, in some respects Victorinus' younger counterpart in Constantinople, Z. writes that he was among Constantius' entourage and "wrote" ("verfasste") an oration on the occasion (p. 194). He may have delivered it as well. In contrast to Victorinus, whose career had been built on senatorial advancement in Latin, pagan, Rome, and peaked in 394 with the erection of his statue, after which he converted to Christianity, Themistius, although pagan, was a rising star in the new, Greek, Christian, imperial capital of Constantinople, promoted at that time by the emperors of the Constantinian dynasty. Although such aspects are not at the centre of Z.'s interest, he nevertheless relates them accurately and in meticulous detail.

Z.'s discussion of the structure of the *Theological Treatises* (pp. 156-235) engages mainly with Hadot. Z. acknowledges early on that the *Opus ad Candidum* (*Ep. Cand*. I 1 – *Adv. Ar*. I 47) is designed as a correspondence ("als eine Art Briefwechsel", p. 160). He draws an analogy between "letters to and fro" and "arguments and counter-arguments" ("Rede und Gegenrede"). Perhaps more context could have been provided on the technique in late antiquity of presenting philosophical discourse in form of (fictionally constructed) epistolary exchanges, and the scope could have been widened, considering the fact that there are other (authentic) letters (by Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia) in the overall collection of the *Treatises* as well. Z. shares the dominant view (put forward by Nautin and Simonetti), which was more recently called in question by Drecoll, that Candidus, Victorinus' epistolary interlocutor, is a fictional character (pp. 167-69). In Z.'s view the intricate rhetorical structuring of *Ep. Cand*. I 1 – *Adv. Ar*. I 47 constitutes strong evidence

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of the constructed nature of this part of the *Treatises* and of the fictionality of Candidus' person and philosophical position (p. 171-2). Victorinus counters Candidus' argument that the Son is created from nothing because God is nothing (meaning that God is transcendent, beyond all being) with the question what Candidus understands by being. In Victorinus' view, since God is transcendent and absolute, he is, in a sense (and here he agrees with Candidus), beyond being, but (and here he disagrees with Candidus), as God is also the cause of all being, this cannot mean that God is not himself being. Above all, it cannot mean that the Son is created out of nothing (p. 176).

Z. points out that Victorinus' argument develops progressively. Victorinus begins by presenting two Arian documents from an early stage in the Arian controversy, authentic letters by Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia. These serve him well not only as evidence in their own right, but also later in the debate, because they can be used as authoritative reference texts against which to assess Candidus' position. Victorinus own authoritative reference texts are the Bible and the Nicene Creed (the latter containing the ὁμοούσιον, p. 181-2). Z. here touches upon a set of topics that are relevant for the understanding of the Arian controversy in general and for Victorinus' *Theological Treatises* in particular, namely the role of (authoritative) letters, 'confessions of faith', and the Bible, and thus the relationship between canon and theology. In a sense, Victorinus' work 'imitates' on a small, academic, scale, one could perhaps say, under 'laboratory conditions' and on a high level of consistent philosophical reflection, the 'real world' debate that was going on at the time, which also involved the exchange of letters and confessions of faith, and polemical debates, but which was much messier than his *Treatises* and did not produce any neat results. In fact, as Victorinus well knew, if Nicaea really meant what many Old Nicenes thought – and claimed – it meant, it was itself heretical.

Victorinus therefore struggled as much with Old Nicene positions as with Homoean positions. He produced Candidus' letters, which he had written by himself, and refuted them in a rhetorically constructed correspondence. But after the basic and foundational refutation of Candidus' position he loses interest in that position because it is not at the heart of his concern with the ὁμοούσιον. Already from *Adv. Ar*. I 23 but certainly from cc. 28-42 he engages with the position which is apparently closest to his and which was deliberately developed to reconcile ὁμοούσιον and ὁμοίον, namely ὁμοιούσιον (p. 182-83). It is the latter concept which he rejects most vehemently, because ultimately it, too, just as ὁμοίον, presupposes an ontological difference ("Wesensverschiedenheit", p. 188) between Father and Son and is therefore heretical and soteriologically dysfunctional.

Following an article by Václav Němec in *Rheinisches Museum* 160 (2017) 161-193, Z. radically rethinks the purpose of the rest of *Adv. Ar*. I, i. e. cc. 48-64, which Hadot designated as Ib (p. 194-201). Since, as Němec pointed out, 'unity of being' between Father and Son (ὁμοούσιον) has been firmly established as a principle by the end of Ia (i. e. *Adv. Ar*. I 47), it is in itself no longer discussed in Ib. What is discussed in Ib, i. e. anything to do with identity and difference (Z.: "Alterität") between Father and Son, is discussed on the basis of the ὁμοούσιον. Victorinus concludes that this unity of being is especially soteriologically relevant: the whole human being, body and soul, is saved in Christ. Here (p. 201) as well as later on (pp. 260-5; 303-6; 383-411) Z. will look at cc. 49f. in particular, where Victorinus defends this principle by engaging with a Gnostic source (the so-called Coptic-Gnostic *Zostrianus*). In the remaining parts of the work, *Adv.*

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Ar. II and III, Victorinus argues for the biblicity of the concept of God as οὐσία (II) and reflects on the inner dynamic of that concept by relating being (*esse*), life and living (*vita*, *vivere*), and 'inner knowing' (*intellegentia*, *intellegere*, pp. 210-17) in God. Z. completes Chapter D with two more sections on the brief treatise *De homoousio recipiendo* and the three hymns appended to the *Theological Treatises* (218-30), before rounding the chapter off with an overall conclusion (230-35).

It is not possible in this brief review adequately to discuss the remaining Chapters E to G, which take up the rest of the volume (pp. 236-523) and deal in depth and at length with three main themes of Victorinus' theology, the Trinity (E), matter and the human body (F), and the soul (G). But perhaps a brief summary along the common thread can be attempted which lends a suprising degree of coherence and simplicity of purpose to this expansive intellectual edifice, the first attempt in the history of Christian theology to develop a comprehensive and philosophically informed reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of the ὁμοούσιον as introduced at Nicaea (p. 240). Not yet using the New Nicene expression of one οὐσία and three ὑποστάσεις Victorinus' theology is restricted to formulating a concept of the trinitarian God, Father, Son and Spirit, as one οὐσία and one ὑπόστασις (p. 250). He therefore has to factor in paradox and to defend himself against the charge of teaching contradictions and sowing confusion (p. 254-6). Z. shows that Victorinus was aware that the reason for this intellectual impasse was the uncertainty ("Unbestimmtheit") regarding the being (or non-being) of the transcendent God, which affected the understanding of God as intellect. Many Christian theologians before Victorinus had grappled with this impasse. Victorinus does so by resorting to the use of some Gnostic and Platonist sources, e. g. the anonymous 'Turin' commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* (pp. 260-65). As a consequence he finds many ways of speaking of the Son as the manifestation of the Father and the Father as a 'being' who 'is' before all being (pp. 265-306). Crucially, thus Z., Victorinus adapts the δύναμις-ἐνέργεια scheme pioneered by Marcellus of Ancyra (whom he otherwise vehemently attacks) to express the being of the Son (Logos) as both 'in' or 'with the Father' and 'in' or 'for the world' (pp. 306-11). The latter expression exposes the common thread mentioned earlier, namely Victorinus' "achievement" (Z.) to synthesize ("zusammendenken") 1) a theology based on the concept of the trinitarian Christian God as ὁμοούσιον, 2) a philosophically grounded reflection on God's salvific will as essentially the way in which God relates to the world, and 3) an understanding of God as revelation of the Father's hidden being in Christ (pp. 312-354, especially pp. 352-54).

The efforts of Hellenizing early Christian theologians to explain their complex ideas about God in as many words are often met with incomprehension and even ridicule, and it is indeed justified to ask what a concept such as the ὁμοούσιον, or οὐσία as a concept referring to God have to do with the biblical faith. But it is worth pointing out that for a theologian such as Marius Victorinus the ultimate purpose of his intellectual work was precisely to express that biblical faith. The authoritative basis for Victorinus' thinking was that faith, which rendered his thought fundamentally different to a non-Christian philosopher of his time, for example a Platonist. Victorinus assumed that God created the world out of nothing, including matter; that God created human beings, body and soul, as one; that human beings, at risk of losing their original purpose, require God's help towards eternal salvation; and that God saves humanity and the world including matter.

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Victorinus, therefore, unlike Platonists and Gnostics, thinks of matter and the human body as created by God, and he believes in a resurrection of the body and in a restitution of the world (pp. 355-439). The point, however, is that Victorinus developed his theology using the philosophical toolbox of his age, which is why his outcomes may look rather different from theologies of other periods, let alone of today.

Like other early Christian theologians (Z. briefly refers to Tatian) Victorinus is keen to express the biblical doctrine of God creating the world in its entirety, matter included, as compatible as possible with the view expressed in Plato's *Timaios* that the Demiurge orders pre-existent matter (pp. 364-366). A solution for him is to relate the 'creation' of matter to the Father and its ordering to the Son. But in this model only the second activity can be considered as 'creation of the world.' The first is a kind of 'proto-creation' that coincides with the "first movement of the Son from the Father, which is also the cause of matter" (p. 366). What we have here is a Christianized version of the creation in two stages held also by many Middle- and Neoplatonists. Matter, for Victorinus, is then also morally determined (pp. 366-383). Victorinus does not consider it outright as a good but as something that is necessary for creation. It has in itself aspects of the good of creation and aspects of the nihilum out of which it was created in the process of the movement of the Son. In itself it is 'dead'. It requires soul to live and to be creation. Victorinus thinks here in the first instance of an irrational soul, which makes matter the seat of irrational powers, which drag human beings, who have also a part in this reality, away from God and their original destiny, downwards, towards irrationality and death.

It is in this context that Victorinus situates the creation and salvation of the human being, body and soul (pp. 383-417). Coming from a Gnostic angle, Victorinus rejects the Gnostic position and assumes a salvation of the human body not because he thinks so highly of matter but because he conceives of matter, from which humans are created as bodily beings, as already ensouled. Thus, for Victorinus, salvation of the body and of matter as a whole, consists in the "spiritualisation of creation" ("in der vollkommenen Vergeistigung der Schöpfung," p. 417). Of course, more crucially for Victorinus, human beings have not only bodies from matter ordered by a soul below the level of a rational mind-soul, human beings are also created as mind-souls "entangled" in matter (p. 426-7) and tasked with learning that they will be liberated from this entanglement towards the spiritualisation mentioned above only through faith in Christ (p. 432). It remains unclear in Victorinus, whether in the end the entire creation will be spiritualised, or whether there will be a last judgement at which Christ will decide who will be saved and who will forever be excluded from salvation (p. 433-4). Victorinus thinks in these terms because, like, for example, Origen, he believes in the pre-existence of the soul and its fall and re-ascent (pp. 450-63). He also conceives of the soul as image of the Trinity. For him, it is in the first instance the human soul of which it can be said that it is created in God's image (pp. 464-475). And he distinguishes different instantiations of 'the soul', a universal soul as principle or fountain ("Quellseele") of created life, which "mediates between the intelligible being in the Logos and the plurality of material being in the world" (p. 503) and which is therefore manifest as a collective force in the world (though not identical with the Platonic 'world soul') and as individual mind souls. The latter are individuated (as *species*) in bodies but substantially one at the level of reason (ibid.). These differentiations have rarely been analysed in such detail as here by Z. (pp. 476-504).

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Crucially, for Victorinus, thus Z., it is the soul, which Victorinus refers to as 'similar' (ὁμοιούσιος) to God's οὐσία, which the Logos incarnate 'assumes, gives up, and resumes' (John 10:17), as he is born, dies, and rises from the dead (p. 505). And it is not just the 'rational soul' which Victorinus refers to here, but the soul as a whole, irrational parts included (p. 516-7). Thus Victorinus rejects on the one hand Platonist and Gnostic teachings which understand the human soul as ὁμοούσιος, of one being with God, and on the other hand Christian teachings, which present the divine Logos, the second person of the Trinity, as merely similar to the God's οὐσία, ὁμοιούσιος.

The driving force of Victorinus' theological thought, however, the common thread that holds his *Theological Treatises* together, this Z. has established beyond doubt, is soteriological and, implied in this, epistemological in nature (pp. 520-523). His basic question is: "Why is the human soul [scil. the ensouled human being] in the world as a being that is in need of salvation, and how is this salvation executed?" (p. 521). The significance of Z.'s dissertation thus transcends the study of Victorinus' work alone. But it has answers, potentially, for all those who ask themselves (and are prepared to listen) why in the fourth century Christians put such huge efforts into explaining a concept (ὁμοούσιον) which on the face of it seemed to have little to do with the core of their faith, as they understood it. Above all, it may encourage readers to study Victorinus' *Theological Treatises* too. Or to conclude with Victorinus' very own words (*Adv. Ar*. I 53): *Audi, ut dico*…, or perhaps better (IV 4): *Audi, lector*…

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