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How St. Basil and Origen Interpret Genesis 1 in the Light of Philosophical Cosmology

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How St. Basil and Origen Interpret Genesis 1 in the Light of Philosophical Cosmology

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In the early Church, the interpretation of Genesis 1 was a locus for the interplay between natural philosophy and theology. St. Basil (d. 379), drawing upon the thought and works of Origen (d. 253/54), believes that Christians should use secular knowledge (*παιδεία*), including philosophical cosmology, in the service of the explication of Scripture and Christian doctrine. However, sometimes natural philosophy and Scripture are at odds. In this dissertation I examine three specific instances of apparent conflict between natural philosophy and Scripture that both Origen and Basil encounter in their exegeses of Genesis 1: the nature of matter (Gen 1:2b), the super-heavenly water (Gen 1:6-7), and astrology (Gen 1:14b). The purpose of this examination is to develop a hermeneutical framework from which such problems can be approached. Such a framework I find in Origen's famous metaphor, which Basil adopts, of philosophy as the handmaid of theology. In confronting all three apparent conflicts, they both draw upon the works of philosophers, even when attacking certain philosophical notions, such as that of uncreated, eternal matter or astrological fatalism.

I conclude that the handmaid metaphor is ambiguous in that it operates on two principles. On the one hand, philosophy is subordinate to theology and as such must yield to its doctrines.

On the other hand, philosophy, as handmaid, is also useful to theology, so its ideas are not to be rejected out of hand. Though both writers use philosophy, they disagree on its limits, and in this the tension between philosophy as helper and philosophy as subordinate is revealed. For Origen, philosophy's ability to judge what is and is not rational helps the interpreter of Scripture by ruling out irrational interpretations. Basil criticizes Origen for this and defends a literal interpretation of Genesis against philosophical objections in order to uphold the superiority of theology to philosophy.

This dissertation by Adam David Rasmussen fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Historical Theology approved by Susan Wessel, Ph.D., as Director, and by Philip Rousseau, D.Phil., and William McCarthy, Ph.D., as Readers.

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INTRODUCTION

Just as the servants of philosophers say concerning geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric and astronomy that they are handmaids to philosophy, we say this very thing about philosophy itself with regard to Christianity. – Origen (*Phil.*, XIII, 1)¹

The relationship between the Bible and science is a current, but not a new, question. It was already grappled with in the works of some of the earliest interpreters of Scripture, who struggled over the relationship between the Bible and the natural philosophy that they knew.² In this dissertation I shall examine the writings of Origen and St. Basil, both Greek theologians of renown from the third and fourth centuries, respectively, to see how they responded to the philosophical cosmology of their day. As I shall show in chapter 1, Origen and Basil are a natural pair: each received a secular education and studied the Greek philosophers, yet left secular learning behind for a life dedicated to theology.

¹ ἴν', ὅπερ φασὶ φιλοσόφων παῖδες περὶ γεωμετρίας καὶ μουσικῆς γραμματικῆς τε καὶ ῥητορικῆς καὶ ἀστρονομίας, ὡς συνερίθων φιλοσοφία, τοῦθ' ἡμεῖς εἰπώμεν καὶ περὶ αὐτῆς φιλοσοφίας πρὸς χριστιανισμόν.

In Joseph Trigg's translation, there is a typographical error on p. 211 where the word *geometry* appears a second time where it should read *astronomy*. I have preferred the traditional *handmaids* to Trigg's *adjuncts* for *συνερίθων*. I cite this letter as "*Phil.*, XIII," as that is how it has been preserved (see chapter 1).

Origen, "La Lettre à Grégoire," in *Remerciement à Origène suivi de la Lettre d'Origène à Grégoire*, edited by Henri Crouzel, SJ, SC 148 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969), 185-95.

———, "Letter to Gregory," translated by Joseph W. Trigg in Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 1998), 210-13.

² I wish to distinguish "natural philosophy" as it was practiced in the ancient world from modern natural "science," as a discipline based on the empirical method associated with the great scientists of the seventeenth century. I admit that the distinction is artificial since those same scientists also called their work "natural philosophy," the specialized use of the word *science* being more recent. The distinction is thus rejected by some, e.g., David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, Prehistory to A.D. 1450*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-3.

The horns of the Bible-science dilemma are well known and well worn: one is sacrificed to the other. Christian fundamentalists reject much (or all) of modern science, while atheistic scientists reject much (or all) of the Bible. The third-century theologian Tertullian has been seen (whether rightly or wrongly) as a model for the former with his infamous dictum: *Quid Athenis et Hierosolymis?* (*De praescr. haer.*, 7.9)³ As for the latter, contemporary examples are so abundant that it would be almost pedantic to name them.⁴ Yet it is possible to seek a middle ground. Many Christians today look for a mediation or conciliation between scientific cosmology and Christian faith.⁵ The same was true of Christians of the past. Some scholars have shown how the Fathers of the Church approach the cosmological problem and what solutions they give.⁶ It is here that this study belongs, as I shall examine, in Basil and Origen, the role that *hermeneutics* plays in mediating between biblical and philosophical cosmology.

For Basil's interpretations of biblical cosmology, it is necessary to look closely at his nine homilies on the hexaemeron (i.e., the "six days" of creation of Genesis 1).⁷ What makes

³ Tertullian, *Traité de la prescription contre les hérétiques*, edited by R. F. Refoulé, OP, SC 46 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1957).

⁴ Thus I will mention only the most renowned: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006).

⁵ For example, from an astrophysicist, Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); from a physicist, Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, rev. ed. (NY: HarperCollins: 1997); and from a theologian, James A. Wiseman, *Theology and Modern Science: Quest for Coherence* (NY: Continuum, 2002). Obviously many more books could be listed.

⁶ For example, R. A. Norris, Jr., *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (NY: The Seabury Press, 1965), which covers St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen (pp. 129-56). Also of importance for my purposes, though he does not directly treat how the Fathers engage natural philosophy specifically in their interpretations of Genesis 1, is the recent book by Peter Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). He discusses Origen's interpretations on pp. 94-118 and Basil's on pp. 124-140.

⁷ Two additional homilies exist, about the creation of humankind (Gen 1:26), in the MSS, which may or may not come from Basil himself. Of their authenticity Philip Rousseau says: "I regard 10 and 11 as essentially the

these homilies a particularly fertile field for cosmological-theological research is that in them the Bible's sacred cosmogony becomes for Basil a springboard for many reflections on physics, cosmology, and biology, as well as for analogies for human mores drawn from the animal world. In these reflections, Basil draws upon his own education in philosophy, alluding to many different natural-philosophical sources.⁸ That he comes off as a bishop well versed in natural philosophy gives his words a certain weight, although it is not certain exactly to what extent Basil is drawing upon the works of the philosophers themselves versus commentaries (*ὑπομνήματα*) and epitomes (*ἐπιτομαί*).⁹

In addition to these philosophical sources, I think that Basil also utilizes, without saying so, the theological and exegetical works of Origen. This is only natural for him, because he shares a familial connection to Origen by way of the evangelist St. Gregory the Wonderworker. Origen, like Basil, is raised as a Christian and also receives a secular education. Moreover, like Basil he experiences the problem of the relationship between the Bible and philosophy personally, as they choose in which direction to mark out their own lives and careers. I believe

work of Basil (a view fully defended by the editors), although they are clearly less finished" (*Basil of Caesarea* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 319n1).

Basil (?), *Sur l'origine de l'homme (Homélies X et XI de l'Hexaéméron)*, edited by Alexis Smets and Michel van Esbroeck, SC 160 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1970).

——— (?), *On the Human Condition*, translated by Verna E. F. Harrison, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 31-64.

⁸ As indicated in the extensive footnotes to the most recent critical edition: Basil, *Homilien zum Hexaemeron*, edited by Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta and Stig Y. Rudberg, GCS, n.s. 2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997).

⁹ See E. Amend de Mendieta, "La Préparation et la composition des neuf 'Homélies sur l'Hexaéméron' de Basile de Césarée: Le problème des sources littéraires immédiates," *Studia Patristica* 18 (1986): 349-67.

that this personal importance of the subject to them makes them especially suitable subjects for research, for they did not engage philosophical cosmology disinterestedly or ignorantly.

In his hexaemeral preaching on Genesis 1, Basil considers three specific, cosmological problems that Origen also encountered: the nature of matter (Gen 1:2a), the water above the sky (Gen 1:6-7), and astrology (Gen 1:14b). These three problems will thus be the focus of my study (being chapters 3-5), though they do not exhaust everything that both authors have to say about cosmology. In addressing these three cosmological problems, Basil draws upon his knowledge of Origen while also displaying an independence of thought that I believe reveals an underlying hermeneutical difference between the two theologians about how the Bible relates to natural philosophy. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how Basil's responses to the three above-mentioned cosmological questions, which were raised by his philosophically-informed reading of Genesis 1, converge and differ from the answers Origen gives to the same questions, and then to interpret what these similarities and differences say about how each theologian thinks the Bible should be read in the light of philosophical cosmology.

My central thesis is that the overall, hermeneutical framework that they share, though it differs in details, is well expressed by a metaphor of Origen's: *natural philosophy is a handmaid to scriptural interpretation*. As a handmaid, knowledge gained from natural philosophy can *help* the interpreter, even to the point of affecting how certain scriptural passages should be understood. Yet, at the same time, philosophy remains always *subordinate* to Scripture. Each theologian discovers and works out, in his own ways, the practical applications of this metaphor, and I would say broadly that Basil assigns a more circumscribed role to philosophy than does Origen.

Like anyone engaging in a work of historical theology, I do so with the belief that what I discover has something to say to Christians today and is not of purely historical interest. Speaking of the profound impact being made on Christians by the scientific and technological revolutions of the mid-twentieth century, R. Norris, Jr., prefaces his work on the Fathers' cosmology by saying: "The question of the Christian appropriation of secular scientific and philosophical ideas [. . . has] been canvassed before, most notably perhaps in the early centuries of the Church's existence, and not without constructive result. It may be, therefore, that some light can be shed on the modern problem by study of its ancient analogue."¹⁰ Likewise Peter Bouteneff, speaking of the modern Christian debate about whether Genesis 1 should be taken literally, writes at the beginning of his book: "The evolution of the early Christian interpretation of Genesis 1-3 is of more than antiquarian interest: like all good history, it has the potential to illuminate the present."¹¹ Their sentiments are also my own.

¹⁰ Norris, *God and World*, 5.

¹¹ Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, ix.

CHAPTER 1

Secular Education (παιδεία)

In this chapter I shall show that Basil and Origen are a natural pair by examining and specifying how Basil is connected to Origen both through Basil's grandmother and, more importantly, by their shared experience and evaluation of secular education (*παιδεία*). Being educated as children in secular disciplines, they neither totally condemn it nor assign it an absolute value. In general, they both affirm that secular education, while flawed and even potentially dangerous, can be usefully pressed into the service of, and at the same time subordinated to, Christianity. In other words, it is a handmaid. The close resemblance between their positions indicates not merely that Basil and Origen had similar childhood experiences, but that the former consciously sees himself as a disciple of the latter, in whom he finds a theologian worthy of imitation.

ORIGEN

The main source for Origen's biography, other than what little can be gleaned from his own extant writings, is book VI of Eusebius's *Historia ecclesiastica*.¹ According to Eusebius, Origen was "devoted to the word of God from the start,"² having been raised a Christian by his father, who was thought to have been St. Leonides (*Hist. eccl.*, VI, 1), who received the martyr's

¹ Eusebius, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, edited by Eduard Schwartz and Theodor Mommsen, 3 vols., GCS, n.s. 6 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999).

———, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson, revised and edited by Andrew Louth (London: Penguin Books, 1989).

² *ὅποιας ἐξ ἐκείνου περὶ τὸν θεῖον λόγον προαιρέσεως ἦν.*

crown under Septimius Severus in 202/03.³ At his father's insistence, Eusebius tells us, Origen "in addition to the encyclical (*ἐγκυκλίων*) curriculum pursued the study of Holy Writ with equal vigor" (ibid., VI, 2.7).⁴ In fact, Eusebius describes the boy as so inquisitive about the Bible that his father scolded him for asking too many questions, though he was secretly glad about his son's zeal, to the point that he would reverently kiss his bare chest while he was sleeping, regarding it as "the temple of a divine spirit" (ibid., VI, 2.11).⁵ This vigor for Scripture is complimented by his zeal for martyrdom, both his father's and his own (supposedly thwarted by his mother hiding his clothes, ibid., VI, 2.5). Jean Daniélou, however, cautions against accepting Eusebius's account of Origen's youth uncritically since "allowances must be made for the element of exaggeration that went into the hagiographical style. . . . Eusebius saw the six-year-old Origen as he was in his maturity."⁶ On the other hand, as Henri Crouzel says, "It does not follow from this hagiographical tone that we should brand as fabrication everything that Eusebius tells us."⁷ Though historical details about Origen's childhood and parents can be neither proved nor disproved, that such stories exist for Eusebius to include in his biography of the man is a testament to the reputation he enjoyed as a devout Christian. Eusebius does not

³ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), s.v. "St. Leonides." From this is derived the year of Origen's birth as 185/86. Cf. Henri Crouzel, SJ, *Origen*, translated by A. S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 2.

⁴ *πρὸς τῇ τῶν ἐγκυκλίων παιδείᾳ καὶ τούτων [τῶν θείων γράφων] οὐ κατὰ πάρεργον τὴν φροντίδα.*

Williamson translates *ἐγκυκλίων* as "normal."

⁵ *θείου πνεύματος ἔνδον ἐν αὐτοῖς [τοῖς στέρνοις] ἀφιερωμένου.*

⁶ Jean Daniélou, *Origen*, translated by Walter Mitchell (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 5.

⁷ Crouzel, *Origen*, 5.

invent these stories, but, having heard them, passes them on as a testament to Origen's character. In any case, for my purposes what is most important in Eusebius's account of Origen's childhood is that he was educated in both the Greco-Roman, "encyclical" curriculum and, as a Christian, in the Bible.

As for Origen's religious education, in addition to the instruction in the Bible that he received at the hands of his father, Eusebius tells us that Origen received catechetical instruction from Clement (*ibid.*, VI, 6). Crouzel, however, is hesitant to trust Eusebius on this point since "Origen does not quote Clement by name and . . . seems to have reacted against some features of his teaching and language."⁸ Although this could be true even if Origen was a former pupil, it is generally agreed by modern scholars that Clement's school was not catechetical in nature but a private, philosophical school like that of Justin.⁹ Thus a direct link between Clement and Origen should not be assumed automatically.

Origen, in a letter to a former student, happens to list some of the "encyclical subjects" (*ἐγκύκλια μαθήματα*) of the Greco-Roman curriculum: geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric and astronomy (*Phil.* XIII, 1).¹⁰ What is here called "grammar" refers to the fourfold process of reading a text: correcting (*διόρθωσις*) the MSS of the text, reading (*ἀνάγνωσις*) it aloud,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.* See also *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Alexandria, School of," Daniélou, 9-10; John A. McGuckin, "The Life of Origen (ca. 186-255)," in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, edited by John Anthony McGuckin, 1-23 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 4; Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 49.

¹⁰ Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 18.3, where Eusebius says that Origen taught his students "geometry, arithmetic, and the other preparatory subjects" (*γεωμετρίαν καὶ ἀριθμητικὴν καὶ τὰλλα προπαιδεύματα*).

explaining (ἐξηγήσεις) it, and finally passing judgment (κρίσις) upon it.¹¹ Origen's list differs from the classical list of four subjects: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.¹² Perhaps Origen finds arithmetic of limited usefulness for Christians, since he does not mention it, though I would not wish to read deeply into this omission.¹³

After his father's martyrdom, the young Origen began a lucrative career as a teacher of "grammar" (*Hist. eccl.*, VI, 2.15). *Grammar* here could also be called "Greek literature," for it would have been the Greek myths that he and his students were reading, through the fourfold grammatical method mentioned above. In the absence of other catechists, who may have fled the city to avoid persecution, he also became a catechist (*ibid.*, VI, 3.1). Eusebius says that the bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius, appointed the seventeen-year-old Origen as the principal of the catechetical school (*ibid.*, VI, 3.3), though Joseph Trigg sees it more as retroactive episcopal approval of the only man available to fill the position.¹⁴ This interpretation makes sense since Eusebius says that it was some interested pagans, not the bishop, who first approached Origen

¹¹ H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, translated by George Lamb (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 165-70. Cf. Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 32; Heine, *Origen*, 61; Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 77-81.

¹² See *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "Education, Greek," which indicates that rhetoric was regarded as a higher study beyond the basic four subjects. According to Trigg, *ibid.*, 31-32, grammar also belonged to elementary education, but was regarded separately from the other four.

¹³ Peter W. Martens thinks that "he likely has a full range of academic disciplines in mind" (*Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 29).

¹⁴ Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy*, 53.

(ibid., VI, 3.1).¹⁵ Holding two different teaching positions created a conflict in Origen, as

Eusebius explains:

He decided, however, that the teaching of literature did not harmonize with training in theology, and promptly broke off his lectures on literature, as useless and a hindrance to sacred studies. Then, with the worthy object of making himself independent of other people's assistance, he parted with all the volumes of ancient literature which had hitherto been his most cherished possessions, and if the purchaser brought him four obels a day¹⁶ he was satisfied. (Ibid., VI, 3.8-9)¹⁷

The young Origen thought that Greek literature (*οἱ γραμματικοὶ λόγοι*) was useless for theology and even a hindrance to it. This passage is immediately followed by a description of his embarking upon the ascetical life ("philosophic life," as they called it), which is characterized by intense Scripture study, sleep deprivation and sleeping on the floor, fasting and abstinence from wine, and going around barefoot (ibid., VI, 3.9, 12). René Cadiou sees here in Origen an enthusiastic "abjuration of pagan literature" that goes hand-in-hand with an embrace of asceticism and bodily mortification,¹⁸ which leads to his alleged autocastration (ibid., VI, 8.1-3). However, John McGuckin denies that Origen really castrated himself since Origen himself never mentions it and even condemns and derides a literal interpretation of Matt 19:12c ("Some have

¹⁵ Cf. Heine: "The point at which Eusebius introduces this remark into the story implies that Origen had been teaching for some time before Demetrius made this decision" (*Origen*, 62).

¹⁶ A modest stipend: "Six obols were the equivalent of one denarius, which represented a very low daily wage" (Crouzel, *Origen*, 8). "Less than the regular wage of a poor laborer" (McGuckin, "Life," 5n29).

¹⁷ ἀσύμφωνον ἡγησάμενος τὴν τῶν γραμματικῶν λόγων διδασκαλίαν τῇ πρὸς τὰ θεῖα παιδεύματα ἀσκήσει, μὴ μελλήσας ἀπορρήγνυσιν ἅτε ἀνωφελῆ καὶ τοῖς ἱεροῖς μαθήμασιν ἐναντίαν τὴν τῶν γραμματικῶν λόγων διατριβήν, εἶτα λογισμῷ καθήκοντι, ὥς ἂν μὴ γένοιτο τῆς παρ' ἐτέρων ἐπικουρίας ἐνδεής, ὅσαπερ ἦν αὐτῷ πρότερον λόγων ἀρχαίων συγγράμματα φιλοκάλως ἐσπουδασμένα, μεταδούς, ὑπὸ τοῦ ταῦτα ἐωνημένου φερομένοις αὐτῷ τέτταρσιν ὀβολοῖς τῆς ἡμέρας ἤρκειτο.

¹⁸ René Cadiou, *Origen: His Life at Alexandria*, translated by John A. Southwell (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1944), 25-28.

made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”) in his commentary on that book (*Comm. in Matth.*, XV, 1-5).¹⁹ McGuckin sees the story as one of many lies told about Origen to discredit him, which Eusebius employs to make Demetrius look hypocritical for first reassuring Origen over what he had done, then later publicizing it (*Hist. eccl.*, VI, 8.3-4). However, the mere fact that Origen condemns the literalistic reading of Matt 19:12c does not necessarily mean that he could not have been guilty of the same literalistic misreading in his youth. Henry Chadwick has said that the story of Origen’s castration, lacking documentary attestation by Eusebius, is on the level of gossip.²⁰ Of course, sometimes gossip is true! Trigg, on the other hand, does not doubt it both because it “would not have seemed as morbidly pathological in Origen’s time as it does now” and because “Eusebius had no motive for passing on a piece of information to Origen’s discredit.”²¹ Crouzel, *Origen* says the same thing.²² Indeed, I wonder whether this experience, if indeed it really happened, may have helped Origen to formulate his theory that the literal meaning of some passages of Scripture is to be rejected.²³

¹⁹ McGuckin, “Life,” 6-7.

Origen, *Matthäuseklärung: Die Griechisch Erhaltenen Tomoi*, edited by Ernst Benz and Erich Klostermann, Origenes Werke 10, GSC 40 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1935).

²⁰ Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1966), 67-68.

²¹ Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy*, 53-54. However, the motivation, according to McGuckin, was to make Demetrius look bad.

²² Crouzel, *Origen*, 9n32.

²³ On this subject, see chapter 2.

Crouzel interprets the significance of Origen selling his books of pagan literature as follows: “This gesture of selling his library marks a complete renunciation of secular studies.”²⁴ Eusebius’s account does give that impression. However, Pierre Nautin casts doubt here by reading this account as serving Eusebius’s apologetic intent of preserving Origen from the criticism that he was too enamored with pagan culture (i.e., *παιδεία*).²⁵ It is possible that Origen’s motivation for selling his books was purely practical and economic, as he shifted his career from grammarian (i.e., teacher of literature) to full-time catechist, and had nothing to do with a belief that the study of Greek literature is a hindrance to biblical studies. Indeed, this is plausible since Eusebius explicitly says that the reason he sold his books (as opposed to the reason he gave up his literary career) was to gain modest financial independence.²⁶ However, Origen’s own words about the Greek myths confirm Eusebius’s interpretation (*pace* Nautin), as I shall show.

Origen, throughout his corpus, sometimes registers his opinion of Greek *παιδεία*. I have found four sentences of his – two more positive, two more negative – that, I think, can be harmonized to present a coherent account of his viewpoint. In the more positive statements, Origen speaks of the usefulness of secular education for Christian theology. In a passage from a letter to a former student, he famously says: “Just as the servants of philosophers say concerning geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric and astronomy that they are handmaids to philosophy, we say this very thing about philosophy itself with regard to Christianity” (*Phil.*, XIII, 1; quoted at

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Pierre Nautin, *Origène: Sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 40. See Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 19, for an obvious example of his attempt to defend Origen from this accusation.

²⁶ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 68, offers a different explanation: Origen sold his books in order to live a life of poverty. Although he keeps the proceeds for himself rather than donating them to the poor, they are meager and perhaps below the actual value of the books.

the beginning of this dissertation). The metaphor of the handmaid is inherently ambivalent: secular learning, philosophy in particular, is helpful for theology, yet it is subordinate, as a handmaid must always obey her mistress. In an analogy that St. Augustine later made famous in the West, Origen says that Christians should make use of secular learning the way the ancient Israelites made use of the material goods they took from the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus (ibid., XIII, 2). However, there is a caveat: secular education must be used wisely, as it can easily lead, and has in fact often led, to heresy since it is of pagan extraction (ibid., XIII, 3). In accordance with this sentiment, in response to the pagan Celsus's claim that Christians are "totally uneducated rustics" (*ἀπαιδευτοτάτοις ἀγροίοις*, *C. Cels.*, III, 58, my translation), Origen states that he encourages young people to study the encyclical curriculum and philosophy before studying Christian theology:

If you were to show me teachers who give preparatory teaching in philosophy and train people in philosophical study, I would not dissuade young men from listening to these; but after they had first been trained in an encyclical (*ἐγκυκλίαις*) education and in philosophical thought I would try to lead them on to the exalted height, unknown to the multitude, of the profoundest doctrines of the Christians. (Ibid.)²⁷

However, again there is a caveat: in the same passage he also warns against reading Greek comedies and poems due to their sexual immorality.

²⁷ *εἰ δὲ παραστήσεις μοι διδασκάλους πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν προπαιδεύοντας καὶ ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ γυμνάζοντας, οὐκ ἀποτρέψω μὲν ἀπὸ τούτων τοὺς νέους, πειράσομαι δὲ προγυμνασασμένους αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐν ἐγκυκλίαις μαθήμασι καὶ τοῖς φιλοσοφούμενοις ἀναβιβάσαι ἐπὶ τὸ σεσμὸν καὶ ὑψηλὸν τῆς λεληθυίας τοὺς πολλοὺς Χριστιανῶν μεγαλοφωνίας.*

Quoted in Martens, *Origen*, 31. Chadwick translates *ἐγκυκλίαις* as "general."

Origen, *Contra Celsum*, edited by M. Marcovich, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (Brill: Leiden, 2001).

———, *Contra Celsum*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

Somewhat in contrast to these statements, in his homilies Origen sometimes seems to dismiss secular education. Speaking of a wide variety of secular subjects (namely grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, dialectic and syllogisms, geometry, astronomy, and music), he says in a homily on Psalm 36: “And thus the learned, through all these very diverse and varied disciplines, in which they learn nothing about God’s will, have collected great riches indeed, but of sinners” (*In. Ps. 36, 3.6, my translation*).²⁸ This statement reveals a certain ambivalence: secular learning is “great riches,” but because it does not involve the study of God, it belongs to the pagans (“sinners”) from whom it originates. Its value is not absolute. Likewise, in his homily on Noah’s ark, giving a moral interpretation of the building of the ark, he contrasts secular books with the Bible:

If there is anyone who, while evils are increasing and vices are overflowing, can turn from the things which are in flux and passing away and fallen, and can hear the word of God and the heavenly precepts, this man is building an ark of salvation within his own heart and is dedicating a library, so to speak, of the divine word within himself. . . .

But he does not construct this library from planks which are unhewn and rough, but from planks which have been “squared” (Gen 6:14a) and arranged in a uniform line, that is, not from the volumes of secular authors, but from the prophetic and apostolic volumes. . . . For the authors of secular books can indeed be called “high trees” and “shady trees”—for Israel is accused of having fornicated “under every high and shady tree” (cf. Jer 2:20)²⁹—because they speak

²⁸ *et sic per omnes istas eruditi tam diuersas et uarias disciplinas, in quibus nihil de dei uoluntate cognouerunt, multas quidem, sed peccatorum diuitias congregauerunt.*

Cited in Heine, *Origen*, 63n156.

Origen, *Homélies sur les Psaumes 36 à 38*, edited by Emanuela Prinzivalli, Henri Crouzel, SJ, and Luc Brésard, OCSO, SC 411 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1995).

²⁹ As it has come down to us, Jer 2:20 (LXX) says “on every high hill / and under every shady tree.”

indeed in a high manner and use flowery eloquence; they have not, however, acted as they have spoken. (*Hom. in Gen.*, II, 6)³⁰

Here Origen's only praise for secular books is that they are rhetorically sophisticated, a positive quality rendered moot by the base and ugly actions they narrate. I believe that these latter two quotations disregard the value of secular education because of their rhetorical context: they come from homilies addressed to Christian congregations, whereas the other two quotations come from scholarly contexts, one an apologetic against a pagan polemic and the other a letter to a former student. The most negative statement is the one from the homily on Genesis, but it is here that Origen is explicitly offering a moral message. For his congregation, moral progress will be found, not by reading Greek literature, which contains many immoral examples, as he even tells Celsus, but by reading the Bible.³¹ In contrast, the benefit provided by secular books is oriented toward Christians going on to study theology and Scripture; it is not practical wisdom that helps Christians to live virtuously. For that, Origen believes that secular literature is actually harmful.

This, then, is the essence of Origen's estimation of the value of the education that he received as a boy: it is very valuable ("great riches") and a handmaid, if one uses it to help understand Christianity and the Bible, which is what he wanted his former pupil to do, rather

³⁰ *Si quis est, qui crescentibus malis et inundantibus uitiiis conuertere se potest a rebus fluxis ac pereuntibus et caducis et audire uerbum dei ac praecepta caelestia, hic intra cor suum arcam salutis aedificat et bibliothecam, ut ita dicam, intra se diuini consecrat uerbi. . . .*

Sed hanc bibliothecam non ex agrestibus et impolitis, sed ex quadratis et secundum aequitatis lineam directis construit lignis, id est non ex saecularium auctorum, sed ex prophetis atque apostolicis uoluminibus. . . . nam auctores saecularium librorum possunt quidem dici "ligna excelsa" et "ligna umbrosa"—s u b o m n i enim l i g n o e x c e l s o e t n e m o r o s o accusatur fornicatus esse Istrahel—, quia illi loquuntur quidem excelsa et florida utuntur eloquentia, non tamen ita egerunt ut locuti sunt.

³¹ For more on the relationship in Origen (and Basil) between audience and scriptural interpretation, see chapter 2.

than become a lawyer.³² Confirmation that this is Origen's view is found in the panegyric to Origen,³³ which in the MSS is attributed to St. Gregory the Wonderworker.³⁴ The panegyric praises Origen as a divine teacher; this being after he had entrusted the more elementary task of catechesis to Heraclas in order to focus on more advanced subjects (*Hist. eccl.* VI, 15). It specifically mentions dialectic, physics and physiology, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy as subjects that Origen taught (*In Orig. or. pan.*, 8.109-14). Absent, however, is any mention of Greek literature (*οἱ γραμματικοὶ λόγοι*), which may indicate again Origen's disregard for that subject, though it may simply be that it was an elementary subject that the students of his school had already completed and need not repeat.

In the light of this analysis, Eusebius's statement that Origen believed that secular literature (*οἱ γραμματικοὶ λόγοι*) is "useless" (*ἀνωφελῆς*) and a "hindrance" (*ἐναντίαν*) to theology must either 1) be rejected as false (Nautin), or 2) reflect Origen's immature thought (he was, after all, still a teenager), or 3) be taken in the narrow sense of referring to the Greek myths, but not the methods of grammar *per se*. Crouzel seems to take the second view, that this was

³² Martens casts Origen's exhortation as a rivalry between competing cultures: "Origen wishes Gregory to use his prowess for what he implicitly suggests in the opening lines is another culture alongside the Greek and Roman cultures, Christianity" (*Origen*, 29).

³³ Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Remerciement à Origène suivi de la Lettre d'Origène à Grégoire*, edited by Henri Crouzel, SJ, SC 148 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969).

———, *Origen the Teacher: Being the Address of Gregory the Wonderworker to Origen, Together with Origen's Letter to Gregory*, translated by William Metcalfe (London: S.P.C.K., 1907).

³⁴ Nautin rejects the attribution of the panegyric to the Wonderworker (*Origène*, 84). Crouzel's argument against Nautin is found in his article "Faut-il voir trois personnages en Grégoire le Thaumaturge?" *Gregorianum* 60 (1979): 287-320. Cf. Rousseau, *Basil*, 12n35, 13.

Origen's immature opinion: "He would soon return to what he had intended to abandon."³⁵ More recent scholars, however, such as Berard Neuschäfer,³⁶ Trigg,³⁷ Frances Young,³⁸ McGuckin,³⁹ Ronald Heine,⁴⁰ and Peter Martens⁴¹ have especially emphasized how Origen made use of his expertise in grammar, the specific branch of *παιδεία* that he taught, in his biblical and theological studies. In grammar he found a very useful handmaid for the study of the Bible, as his creation of the biblical *Hexapla* indicates. In the light of his criticisms of the Greek myths, which he calls "very stupid" (*εὐεγέστατα*) and "very impious" (*ἀσεβέστατα*, *C. Cels.*, IV, 50) and "outrageous" (*ἀτόπους*) and "shameful" (*αἰσχυής*, *ibid.*, IV, 48), I argue for the third view, that Origen does not reject the philological *methods* of grammar (thus he can list grammar among the handmaids of philosophy) but only the literature it was being used on, i.e., the Greek myths with their many false gods and immorality. This is similar to Origen's refusal to have his pupils read the writings

³⁵ Crouzel, *Origen*, 8. Cf. Cadiou: "A radical elimination of Greek culture from the storehouse of his mind was impossible" (*Origen*, 27).

³⁶ Berard Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe*, 2 vols. (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 1987).

³⁷ "Literary studies were one of the most significant factors shaping Origen's thought and his legacy" (Joseph Trigg, *Origen* [London: Routledge, 1998], 5). "In taking on a new identity, he did not forget what he had learned" (*ibid.*, 14).

³⁸ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*.

³⁹ John McGuckin, "Origen as Literary Critic in the Alexandrian Tradition," in vol. 1 of *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition* (Papers of the 8th International Origen Congress—Pisa, 27-31 August 2001), edited by L. Perrone, 120-35 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ For instance, Heine posits that Origen would have continued the fourfold process of grammar (see above) but with the Bible in front of him instead of Homer: "When he stopped teaching classical Greek literature and began teaching Biblical literature he would have continued the same basic steps in the teaching syllabus" (*Origen*, 74).

⁴¹ The first half of his *Origen and Scripture* is devoted to showing how Origen believed a biblical scholar needed to make use of philology in his work.

of atheist philosophers (*In Orig. or. pan.* 13.152). As Young has argued,⁴² the Greek myths are, for Origen as well as other Fathers, to be replaced by the Bible as the foundational literature of *παιδεία*.

The subordinate role of secular learning in Origen's thought is well illustrated by the panegyric's remarks about Origen's appraisal of philosophy in particular. It says that Origen praised philosophy and philosophers (*ibid.*, 6.75). Nonetheless, forceful criticisms of philosophy as it is actually practiced come through. Many teach philosophy in a theoretical way, the panegyric says, but fail to live out the true love of wisdom by practicing the cardinal virtues as Origen did: "It was not by words only, but in a manner by deeds that he directed the impulses within us by the very vision and consideration of the soul's impulses and passions" (*ibid.*, 9.118).⁴³ Origen understands philosophy in conjunction with the philosophic life, that is, Christian asceticism, which he himself has embraced. This understanding of philosophy is in play when the panegyric records that "He used to declare, and that truly, that true religion was utterly impossible to one who did not philosophize" (*ibid.*, 6.79).⁴⁴ In fact, the author of the

⁴² The thesis of her *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* is that the Fathers of the Church, beginning with Origen, the first Christian scholar, created an educated culture in which the Bible replaced the Greek myths as the foundational literature. This does not mean, however, that the scholarly *methods* of pagan culture were abandoned. On the contrary, they were pressed into the service of reading and studying the Bible. "Origen marks the advent of properly scholarly exegesis, and this presupposes a body of approved literature to be used for Christian *paideia*. For Origen as for Philo, Greek culture is subordinated to the Scriptures" (68). She summarizes her conclusions with respect to Origen specifically, the "pivot" of her story, on pp. 292-95. Her thesis seems to me to build upon the work of Werner Jaeger, who says that Origen "saved what we might call the Christian *paideia* and its foundation in the Bible. . . . He commented on almost all the important books of the Old Testament and much of the New Testament, combining his philosophical theology with the closest philological study of the sacred texts" (*Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1961], 49).

⁴³ καὶ οὐ λόγοις μόνον, ἀλλ' ἤδη καὶ ἔργοις τρόπον τινὰ διεκυβερνᾶτο παρ' ἡμῶν τὰς ὁρμάς, αὐτῇ τῇ τῶν ὁρμῶν καὶ παθῶν τῶν τῆς ψυχῆς θεωρίᾳ καὶ κατανοήσει.

⁴⁴ οὐ τοίνυν οὐδὲ εὐσεβεῖν ὅλως δυνατόν εἶναι ἔφασκεν, ὁρθῶς λέγων, μὴ φιλοσοφῆσαντι.

panegyric is so critical of other philosophers that he declares, albeit with some hesitation: “I would well-nigh rather be utterly unlearned than learned in anything professed by them, whom I have settled not so much as go to hear for the rest of my days—perhaps I do not think rightly” (ibid., 10.128).⁴⁵ Origen makes use of pagan philosophy in the service of his Christianity, as a handmaid, but does not teach it – in fact, spurns it – as pagan philosophers teach it.

BASIL

Of particular importance in establishing Basil’s biography are his own corpus of 350 letters⁴⁶ and a eulogy given by his friend St. Gregory of Nazianzus.⁴⁷ Born around 330,⁴⁸ Basil was raised, like Origen, a Christian, as he says himself: “The concept of God that I received as a child from my blessed mother and my grandmother Macrina, though it has grown, I have held within myself” (*Ep. CCXXIII*, p. 298, my translation).⁴⁹ Curiously, Gregory Naz.⁵⁰ does not mention St. Macrina (the elder, for Basil and his brother St. Gregory of Nyssa also have a sister

⁴⁵ ἐμέ δὲ μικροῦ δεῖν ιδιωτεύειν ἐλέσθαι πάντῃ, ἢ περ τι μαθεῖν ὧν οὗτοι ἀπαγγέλλουσιν, οἷς διὰ τὸν λοιπὸν βίον οὐδὲ προσιέναι ἄξιον εἶναι ἐδόχουν, ἴσως οὐκ ὀρθῶς τοῦτο φρονῶν.

⁴⁶ Basil, *The Letters*, edited and translated by Roy J. Deferrari, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1926-34).

———, *Letters*, translated by Agnes Clare Way, 2 vols., FOTC 13, 28 (NY: Fathers of the Church, 1951, 1955).

⁴⁷ Gregory Naz., *Discours 42-43*, edited by Jean Bernardi, SC 384 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992).

———, “On St. Basil the Great,” translated by Leo P. McCauley, SJ, in *Funeral Orations*, FOTC 22, 27-99 (NY: Fathers of the Church, 1953).

⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Basil*, 1.

⁴⁹ ἦν ἐκ παιδὸς ἔλαβον ἐννοίαν περὶ θεοῦ παρὰ τῆς μακαρίας μητρός μου καὶ τῆς μάμμης Μακρίνης, ταύτην αὐξηθεῖσαν ἔσχον ἐν ἐμαυτῷ.

⁵⁰ To distinguish the three Sts. Gregory, I will refer to them as “the Wonderworker,” “Gregory Nyss,” and “Gregory Naz.”

by that name) in his eulogy, even though Basil says twice that she raised him (*Epp.* CCIV, p. 168; CCX, p. 196). Gregory Naz. instead mentions Basil's parents, Basil (Sr.) and Emmelia, saying that his "earliest years were spent under the direction of his illustrious father,"⁵¹ and this included training "in piety" (*θεσέβειαν*, *Fun. in laud. Bas.* [= *Or.* XLIII], 12; Emmelia is mentioned in 10). Basil also says that it was Macrina the elder who taught him "the words of the most blessed Gregory [the Wonderworker]" (*Ep.* CCIV, p. 168).⁵² It has been claimed from this statement that Macrina was converted and baptized by the Wonderworker himself,⁵³ but this goes beyond the evidence. Rousseau says only that she "had known disciples of the great 'apostle' of Pontus,"⁵⁴ which seems consistent with Basil's statement that his sayings had been "preserved for her through the succession of memory" (*ibid.*, my translation).⁵⁵ Basil tells us that it was through the apostolic work of the Wonderworker that the evangelization of their hometown of Pontus occurred. Basil writes of him: "Although he took to himself only seventeen Christians, he brought the whole people, both urban and rural, to God through knowledge" (*De Sp. s.*, XXIX, 74, my translation).⁵⁶ The significance of this connection for Basil is that, when suspected of

⁵¹ *Τὰ μὲν δὴ πρῶτα τῆς ἡλικίας ὑπὸ τῷ μεγάλῳ πατρὶ.*

⁵² *τὰ τοῦ μακαριωτάτου Γρηγορίου ῥήματα.*

⁵³ Anthony Meredith, SJ, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 4. Crouzel, ed., *Remerciement*, 23.

⁵⁴ Rousseau, *Basil*, 4.

⁵⁵ *πρὸς αὐτὴν ἀκολουθία μνήμης διασωθέντα.*

⁵⁶ *ἐπτακαίδεκα μόνους Χριστιανούς παραλαβὼν, ὅλον τὸν λαὸν τὸν τε ἀστικὸν καὶ τὸν χωρτικὸν διὰ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως προσήγαγε τῷ θεῷ.*

Basil, *Sur le Saint-Esprit*, edited by Benoît Pruche, OP, 2nd ed., SC 17 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002).

heterodoxy, he can trace his theological pedigree, so to speak, back to the Wonderworker through Macrina the elder.⁵⁷

Origen's former pupil, who received his aforementioned letter, was also named Gregory, and Eusebius identifies this Gregory as the Gregory whose brother is named Athenodorus, i.e., Gregory the Wonderworker (*Hist. eccl.*, VI, 30). He became the first bishop of Neocaesarea sometime before the emperor Decian began persecuting Christians in 250.⁵⁸ This identification of Origen's Gregory with the Wonderworker is made also by Gregory Nyss. in his biography of the Wonderworker, who says of him: "Leaving behind all study of pagan philosophy he goes . . . to that age's master of Christian philosophy, which was Origen, the prolific author" (*De uita Greg. Thaum.*, p. 13, my translation).⁵⁹ Nautin, however, rejects this identification, arguing that Eusebius has based it solely on the coincidences of names.⁶⁰ The question of the identities of the Gregories, while interesting, is irrelevant to this study because surely Basil, like his brother, at least *believed* that the Wonderworker was Origen's disciple.⁶¹ That belief is significant for my purposes because it suggests why Basil looked to Origen for inspiration.⁶² Although Basil

⁵⁷ See Rousseau, *Basil*, 23-26, and Jean Gribomont, OSB, "L'Origénisme de Saint Basile," in vol. 1 of *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Aubier, 1963), 281.

⁵⁸ Crouzel, ed., *Remerciement*, 24.

⁵⁹ καταλιπὼν πᾶσαν τὴν περὶ τὴν ἔξω φιλοσοφίαν σπουδὴν προσφοιτᾷ . . . τῷ κατὰ χρόνον ἐκεῖνον τῆς τῶν Χριστιανῶν φιλοσοφίας καθηγουμένῳ — Ὀριγένης δὲ οὗτος ἦν, οὗ πολὺς ἐπὶ τοῖς συγγράμμασι λόγος.

Gregory of Nyssa, *De uita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, edited by Gunter Heil, in vol. 10.1 of *Gregorii Nysseni*, edited by Gunter Heil, John P. Cavarnos, Otto Lendle, and Friedhelm Mann, 1-57 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990).

⁶⁰ Nautin, *Origène*, 85, 161. Crouzel, *Origen*, 2n3 disagrees with Nautin, saying that he ignores Gregory Nyss.'s biography.

⁶¹ Cf. Rousseau, *Basil*, 11.

⁶² As for the panegyric on Origen attributed to the Wonderworker, the Cappadocians never mention it.

certainly cannot rely on a connection to Origen to defend himself against accusations of heterodoxy, he would still have been aware that his and his family's Christianity in no small way descends from Origen. After all, had it not been for Origen, Gregory might have become a lawyer instead of a missionary, and Pontus would never have received him, and Basil's grandparents might not have converted to the Christian religion that was then passed on to him.

Just like Origen, Basil received a secular education (*ἐν κύκλιον παιδείσιν*) under the guidance of his father (Gregory Naz., *Or.* XLIII, 12). He continued his studies into adulthood rather than launching into his career straightaway. Gregory Naz. tells us that, “when he was sufficiently instructed at home,”⁶³ he went to study in Caesarea (*ibid.*, 13). After this he studied in Byzantium (*ibid.*, 14), then finally Athens, where he studied alongside Gregory Naz., who was already there (*ibid.*, 15). He studied there for five years, from 349-355, according to Rousseau.⁶⁴ Late in his life, in a letter,⁶⁵ Basil looks back very negatively on the years he spent in Athens, saying that they were wasted. He writes:

After I had wasted much time in vanity and had spent nearly all my youth in the vain labor in which I was engaged, occupying myself in acquiring a knowledge made foolish by God [cf. 1 Cor 1:20], when at length, as if aroused from a deep sleep, I looked upon the wondrous light of the truth of the Gospel and saw the futility of the wisdom “of the rulers of this age who are passing away” [1 Cor 2:6], having mourned deeply my piteous life, I prayed that guidance be given me for my introduction to the doctrines of religion. (*Ep.* CCXXIII, p. 290, 92)⁶⁶

⁶³ Ἐπεὶ δὲ ἱκανῶς εἶχε τῆς ἐνταῦθα παιδείσιν.

⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Basil*, 28.

⁶⁵ *Ep.* CCXXIII, which Paul J. Fedwick dates to 375 (“A Chronology of the Life and Works of Basil of Caesarea,” in vol. 1 of *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic—A Sixteen-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium*, edited by Paul Jonathan Fedwick [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981], 16).

⁶⁶ Ἐγὼ πολὺν χρόνον προσαναλώσας τῇ ματαιότητι, καὶ πᾶσαν σχεδὸν τὴν ἑμαυτοῦ νεότητα ἐναφανίσας τῇ ματαιοπονίᾳ, ἣν εἶχον προσδιατρίβων τῇ ἀναλήψει τῶν μαθημάτων τῆς παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ μωρανθείσης σοφίας, ἐπειδὴ ποτε, ὥσπερ ἐξ ὑπνου βαθέος διαναστάς ἀπέβλεψα μὲν πρὸς τὸ θαυμαστὸν φῶς τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, κατεῖδον

Basil then immediately refers to following Christ's advice in the Gospels (Matt 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22) to sell all one's possessions, as in the archetypal story of St. Anthony.

Clearly Basil is speaking of a conversion away from a life marked by the pursuit of *παιδεία*, and rhetoric in particular, I think, to the ascetic lifestyle.

This important moment in Basil's life is confirmed in his brother's hagiography of their sister St. Macrina.⁶⁷ Gregory Nyss. records that Basil returned from Athens an arrogant man, "excessively puffed up by his rhetorical abilities,"⁶⁸ and "considering himself better than the leading men in the district" (*Vita Macr.*, 6).⁶⁹ Gregory Naz. says much the same thing, not with a chiding but with a boastful tone, claiming that he and Basil "became famous not only in the sight of our own masters and companions, but even throughout Greece and especially among the most illustrious men" (*Or.* XLIII, 22).⁷⁰ According to Gregory Nyss., it was Macrina who convinced Basil to become an ascetic (*Vita Macr.*, 6). Considering that he is writing a hagiography of his sister and that Basil fails to mention her, I think that Gregory Nyss. exaggerates her importance

δὲ τὸ ἄχρηστον τῆς σοφίας τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦτου τῶν καταργουμένων, πολλὰ τὴν ἐλεεινὴν μου ζῶν ἀποκλαύσας, ὑπόμην δοθῆναι μοι χειραγωγίαν πρὸς τὴν εἰσαγωγὴν τῶν δογμάτων τῆς εὐσεβείας.

⁶⁷ Gregory Nyss., *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, edited by Pierre Maraval, SC 178 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1971).

———, "The Life of Saint Macrina," in *Ascetical Works*, translated by Virginia Woods Callahan, 159-91, FOTC 58 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967).

⁶⁸ ὑπερφυῶς ἐπηρμένον τῷ περὶ τοὺς λόγους φρονήματι.

⁶⁹ ὑπὲρ τοὺς ἐν τῇ δυναστείᾳ λαμπροὺς ἐπηρμένον τῷ ὄγκῳ.

⁷⁰ ὑπῆρχεν ἡμῖν ἐπισήμοις μὲν εἶναι παρὰ τοῖς ἡμετέροις παιδευταῖς καὶ συμπράκτορσιν, ἐπισήμοις δὲ παρὰ τῇ Ἑλλάδι πάσῃ καὶ ταύτης μάλιστα τοῖς γνωριμωτάτοις.

in Basil's decision to become an ascetic, though no doubt Macrina's own embrace of the ascetic lifestyle must have made some impression on her brother.

What might be seen as a change of career from secular studies to an ecclesiastical vocation is cast by Basil as a conversion, just as Eusebius cast Origen's career change from grammarian (i.e., teacher of Greek literature) to catechist. Basil identifies his years of higher education with the wisdom made foolish by God of 1 Cor 1:20. The passage is replete with negative words that describe his higher education: *wasted* (*προσαναλώσας*), *vanity* (*ματαιότητι*), *vain labor* (*ματαιοπονία*), *made foolish* (*μωρανθείσης*), *futility* (*ἄχρηστον*), *mourned* (*ἀποκλαύσας*), *piteous* (*ἐλεεινήν*), *amend* (*διόρθωσιν*), *indifferent* (*φαύλους*), and *perverted* (*διαστραφέντος*) (Ep. CCXXIII, p. 290, 92). In this context "conversion" refers not to the changing of religions (after all, Basil was always a Christian) but to the passing from the ordinary religiosity of most Christians to the perfect, ascetic life. During a time when Christianity was beginning to enjoy the privileges of empire and pagans were converting in droves to align their social standing with the new status quo of civil religion, simply converting to Christianity was seen as insufficient by some Christians. Thus Basil can simultaneously say that he was raised a Christian and that, as a man in his 20s, he still required "introduction to the doctrines of religion." What he means is an introduction to the practices and beliefs of the ascetic lifestyle.⁷¹

Gregory Naz.'s eulogy paints a different picture entirely. Given Gregory Naz.'s rhetorical sophistication, I agree with Neil McLynn's judgment that his eulogy is, at least to some degree, deliberately biased: "Gregory was rewriting the history of Basil's religious development. . . . His

⁷¹ Cf. Rousseau, who speaks of the meaning of "conversion" in the time of Constantine vis-à-vis Basil (*Basil*, 14-23).

was a version of Basil designed to appeal to the city's cultural elite . . . and at the same time to enhance his own credit.”⁷² Gregory Naz., not mentioning any ascetical conversion on Basil's part, says that they had already decided to embrace the ascetic lifestyle while studying in Athens: “The sole object of us both was virtue and living for future hopes, having detached ourselves from this world before departing from it” (*Or.* XLIII, 20).⁷³ To him this was perfectly consistent with their studies: “As for our studies, we found pleasure not so much in the most agreeable as in the most excellent” (*ibid.*).⁷⁴ It was their asceticism that allowed them to escape the city with their souls unharmed (*ibid.*, 21). This no doubt is how Gregory Naz. really feels, but it is not true of Basil, if his letter is to be believed. Gregory Naz. notes at one point that Basil became disillusioned by Athens shortly after his arrival because of the petty jealousy of their fellow students (*ibid.*, 18). Basil called the city “an empty happiness” (*κενήν μακαρίαν*, *ibid.*), but Gregory Naz. urged him not to make a hasty judgment and, he claims, “restored his good spirits” (*ibid.*).⁷⁵ In my opinion this lacks plausibility, as Basil in fact later quits Athens, leading Gregory Naz. to feel devastated and abandoned by his best friend (*ibid.*, 24). Gregory Naz., seeing here only “betrayal” (*τὸ προδοθείς*, *ibid.*, 24), has failed to appreciate his friend's true feelings, expressed so strongly years later in *Ep.* CCXXIII. That letter's negative assessment, which fits well with the disconsolate Basil Gregory Naz. mentioned earlier (*ibid.*, 18), contrasts sharply

⁷² Neil McLynn, “Gregory Nazianzen's Basil: The Literary Construction of a Christian Friendship,” *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001), 180.

⁷³ ἔν δ' ἀμφοτέροις ἔργον ἡ ἀρετὴ καὶ τὸ ζῆν πρὸς τὰς μελλούσας ἐλπίδας, πρὶν ἐνθένδε ἀπελθεῖν ἐνθένδε μεθισταμένοις.

⁷⁴ μαθημάτων δὲ οὐ τοῖς ἡδίστοις πλέον ἢ τοῖς καλλίστοις ἐχαίρομεν.

⁷⁵ ἐπανῆγον αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ εὖθυμον.

with Gregory Naz.'s own glowing praise of Athens: "Athens, [a city] to me, if to anyone, truly golden, patroness of all that is excellent" (ibid., 14).⁷⁶ Though he admits that "the pious" (τοῖς εὐσεβεστέροις, ibid., 21)⁷⁷ are correct in regarding Athens as a place "harmful, in general, to the things of the soul" (ibid., 21),⁷⁸ he says that he and Basil were completely immune to its corrupting influence, because their minds were "closed and secured" (πεπυκνωμένοις καὶ πεφραγμένοις, ibid., my translation). Well, Basil did not think so, as he considered his time spent in Athens a waste and, if anything, seems to be (almost) in agreement with the pious Christians that shun secular education.⁷⁹

However, there is more to Basil's opinion of secular education than what is found in that letter. Basil's attitude toward "Greek letters" (Ἑλληνικοὶ λόγοι) is revealed also through a letter that he writes to some teenagers,⁸⁰ presumably his nephews "(and perhaps nieces)"⁸¹ since he

⁷⁶ Ἀθήνας τὰς χρυσᾶς ὄντων ἐμοὶ καὶ τῶν καλῶν προξένους εἶπερ τινί.

⁷⁷ "The pious" are probably the same conservative Christians who, he says, "by an error of judgment scorn [pagan culture] as treacherous and dangerous and as turning us away from God" (διαπτύουσιν [τὴν ἕξωθεν παιδείαν] ὡς ἐπίβουλον καὶ σφαλερὰ καὶ θεοῦ πόρρα βάλλοθσαν, κακῶς εἰδότες) and "dishonor education . . . that their own deficiencies might be hidden in the general mass, and their want of culture escape reproach" (οὐκ οὖν ἀντιμαστέον τὴν παιδείαν ὅτι τοῦτο δοκεῖ τισιν . . . ἵν' ἐν τῷ κοινῷ τὸ κατ' αὐτοὺς κρύπτηται καὶ τοὺς τῆς ἀπαιδευσίας ἐλέγχους διαδιδράσκωσιν) (Or. XLIII, 11).

⁷⁸ βλαβεραὶ μὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις Ἀθῆναι τὰ εἰς ψυχὴν.

⁷⁹ So also McLynn concludes ("Nazianzen's Basil," 180).

⁸⁰ Basil, *On the Value of Greek Literature*, edited by N. G. Wilson (London: Duckworth, 1975).

Basil, "Address to Young Men on Reading Greek Literature," translated by Roy Joesph Deferrari and Martin R. P. McGuire in vol. 4 of Basil, *The Letters*.

⁸¹ N. G. Wilson, ed., *Value*, 7.

says he is the closest relation to them after their parents (*De leg. gent. libr. [= Ad adul.], 1*).⁸² Basil's thesis in this letter is that "pagan learning is not without usefulness for the soul" (*ibid.*, 4).⁸³ Nevertheless, he argues, secular works should be read discerningly: "You ought not to give your attention to all they write without exception" (*ibid.*, 4),⁸⁴ and "You should not surrender to these men once for all the rudders of your mind, as if of a ship, and follow them whithersoever they lead; rather, accepting from them only that which is useful, you should know that which ought to be overlooked" (*ibid.*, 1).⁸⁵ This is reminiscent of how Origen introduced his students to all the sects of philosophy (except the atheists). What is to be held onto, according to Basil, is that which teaches about true virtue, which is concerned with the spirit, not with material and bodily things (*ibid.*, 2). Virtue, in fact, is praised in all genres of writing (*ibid.*, 2, 5), especially philosophy (*ibid.*, 5). As Young notes, Basil's argument here is simply for employing the fourth and highest method of grammar: ethical judgment.⁸⁶

Basil must presuppose, then, the moral formation of Christian readers of the classics, as Christian morality is obviously the criterion by which this ethical judgment will be made. He sees secular literature as appropriate for young people in particular since they are (he says) not yet mature enough to read the Bible (*ibid.*, 2). I think that he refers here to the *careful* interpretation of the Bible that is part of the ascetic life (see chapter 2) since he presupposes the

⁸² Thus Wilson, who adds, however, that Basil probably "had his eye on eventual publication" (*ibid.*, 7-8).

⁸³ οὐκ ἄχρηστον ψυχαῖς μαθήματα τὰ ἔξωθεν.

⁸⁴ μὴ πᾶσιν ἐφεξῆς προσέχειν τὸν νοῦν.

⁸⁵ τὸ μὴ δεῖν εἰς ἅπαξ τοῖς ἀνδράσι τούτοις, ὥσπερ πλοίου τὰ πηδάλια τῆς διανοίας ὑμῶν παραδόντας, ἥπερ ἂν ἄγωσι, ταύτη ξυνέπεσθαι, ἀλλ' ὅσον ἐστὶ χρήσιμον αὐτῶν δεχομένους, εἰδέναι τί χρὴ καὶ παριδεῖν.

⁸⁶ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 172-73, 204.

religious and moral formation of the readers, which surely would include at least an *introductory* knowledge of the Bible. For Christian readers, secular literature remains not just anterior to the Bible in the curriculum but subordinate to Christianity, because it is by Christianity that one discerns what is to be rejected, such as sinful deeds and talk of the pagan gods (ibid., 4), and what is to be kept, such as praise of virtue.⁸⁷ Curiously, Basil concludes his letter with a remark that seems to question the point of reading secular works when one could just read the Bible instead: “But we shall doubtless learn these things more thoroughly in our own literature [i.e., the Scriptures]” (ibid., 10).⁸⁸ Whatever else this may mean, it clearly shows that, for all the good secular education has to offer, it is subordinate to Scripture.

Scholars have differed in evaluating Basil’s judgment of secular education. Henri Irénée Marrou thinks that Basil accepts it as a necessary evil.⁸⁹ N. D. Wilson, rightly, in my opinion, contests this negative reading: “Despite the suggestion that some parts of pagan literature are to be avoided, the general tone of the essay does not suggest that B[asil] is reluctantly accepting the place of the pagan authors in the school curriculum and making the best of a bad situation.”⁹⁰ After all, the very thesis of the whole essay is that “pagan learning is not without

⁸⁷ Cf. Rousseau: “The acceptability of the classics . . . depended upon an altogether prior sense of what ‘virtue’ might mean” (*Basil*, 53).

⁸⁸ Ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν που . . . τοῖς ἡμετέροις λόγοις τελειότερον μαθησόμεθα.

This is one reason Rousseau sees the work as ultimately “inconclusive,” and even “disorganized” (*Basil*, 56), in working out the exact relationship between Christianity and secular education. Wilson notes that “Some modern scholars, not entirely without justification, have complained of the weakness of the argument. This weakness can hardly be denied, but it can perhaps be partly explained as the result of an attempt to combine two themes [i.e., the encouragement to the virtuous life and the means of deriving benefit from pagan literature] within too short a space” (ed., *Value*, 9).

⁸⁹ Marrou, *History*, 321-22.

⁹⁰ Wilson, ed., *Value*, 10.

usefulness for the soul.” Surely this is not merely the toleration of an evil. Jaeger also takes a positive view and refers to *Ad adolescentes* as “the charter of all Christian higher education” and argues that “Basil insists on the direct reception into the Christian schools, which were still *in statu nascendi*, of ancient Greek poetry as a way of higher education.”⁹¹

Robert Winn also adopts a positive reading of *Ad adolescentes* but then sees a contradiction between Basil’s opinion of *παιδεία* expressed there and his ascetic renunciation and conversion found in the aforementioned letter and elsewhere in his ascetic corpus.⁹² On this basis, he argues that *Ad adolescentes* reflects Basil’s immature thought, originating from before he left Athens.⁹³ Winn notes that Basil thanks God for having “liberated [him] from the error of pagan tradition” (*De iud. dei*, 1 [PG 31, 653a]).⁹⁴ However, Basil couples this statement (using a *μὲν / δὲ* construction) with the assertion that he was raised by Christian parents from the beginning (*ibid.*). Since his parents did in fact have him educated in secular literature, he cannot here be referring to his ascetical conversion. I think that he means that he is thankful that he was not raised as a pagan in the Greco-Roman religious tradition. So this is no proof that Basil spurned secular education, as Winn imagines. However, Winn also notes that in a religious rule

⁹¹ Jaeger, *Christianity*, 81, 83-84.

⁹² Robert E. Winn, “Revisiting the Date of Authorship of Basil of Caesarea’s *Ad adolescentes*,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 (1999): 291-303.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 301-02.

⁹⁴ *τῆς μὲν κατὰ παράδοσιν τῶν ἑξῶθεν πλάνης ρυσθείς.*

Quoted in Greek in *ibid.*, 298.

Basil, *Opera omnia*, edited by Julien Garnier and Prudentius Maran, 3 vols. (Paris: 1721-30) [PG 29-32].

Basil, *Ascetic Works*, translated by M. Monica Wagner, CSC, FOTC 9 (Washington, DC, 1962).

Basil indicates that children “should employ a vocabulary derived from the Scriptures and, in place of myths, historical accounts of admirable deeds should be told to them” (*Reg. fus. tract.*, XV, 3 [PG 31, 953c]).⁹⁵ Basil seems to be suggesting (*pace* Jaeger) that Scripture replace secular literature in the education of children. Although this is different from what he says in *Ad adulescentes*, it actually is consistent with that text, since in it Basil says that Scripture teaches virtue better than secular literature does. Thus I do not see a contradiction here, since the contexts are different: in the ascetical rule Basil speaks of students in the nascent monastic schools, whereas in *Ad adulescentes* he speaks of Christian children in secular schools. Why should it be inferred that *Ad adulescentes* must be an immature work and that later in his career Basil changes his mind and begins to say (though nowhere, to my knowledge, do we find such a sentiment) that Christian parents *must* send their children to the monastic schools? Even if some young people attend monastic schools, where only the Bible is read, as he advises, for secularly educated children, Basil’s advice in *Ad adulescentes* should still hold. So there is no explicit contradiction and thus no need to postulate an early date for *Ad adulescentes*.

But what of Basil’s ascetic renunciation of his wasted years of education? I think that it should be noted that a generic condemnation of *παιδεία* does not necessarily follow from a negative assessment of his higher studies in Athens, which are the specific object of his ascetic renunciation. For instance, in this letter itself he is critical of the very art to which he devoted much of his attention in Athens, namely rhetoric, which he cleverly calls “the art of lying” (*ibid.*,

⁹⁵ ὥστε καὶ ὀνόμασιν αὐτοὺς τοῖς ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν κεχρηῆσθαι, καὶ ἀντὶ μύθων τὰς τῶν παραδόξων ἔργων ἱστορίας αὐτοῖς διηγείσθαι.

Quoted in Winn, “Revisiting the Date of Authorship,” 299.

4).⁹⁶ Thus Wilson identifies the object of Basil's ascetic renunciation as "the traditional rhetorical education."⁹⁷ Second, Basil positively uses many philosophical works and ideas in the *Hexaemeron*. If he had totally renounced secular education, why would he bother with all the natural philosophy when preaching on Genesis 1? I prefer the view of Stephen Hildebrand, who argues that Basil is seeking, not to replace secular education with the Bible, but to build a "synthesis" of the two, in which, however, the Bible retains priority.⁹⁸ It seems to me that Rousseau says something similar when he argues that Basil accepts secular education, not as a coherent, self-subsistent whole placed side-by-side with the Bible and Christianity, but as something to be integrated into Christianity as if through recycling: "Basil came to view the classics . . . as part and parcel of a Christian's formation. . . . For him, the whole [secular] educational edifice had already been dismantled, like a neglected temple, and was to be recycled within the fabric of a Christian building."⁹⁹ While Basil's opinion of secular education is indeed negative insofar as he affirms that it can be harmful and also denies it any unique value of its own, it is also positive insofar as he both refuses to condemn it and even finds auxiliary value in it. Though he may not be a humanist *per se*, neither is Basil one of the "pious" mentioned by Gregory Naz. who spurn secular education.

⁹⁶ τὴν περὶ τὸ ψεύδεσθαι τέχνην.

⁹⁷ Wilson, ed., *Value*, 10.

⁹⁸ Stephen M. Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 11-14.

⁹⁹ Rousseau, *Basil*, 52, 56.

Basil the Origenist

Basil's interest in Origen is most noticeable in the anthology of his writings called the *Philocalia*,¹⁰⁰ the compilation of which is attributed in its preface to Basil and Gregory Naz. The only extant reference to the work comes from one of Gregory Naz.'s letters, preserved also in the *Philocalia* itself, in which he gives a copy of the anthology to his ecclesiastical superior as an Easter present, in the hopes that it will serve as a "reminder of both the same thing and of St. Basil."¹⁰¹ On the basis of this statement, the traditional attribution of the work to Basil and Gregory Naz. has been assumed by Éric Junod,¹⁰² Jean Gribomont,¹⁰³ Paul Fedwick,¹⁰⁴ Rousseau,¹⁰⁵ and Anthony Meredith.¹⁰⁶ However, Marguerite Harl in the introduction to her critical edition regards Gregory Naz.'s statement as too ambiguous to establish authorship.¹⁰⁷ McGuckin has his own hypothesis that the anthology was "largely a work of Gregory [Naz.]'s, which, typically, he associated with Basil for the sake of friendship and honour."¹⁰⁸ Even if they

¹⁰⁰ Origen, *Philocalie, 1-20: Sur les Écritures et la Lettre à Africanus sur l'histoire de Suzanne*, edited by Marguerite Harl and Nicholas de Lange, SC 302 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983).

¹⁰¹ ὑπόμνημα . . . τὸ δ' αὐτὸ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου Βασιλείου.

¹⁰² "La *Philocalie* est présentée comme l'œuvre de Grégoire et Basile" (Éric Junod, "Remarques sur la composition de la 'Philocalie' d'Origène par Basile de Césarée et Grégoire de Nazianze," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 52 [1972]: 150).

¹⁰³ Gribomont, "L'Origénisme," 282.

¹⁰⁴ Fedwick, "Chronology," 6.

¹⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Basil*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Meredith, *Cappadocians*, 21-22.

¹⁰⁷ Marguerite Harl and Nicholas de Lange, eds., *Philocalie, 1-20*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ John A. McGuckin, "Patterns of Biblical Exegesis in the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa," in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, edited

did not make it themselves, Gregory Naz.'s use of the word *reminder* at least reveals that he and Basil had read and benefited from the work, as Harl herself maintains. Although the traditional attribution is based on scanty evidence, I will assume that Basil and Gregory Naz. are the compilers since there is no positive evidence to the contrary. Since the two lived together for a while after their studies in Athens, I also assume that this is when they compiled the *Philocalia*, around 358 (by Rousseau's chronology), when Basil was not yet 30 years old, before he began his priestly career.¹⁰⁹

An early date such as this may be important for understanding Basil as a disciple of Origen because Basil seems to have distanced himself somewhat from Origen later in life as his writings became controversial (even though Gregory Naz. is content to promote the *Philocalia* even after Basil's death). It is in the treatise *De Spiritu sancto* (73-74), written in 375 (according to Fedwick¹¹⁰ and Rousseau¹¹¹) that we find Basil's only explicit mention of Origen, as a witness to the ancient practice of praising the Holy Spirit *with* the Father and the Son. However, he does not lavish praise upon Origen but rather cites him in spite of his supposed heterodoxy regarding

by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 45. This hypothesis serves to alleviate the apparent contradiction between Origen's hermeneutics and Basil's (see chapter 4).

¹⁰⁹ Thus Fedwick, "Chronology," 6; Rousseau, *Basil*, 66; Meredith, *Cappadocians*, 21-22. Gribomont sees the *Philocalia* as essentially concerned with apologetics, a topic that would have interested them as students studying in Athens but which, he says, "ne constitue plus une obsession lors de la maturité des Cappadociens" ("L'Origénisme," 284). Junod, on the other hand, while also acknowledging the apologetic nature of the text ("Remarques," 153), takes exactly the opposite position: "La *Philocalie* se présente comme l'œuvre d'hommes qui ont atteint leur pleine maturité théologique" (ibid., 155). However, he concedes that he is speculating and says that what is really known is simply that it was written sometime after (*terminus a quo*) their student days (360 by his reckoning) and before (*terminus ad quem*) Basil's hexaemeron (378), in which he, in Junod's reading, rejects allegorical interpretation. On the question of allegory, see chapter 2.

¹¹⁰ Fedwick, "Chronology," 17.

¹¹¹ Rousseau, *Basil*, 12.

the Holy Spirit.¹¹² Likewise, Basil criticizes Origen anonymously (I believe) in his hexaemeral homilies because of his nonliteral interpretation of the waters above and below the firmament.¹¹³ On the other hand, Gribomont and Junod point out that even in the *Philocalia* Basil and Gregory Naz. display a careful reserve about Origen since they do not extract any of his controversial passages about either the Trinity or the pre-existence of souls, so there may never have been a time when the two were completely enchanted with Origen.¹¹⁴ These facts do not mean that Basil late in life renounced Origen, but, on the contrary, show that Basil maintained a critical interest in Origen his whole life. If Basil wanted to renounce or denounce Origen, he could have done so clearly, by naming him, or by saying something more critical than that Origen's opinions on the Holy Spirit are "not altogether healthy" (*οὐδὲ πᾶν τι ὑγιεῖς*, *De Sp. s.*, XXIX, 73, my translation). That he was not unreservedly positive (even in the *Philocalia* itself) indicates that he, though a theological disciple of Origen, is also an independent thinker. The rest of this dissertation will show to what degree Basil remains an Origenist.

¹¹² Origen says that, in his day, it was a debated question whether the Holy Spirit is a creature or not (*De Princ.*, I, pref., 4). Actually, in Rufinus's translation, it says that the debate was over whether the Spirit was "begotten" (*natus*), but this is an attempt to bring Origen into line with fourth-century orthodoxy, as Basil's very remark might lead one to suspect. See the footnote in Butterworth's translation, 3n1.

Origen, *Traité des principes*, edited by Manlio Simonetti and Henri Crouzel, SC 252-53, 268-69, 312 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1978, 1980, 1984).

———, *On First Principles*, translated by G. W. Butterworth (NY: Harper and Row, 1966).

¹¹³ For a full discussion of this point, see chapter 4.

¹¹⁴ Junod, "Remarques," 152; Gribomont, "L'Origénisme," 283; cf. Rousseau, *Basil*, 14. Junod also claims that it contains "bien peu des séductions de l'allégorie," while Gribomont says almost the same thing, that it contains "fort peu d'exégèses proprement allégoriques." I essentially reject this claim in chapter 2.

INTERPRETATION

A look at the lives of Origen and Basil reveals striking similarities: both were raised as Christians yet also received secular educations at the insistence of their fathers, then both seemed to renounce this education, at least partially, while continuing to show an interest in it as theologians and churchmen. That Basil had a family connection that reached back to Origen through the Wonderworker, and that he took the trouble to compile an anthology of his writings, strongly suggest to me that he sees in Origen a kindred spirit and a theologian worth imitating. That is the reason I have chosen them as Fathers whose views on cosmology and the Bible are worthy of comparison. I have showed already how neither theologian gives a totally positive or negative judgment on secular education. Origen expresses the relationship of secular education to Christianity through the metaphor of the handmaid, which is useful, but also subordinate. Thus secular education cannot be used to overthrow Christian teachings or practices, for the handmaid must obey her mistress. Following in this line of thought, Basil tells his nephews how they themselves can derive moral benefit from secular education, provided that they use their Christian beliefs and values to avoid that which is false or vicious, for, after all, the Word of God is superior to secular teaching. His advice that they pick and choose what is best in secular literature also agrees with the pedagogy of Origen, who exposed Gregory and his other students to all the pagan philosophers (except the atheists).

Still, the two are not identical. By selling his books of secular literature, Origen seems to have indicated his disdain for the Greek myths that he learned as a child, side by side with the Bible, and even taught as a grammarian. He speaks contemptuously of them in his polemic against Celsus. Basil, on the other hand, is more positive, believing that, in spite of their

deficiencies, the pagan myths can provide moral examples for the discerning Christian reader. I think that this difference can be explained partially by the different times in which the men lived. Origen lives in a time of persecution, when Christians are bound to be very hostile toward paganism. Thus Origen, as Young and others have argued, seeks to do away with the pagan myths in favor of the Bible, while nevertheless retaining the disciplines and methods of secular education, which can be applied to Scripture just as easily as they had been to the myths. By Basil's time the persecutions have ended and Christianity has gained the upper hand over paganism. Origen's project of replacing the pagan myths with the Bible is well under way; after all, Christian monastic schools are now appearing, in which the Bible is the textbook, as we see from Basil himself. Thus the pagan myths are no longer a hostile threat, in Basil's eyes, and do not need to be completely and absolutely replaced by the Bible. Instead they may be, like the rest of secular education, pressed into the service of Christianity for their examples of virtuous behavior. I like Rousseau's metaphor, quoted earlier: "The whole [secular] educational edifice had already been dismantled, like a neglected temple, and was to be recycled within the fabric of a Christian building."¹¹⁵

While Basil's admittedly qualified moral appreciation for the pagan classics can make him appear even more humanistic than Origen (who admires their eloquence but despises their content), it is not clear to me that Basil's estimate of the usefulness of secular education is as broad as Origen's. Basil speaks only of the *moral* value of secular works, whereas Origen has in mind their general usefulness for theology and biblical studies. On this point I cannot be certain, though, seeing as how Basil's treatise on Greek literature was written for a specific purpose and

¹¹⁵ Rousseau, *Basil*, 56.

occasion. Its restriction to matters of morality does not necessarily mean that Basil thinks that secular education is otherwise completely useless.¹¹⁶ Still, Basil's strong language in his letter, in which he laments his years of wasted study in Athens, does not lead me to believe that he entertains high hopes for secular education, though, again, his negative words are probably a lamentation of studying rhetoric in particular. Perhaps if Origen had continued his studies into adulthood like Basil, he would have had a similar experience of disillusionment. Or perhaps Basil's reserve about the usefulness of secular literature, compared to Origen, comes from his vocation as a bishop, which Origen did not share.

The general theoretical statements regarding the usefulness of pagan literature and philosophy made by Origen and Basil can go only so far, for, as Hildebrand says, "The Fathers' appropriation of *paideia* must be studied as a matter of practice rather than theory" alone.¹¹⁷ This is because they both make use of pagan sources in their writings, as is especially clear in Basil's *Homilia in hexaemeron*, and one cannot rule out in advance the possibility that their practice may not line up perfectly with their expressed theory. The theoretical bottom line, to me, is that, having been educated as children in both Scripture and secular disciplines, they both affirm that secular education, while flawed and even potentially dangerous, can be very useful to Christians. This theory, then, is the foundation for my examination of the extent to which philosophical cosmology can be useful in the interpretation of Genesis 1.

¹¹⁶ "He has not written a treatise on the all-encompassing value of pagan literature" (Hildebrand, *Theology*, 5).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

CHAPTER 2

Hermeneutics

A study of Origen's and Basil's interpretations of Genesis 1 should naturally be preceded by a study of how they interpret the Bible in general. The questions at hand are: what are Origen's hermeneutics, what are Basil's, and what is the relationship between the two? I shall argue that Basil is a hermeneutical disciple of Origen, who uses his threefold method of biblical exegesis and also shares his ascetic understanding of the task of exegesis. Basil, however, is no slavish imitator. By the end of his life, in his *Homilia in hexaemeron*, Basil has become very cautious about exposing so-called "simple" Christians, who constitute the bulk of his audience, to figurative interpretations of Scripture. Such interpretations, Basil has learned, can become an occasion for heresy that may easily mislead the simple. Likewise, he is reticent, though not completely unwilling, as I shall show, to invoke Origen's principle that some passages of the Bible should not be interpreted literally because to do so would result in absurdity. These differences do not constitute a renunciation of Origen's hermeneutics, as sometimes has been thought, but rather a development within the same hermeneutical system. Both Origen and Basil recognize, at least as a matter of theory, that figurative interpretations are meant for more advanced and "perfect" Christians, while simple Christians are edified by the ordinary, literal meaning of Scripture. It is this principle that Basil puts into practice when he eschews allegorical interpretations in his hexaemeral homilies.

ORIGEN

Origen is the first Christian to lay out his scriptural hermeneutics systematically, which he does in *De princ.*, IV, 1-3,¹ a passage that has been preserved in its original Greek as the first chapter of Basil and Gregory Naz.'s *Philocalia*.² His central hermeneutical theory is that the Bible has three meanings corresponding to what he believes are the three parts of the human person: flesh (σάρξ) or body (σώμα), soul (ψυχή), and spirit (πνεύμα, *ibid.*, IV, 2.4).

The “bodily” interpretation of Scripture is its “ordinary interpretation” (τὴν πρόχειρον ἐκδοχὴν, my translation), which Rufinus expansively translates as “common and historical interpretation” (*ibid.*).³ What Origen means by the “ordinary interpretation” is the usual, common meanings that individual words have outside of any particular context. For instance, he says that the command in Exod 16:29, “Sit, each person, in your houses; let no one go out from his place on the seventh day,”⁴ “is an impossible one to observe literally (κατὰ τὴν λέξιν), for no living creature could sit for a whole day” (*ibid.*, IV, 3.2).⁵ In instances like this, Origen’s ordinary interpretation can seem more literalistic than literal, as in this context where “Sit in your houses” surely means “Stay at home,” without implying that one is to remain in the seated

¹ “No earlier Christian had attempted anything like the *On First Principles*. It was a new genre for Christian literature, so far as we can tell” (Heine, *Origen*, 131).

² There are, however, some minor discrepancies between the Latin and Greek versions. For example, Rufinus omits passages in 3.5 and 3.6-7, while the *Philocalia* omits passages in 3.9 and 3.10 and ends with 3.11, leaving off 3.12-15 altogether.

³ *commune istum et historiam intellectum.*

⁴ Since both Origen and Basil read the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament, I take quotations of it from the New English Translation of the Septuagint, available online at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition> (accessed March 12, 2013).

⁵ ἀδύνατόν ἐστι φυλαχθῆναι κατὰ τὴν λέξιν, οὐδενὸς ζώου δυναμένου δι’ ὅλης καθέξεσθαι τῆς ἡμέρας.

position all day long without interruption. His apparent literalism is the result of his system of interpretation, according to which to interpret a figure of speech, such as a metaphor, hyperbole, allegory, or parable, even if its meaning is obvious, is already to move beyond the literal to the figurative. I think that most biblical interpreters today would be inclined to say that the “figurative” meaning of figures of speech is actually the ordinary, literal meaning. Yet if Origen’s hermeneutic may seem artificial, one should consider that the identification or non-identification of figures of speech in Scripture is not always so obvious as, say, “I am the vine” (John 15:5), and is occasionally the source of theological debate.⁶

According to Origen, some scriptural texts, like Exod 16:29, actually lack a “body” and have only a “soul” and “spirit,” which are never lacking (ibid., IV, 2.5). If one were to take the bodily interpretation to be simply the literal interpretation, this would be nonsense, as any grammatically coherent text can be interpreted literally.⁷ What Origen means is that some passages, when taken “in a literal sense” (*ἐπὶ τῷ ῥητῶν*),⁸ say things that are “irrational” (*ἄλόγων*) or “impossible” (*ἄδυνάτων*, ibid., IV, 3.4). The passages are not to be rejected, but the literal interpretation of them is. This is what he means when he says that they have no body. Such passages are, however, the exception rather than the rule. He defends himself against the accusation that his hermeneutic undermines the authority of the Bible:

⁶ For example, the words of the institution of the Eucharist (“This is my body,” “This is the cup of my blood”), or Genesis 1-3.

⁷ Cf. Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture within Origen’s Exegesis* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 52. Her viewpoint on Origen’s threefold hermeneutic is explained below.

⁸ Synonymous with *κατὰ τὴν λέξιν. κατὰ τὸ ῥητόν* (see below) is another synonymous phrase.

But someone . . . may suspect us of saying that because some of the history did not happen, therefore none of it happened; and because a certain law is irrational or impossible when taken literally, therefore no laws ought to be kept to the letter. . . . We must assert, therefore, that in regard to some things we are clearly aware that the historical fact is true; as that Abraham was buried in the double cave at Hebron . . . and thousands of other facts. For the passages which are historically true are far more numerous than those which are composed with purely spiritual meanings. (Ibid., IV, 3.4)⁹

Not only is the bulk of the Bible historically accurate, it is morally and spiritually useful for Christians even when read at the bodily level: “The intention was to make even . . . the bodily part of the scriptures in many respects not unprofitable but capable of improving the multitude in so far as they receive it” (ibid., IV, 2.8).¹⁰ Thus Dively Lauro defines the bodily sense as “the literal reading that spiritually benefits the hearer.”¹¹ The purpose of the impossible and irrational passages, which he calls “stumbling-blocks” (*σκάνδαλα*), is to alert the careful reader to the fact that all passages of Scripture have figurative meanings:

If the usefulness of the law and the sequence and ease of the narrative were at first sight clearly discernible throughout, we should be unaware that there was anything beyond the ordinary meaning (*τὸ πρόχειρον*) for us to understand in the scriptures. Consequently the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks, as it were, and hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the history. (Ibid., IV, 2.9)¹²

⁹ ἵνα δὲ μὴ ὑπολάβῃ τις ἡμᾶς . . . λέγειν, ὅτι οὐδεμία ἱστορία γέγονεν, ἐπεὶ τις οὐ γέγονε, καὶ οὐδεμία νομοθεσία κατὰ τὸ ρητὸν τηρητέα ἐστίν, ἐπεὶ τις κατὰ τὴν λέξιν ἄλογος τυγχάνει ἢ ἀδύνατος . . . · λεκτέον ὅτι σαφῶς ἡμῖν παρίσταται περὶ τινῶν τὸ τῆς ἱστορίας εἶναι ἀληθές, ὥς ὅτι Ἀβραὰμ ἐν τῷ διπλῷ σπηλαίῳ ἐτάφη ἐν Χεβρὼν . . . , καὶ ἄλλα μυρία. πολλῶ γὰρ πλείονά ἐστι τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἱστορίαν ἀληθευόμενα τῶν προσυφανθέντων γυμνῶν πνευματικῶν.

¹⁰ προέκειτο γὰρ καὶ . . . τὸ σωματικὸν τῶν γραφῶν ἐν πολλοῖς ποιῆσαι οὐκ ἀνωφελές δυνάμενόν τε τοὺς πολλοὺς, ὥς χωροῦσι, βελτιοῦν.

¹¹ Dively Lauro, *Soul and Spirit*, 53.

¹² ἐπεὶ περ, εἰ δι’ ὅλων σαφῶς τὸ τῆς νομοθεσίας χρήσιμον αὐτόθεν ἐφαίνετο καὶ τὸ τῆς ἱστορίας ἀκόλουθον καὶ γλαφυρόν, ἠπιστήσαμεν ἂν ἄλλο τι παρὰ τὸ πρόχειρον νοεῖσθαι δύνασθαι ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς, ὡκονόμησέ τινα οἶνεῖ σκάνδαλα καὶ προσκόμματα καὶ ἀδύνατα διὰ μέσου ἐγκαταταχθῆναι τῷ νόμῳ καὶ τῇ ἱστορίᾳ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγος.

Origen never defines the soul of Scripture, but he does give a biblical example of it (ibid., IV, 2.6), namely Deut 25:4 as interpreted by St. Paul:

It is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is God concerned about oxen, or is he not really speaking for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope, and the thresher in hope of receiving a share. (1 Cor 9:9-10)¹³

The “psychic”¹⁴ interpretation traditionally has been designated “moral” because it edifies the hearer. Thus Dively Lauro defines it as a “nonliteral, figurative reading of the text that more generally calls the hearer to shun vice and grow in virtue.”¹⁵ It is “figurative” in that words are taken to refer to things other than those to which they usually refer; in this sense the words are not being taken in their “ordinary” sense. For instance, in Paul’s reading of Deut 25:4, the word *ox* refers not to the animal ordinarily signified by that name but to the Christian missionary, and the word *grain* not to the plant ordinarily called by that name but to the Gospel of Christ.

Finally, the spiritual interpretation of Scripture is a figurative interpretation that discloses a theological meaning. Again Origen cites Paul (*De princ.*, IV, 2.6), who, referring to the events of Exodus 13-17, writes:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the

I have replaced Butterworth’s “obvious” with “ordinary” (τὸ πρόχειρον) solely for the sake of consistency.

¹³ Quotations from the New Testament are taken from the New American Bible.

¹⁴ Since there is no adjectival form of the word *soul*, I must resort either to *animal*, from the Latin word *anima*, or *psychic*, from the Greek word *ψυχῆς*. Neither English word naturally makes one think of the soul, but *psychic* is, I think, preferable to *animal*.

¹⁵ Dively Lauro, *Soul and Spirit*, 2.

rock was the Christ. . . . These things happened as examples for us. (1 Cor 10:1-4, 6)

Dively Lauro defines the spiritual sense as a “nonliteral sense that enlightens the reader concerning God’s plan of salvation through Christ.”¹⁶ It is figurative in exactly the same way that the psychic interpretation is. Both the psychic and spiritual interpretations can also be called “allegorical,” which is a synonym for “figurative.” Origen himself says “that there are allegories in the Scriptures,”¹⁷ quoting Gal 4:21-24 as proof (*De princ.*, IV, 2.6).

In addition to corresponding to the parts of the human person, the three parts of Scripture also correspond to three classes of Christians, according to Origen. The body of Scripture is the only part known by “the simple” (*ὁ ἀπλούστερος*, *ibid.*, IV, 2.4, my translation). These simple Christians do not know how to interpret the Bible figuratively and take everything literally, even those passages that, if taken literally, are irrational or impossible. As a result, they end up holding “false opinions” (*ψευδοδοξιών*) and making “impious or ignorant assertions about God” (*ibid.*, IV, 2.1),¹⁸ “believ[ing] such things about him as would not be believed of the most savage and unjust of men” (*ibid.*, IV, 2.2).¹⁹ He is referring in particular to passages of the Bible that speak of God anthropomorphically. Jews are just such literal-minded readers, according to Origen, which is why they rejected Jesus, who fulfilled prophecy spiritually, not literally (*ibid.*, IV, 2.1). However, even the simple Christians have an advantage over Jews in that they at least

¹⁶ Dively Lauro, *Soul and Spirit*, 2.

¹⁷ ἀλληγορίας εἶναι ἐν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις.

¹⁸ ἀσεβειῶν ἢ ἰδιωτικῶν περὶ θεοῦ λόγων.

¹⁹ τοιαῦτα δὲ ὑπολαμβάνουσι περὶ αὐτοῦ, ὅποια οὐδὲ περὶ τοῦ ὠμοτάτου καὶ ἀδικωτάτου ἀνθρώπου.

believe the doctrine of the Church that there are “mystical dispensations” (*οἰκονομαὶ μυστικάι*) hidden in the Old Testament (ibid., I, pref., 8), though they do not know exactly what or where these are (ibid., IV, 2.2).

The second class of Christian, “the one who has made some progress” (*ὁ ἐπὶ ποσὸν ἀναβεβηκώς*, ibid., IV, 2.4, my translation), can determine where and how the Bible can be interpreted psychically and benefit from such interpretations. Such people will be able to understand how a hidden meaning of Scripture helps them to advance in virtue and to avoid vice. They are on the path toward joining the final class: “the perfect” (*ὁ τέλειος*, ibid., my translation). Perfect Christians understand both figurative interpretations. Obviously Origen considers himself to be one of these perfect Christians since he frequently gives spiritual interpretations of Scripture.

Origen does not imagine himself to have invented the nonliteral interpretation of sacred texts. He does not present himself as the creator of a new method of interpretation, but, on the contrary, he comes to the Scriptures of the Church already recognizing the allegorical reading of sacred texts as a traditional principle of religious exegesis. The pagan writer Celsus, in a book he wrote against Christianity in which he boasted (according to Origen) that he knew all Christian beliefs, had accused the Bible of being unworthy literature. Origen, in his reply to Celsus (*Contra Celsum*), accuses him of arrogance. Celsus, he says, is like a person who, just because he lives in Egypt and has heard the Egyptian myths, thinks that he knows all the religious doctrines of the Egyptian sages. It is not enough, Origen explains, just to hear their stories; one must consult the wise men who know how to interpret them allegorically: “He [Celsus] is like a man who went to stay in Egypt, where the Egyptian wise men who have studied the traditional

writings give profound philosophical interpretations of what they regard as divine, while the common people hear certain myths of which they are proud, although they do not understand the meaning” (*Cont. Cels.*, I, 12).²⁰ Sacred texts or myths, of whatever people, are meant to be read allegorically (*ibid.*); that is what all wise men do. The common people, like those Christians he calls “simple,” fail to grasp the deeper meanings. Celsus is such a simple reader.

Although he grants the universal validity of explaining myths allegorically, later in his apologetic against Celsus Origen specifically criticizes the Stoic practice of allegorizing the Greek myths. In his eyes, the crucial difference between reading the Greek myths allegorically and reading the Bible allegorically is not in method but in the value of the texts themselves when taken at face value, i.e., their ordinary, bodily meaning. The Stoic allegorists had the right method, but the wrong texts. Like Plato, Origen believes that the Greek myths offer immoral examples to the young people who read them:

If any stories of myths and legends may be said to be shameful on the ground of their first meaning (*κατὰ τὴν πρώτην ἐκδοχὴν*) [as Celsus says about the Old Testament], whether they were composed with a hidden interpretation or in any other way, what stories deserve to be so regarded more than those of the Greeks? . . . We truly have reverence for the name of God and the names of the beautiful things which he has created, so that we do not accept any myth which might harm the young even if it is to be understood allegorically. (*Ibid.*, IV, 48)²¹

²⁰ ὥς εἴ τις τῇ Αἰγύπτῳ ἐπιδημήσας, ἔνθα οἱ μὲν Αἰγυπτίων σοφοὶ κατὰ τὰ πάτρια γράμματα πολλὰ φιλοσοφοῦσι περὶ τῶν παρ’ αὐτοῖς νενομισμένων θείων, οἱ δὲ ἰδιῶται μύθους τινὰς ἀκούοντες, ὧν τοὺς λόγους οὐκ ἐπίστανται.

²¹ εἴπερ αἰσχύνῃς ἄξια τὰ κατὰ τὴν πρώτην ἐκδοχὴν χρὴ λέγειν μύθων καὶ ἀναπλασμάτων, εἴτε δι’ ὑπονοίας γεγραμμένων εἴτε ἄλλως ὅπως οὖν· ἐπὶ τίνων τοῦτο ἢ ἐπὶ τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν χρὴ λέγειν ἱστοριῶν; . . . ἡμεῖς οὖν ἀληθῶς ἔχομεν «δέος» περὶ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῶν καλῶν αὐτοῦ δημιουργημάτων, ὥς προφάσει τροπολογίας μῦθόν τινα παραδέξασθαι ἐπὶ βλάβῃ τῶν νέων.

Butterworth translates *πρώτην* as “literal,” which is certainly the sense of the phrase.

In other words, Origen turns Celsus's criticism of the Old Testament back around: it is not the Old Testament that contains immoral stories liable to corrupt the minds of the young, but the Greek myths. That Greek literary critics and philosophers justified these tales of divine debauchery by saying that they were actually allegories for philosophical truths, even if true, does not justify exposing them to young people, who can grasp only their literal meaning. Thus the validity of the nonliteral sense of a sacred text actually depends upon the value of the literal sense, which can thus be called the "first" sense. This critique undermines one of the very purposes of allegorical reading as it was used by the Stoics: to defend the sacred text against a charge of impiety.²² Impiety is precisely the problem with the Greek myths, in Origen's eyes, and allegorical interpretation does not solve it, because while the allegorical meanings may be good for the intelligentsia (like Origen's "perfect") who know how to decode them, the multitude (the "simple") are left with tales of debauchery that hurt rather than help them. This is not true of the Bible: "It is the legends of the Greeks which are not only "very stupid" [as Celsus says of the Bible] but also very impious. For our Scriptures have been written to suit exactly the multitude of the simple (*ἀπλουστέρων*), a consideration to which no attention was paid by those who made up the fictitious stories of the Greeks" (ibid., IV, 50).²³ This highlights the importance, in Origen's thinking, of the moral usefulness of the Bible, even in its literal sense, which must be

²² See Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems*, edited and translated by Donald A. Russell and David Konstan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), xii. Cf. David Dawson's analysis of Heraclitus in *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 38-52.

²³ τὰ Ἑλλήνων οὐ μόνον εὐηθέστατα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀσεβέστατα μεμυθολόγηται, τὰ γὰρ ἡμέτερα ἐστόχασται καὶ τοῦ πλήθους τῶν ἀπλουστέρων, ὅπερ οἱ τὰ Ἑλληνικά πλάσματα ποιήσαντες οὐκ ἐφυλάξαντο.

Chadwick renders *ἀπλουστέρων* as "simple-minded," but I have kept "simple" purely for the sake of consistency.

useful for the simple readers, who constitute the majority of its readership.²⁴ If it encouraged immorality, then it would be no better than the Greek myths.

Here someone may charge Origen with inconsistency and hypocrisy, since he admits in *De principiis* that there are in fact, in Genesis, immoral stories that have a hidden meaning, the very things he tells Celsus that he will not allow in pagan myths even under the pretext of allegory: “If, for instance, an inquirer were to be in a difficulty, about the intercourse of Lot with his daughters, or the two wives of Abraham, or the two sisters married to Jacob, or the two handmaids who bore children by him, [the simple] can say nothing except that these things are mysteries not understood by us” (*De princ.*, IV, 2.2).²⁵ Although Origen is describing the viewpoint of the simple, he does not contradict their premise, merely noting their inability to explain exactly how these sinful deeds conceal spiritual mysteries. So Origen does seem to be breaking his own rule here. However, I think his point is that, in Homer and Hesiod, the impious stories are the rule, whereas in the Bible they are the exception, rather in the same way that he says that the stories that have a bodily meaning and can therefore be interpreted literally are far more numerous than those that lack it and must be read only as allegories (*ibid.*, IV, 3.4, quoted above). Elsewhere Origen gives a better explanation for the presence of immoral stories in the

²⁴ Emphasized by Dively Lauro, *Soul and Spirit*, 53-55; Heine, *Origen*, 134-35; and Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 193.

²⁵ εἰ γοῦν ἐπαπορήσαι τις περὶ τῆς τοῦ Λωτ θυγατρομιξίας καὶ τῶν δύο γυναικῶν τοῦ Ἀβρααμ δύο τε ἀδελφῶν γεγαμημένων τῷ Ἰακωβ καὶ δύο παιδισκῶν τετεκνωκυῖν ἐξ αὐτοῦ, [ἀπλούστεροι] οὐδὲν ἄλλο φήσουσιν ἢ μυστήρια ταῦτα τυγχάνειν ὑφ’ ἡμῶν μὴ νοούμενα.

Bible, when he simply notes that some stories record “the acts of righteous men and the sins that these men occasionally committed, seeing they were but human” (ibid., IV, 2.8).²⁶

The Ascetic Character of Exegesis

The final classification of the “perfect” Christian recalls Origen’s commitment to asceticism, which is the life of perfection, as described by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.*, VI, 3.9, 12). I do not think that it is a coincidence that Origen embarks upon the vocation of catechist, which quickly gives way to the vocation of theologian and exegete, at the same time that he embraces the ascetic lifestyle. Martens has recently argued (and correctly, I am sure) that Origen sees the task of biblical exegesis within the context of the ascetic life.²⁷ Though Origen is technically accomplished in reading ancient texts through his training in *παιδεία*, in determining and explaining the spiritual meaning of the Bible he sees his scholarly proficiency as no substitute for spiritual perfection, for it is the perfect who understand the highest meaning of Scripture. Martens demonstrates that this was Origen’s opinion by referring to some remarks he makes at the beginning of his commentary on John’s Gospel, in which Origen identifies the 144,000 sealed of Rev 7:2-5 and 14:1-5 as celibate men, “who were not defiled with women” (Rev 14:4), devoted totally to serving God (i.e., ascetics). He writes:

Most of us who approach the teachings of Christ, since we have much time for the activities of life and offer a few acts to God, would perhaps be those from the tribes who have a little fellowship with the priests and support the service of God in a few things. But those who devote themselves to the divine Word and truly exist by the service of God alone will properly be said to be Levites and priests in

²⁶ δικαίων πράξεις καὶ τῶν αὐτῶν τούτων ποτὲ γεγόμενα ἁμαρτήματα ὡς ἄνθρώπων.

²⁷ Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 89-94.

accordance with the excellence of their activities in this work. (*In Io. comm.*, I, 2.10)²⁸

As in *De Principiis*, IV, Origen here makes a contrast between perfect, ascetic Christians, who hold no secular employment (“truly exist by the service of God alone”), and ordinary Christians, who are too busy with “the activities of life” to give their complete attention to the Bible. (Here he does not mention the middle class of those “who have made some progress.”) It is the ascetics who have the time to give themselves over to biblical studies. Origen then explains that, for this highest class of Christians, the greatest ascetic activity is, in fact, the exegesis of the New Testament: “What more excellent activity ought there be, after our physical separation from one another, than the careful examination of the gospel?” (*ibid.*, I, 2.12)²⁹ Origen goes on to explain that the word *gospel* refers to the entire New Testament (*ibid.*, I, 3.17-4.26). Presumably, given how much attention he himself devotes to it, he considers the interpretation of the Old Testament, which “proclaims him [Jesus] in advance” (*προκηρύσσουσα*, *ibid.*, I, 3.17), a close second to the interpretation of the New. Here we have a basic description of the ascetic life as

²⁸ ἡμῶν δὴ τῶν προσιόντων τοῖς Χριστοῦ μαθήμασιν οἱ μὲν πλεῖστοι, τὰ πολλὰ τῷ βίῳ σχολάζοντες καὶ ὀλίγας πράξεις τῷ θεῷ ἀνατιθέντες, τάχα εἶεν ἂν οἱ ἀπὸ τῶν φυλῶν ὀλίγην πρὸς τοὺς ἱερεῖς ἔχοντες κοινωνίαν καὶ ἐν βραχείῃ τὸ θεραπευτικὸν τοῦ θεοῦ τρέφοντες· οἱ δὲ ἀνακείμενοι τῷ θείῳ λόγῳ καὶ πρὸς μόνῃ τῇ θεραπείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ γινόμενοι γνησίως κατὰ τὴν διαφορὰν τῶν εἰς τοῦτο κινήματων λευΐται καὶ ἱερεῖς οὐκ ἀτόπως λεχθήσονται.

Partially quoted in Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 91.

Origen, *Commentaire sur Saint Jean*, edited by Cécile Blanc, 5 vols., SC 120 (2nd ed.), 157, 222, 290, 385 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970, 1975, 1982, 1992, 1996).

———, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, translated by Ronald E. Heine, 2 vols., FOTC 80, 89 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989, 1993).

²⁹ ποῖαν ἐχρῆν εἶναι μετὰ τὸ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα κεχωρίσθαι ἡμᾶς ἀλλήλων διαφέρουσιν ἢ τὴν περὶ εὐαγγελίου ἐξέτασιν;

Quoted in Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 91.

Origen knows it: celibacy, serving God, physical separation from others, and the careful study of the New Testament. This picture is augmented by Eusebius's aforementioned description of Origen's ascetic practices, which include fasting, abstinence from alcohol, poverty, and bodily mortification (e.g., sleeping on the floor).

The Scholarly Evaluation of Origen's Exegesis

The value of Origen's threefold hermeneutic has been controversial, and older scholars can be divided into two schools of thought, one more negative and the other more positive.³⁰ Eugène de Faye, voicing the criticism of many, sees Origen's threefold hermeneutic as nothing other than a way for Origen to exploit the Bible by reading his own thought into it,³¹ a judgment no less reasonable today than it was in the 1920's. In 1959, Richard Hanson basically restates de Faye's judgment: "[Origen's] scheme . . . was largely a façade or a rationalization whereby he was able to read into the Bible what he wanted to find there."³² Along the same lines, in 1983, Trigg says that allegorical interpretation, as a method practiced by the Stoics when they read the epic poems of Homer, is obviously "a desperate effort to avoid the plain meaning of the text," which is also exactly how Origen sometimes uses it, as when, for instance, "he sought to

³⁰ Cf. R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*, reprinted with an introduction by J. W. Trigg (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), ix.

³¹ Eugène de Faye, *Origen and His Work*, translated by Fred Rothwell (NY: Columbia University Press, 1929), 33-52. His main work on Origen is *Origène: sa vie, son œuvre, sa pensée*, 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions Ernest Leroux, 1923-1928).

³² Hanson, *Allegory*, 258.

reinterpret the bloodthirsty war for the conquest of Canaan as Christ's conquest of the fallen human soul."³³

In the 1930's Hans Urs von Balthasar begins the Catholic re-appreciation of Origen and argues that Origen's spiritual interpretation of Scripture is a logically necessary consequence of believing that Scripture is the Word of God, who is Spirit.³⁴ Von Balthasar says that what has derisively been labeled Origen's "allégorisme n'est . . . rien d'autre que le développement du dogme chrétienne par l'enseignement des docteurs de l'Église."³⁵ In the 1940's, Daniélou follows in von Balthasar's footsteps but distinguishes in Origen two competing systems: the threefold system consciously espoused by Origen, which Daniélou argues he borrowed from Philo, thus making it something foreign to Christianity;³⁶ and an authentically Christian tradition that distinguishes two meanings: the literal and the typological. The former system, he says, is something Origen "tries to impose" on Scripture, "an artificial proceeding . . . destined to be a great drag on exegesis in later times."³⁷ In contrast, he argues, the latter system is "the authentic tradition of the Church."³⁸ In 1950, Daniélou is followed by Henri de Lubac, who likewise

³³ Trigg, *Bible and Philosophy*, 121-22.

³⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Parole et Mystère chez Origène* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1957), 54. This is a reprint of his two-part article "Le Mysterion d'Origène," *Recherches de science religieuse* 26 (1936): 513-62, and 27 (1937): 38-64.

³⁵ Von Balthasar, *Parole et Mystère*, 57.

³⁶ Daniélou, *Origen*, 188-89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 187. For his distinction between allegory, upon which the threefold system depends, and typology, see also his earlier article "Traversée de la Mer Rouge et baptême aux premiers siècles," *Recherches des sciences religieuses* 22 (1946): 402-30.

espouses a twofold hermeneutic of the literal and the spiritual.³⁹ However, he also criticizes Daniélou's attempt to distinguish sharply between allegory as something foreign to Christianity and typology as the authentic Christian tradition.⁴⁰ De Lubac argues that the spiritual sense contains more than just typology: "[Typology] leaves outside its perspectives explanations that are most properly spiritual. . . . Those who have been the first to emphasize 'typology' have made a choice of solid ground, but they have made it too narrow."⁴¹ He adds in a footnote: "It is not certain . . . that typology always succeeds, as it wishes, to distinguish itself from the allegory it condemns."⁴² Thus de Lubac's evaluation of Origen's hermeneutics is more positive than Daniélou's, in that he does not limit what is of value in Origen to typology alone. In the 1960's, Daniélou and de Lubac are joined by Crouzel, who follows his predecessors in criticizing Origen's threefold system (as opposed to a twofold system) as artificial:

This [threefold] classification does little to clarify Origen's exegesis: developed by starting from a different reality, anthropology, it gives the impression that it is imposed from without. . . . His vocabulary . . . does not permit a simple distinction between the second and third meanings.⁴³

Thus he rejects Daniélou's distinction between allegory and typology, as did both de Lubac and Hanson: "In its judgement of value the distinction between 'allegory' and 'typology' is too

³⁹ Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, translated by Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Hanson agrees with this criticism (*Allegory*, 253).

⁴¹ De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 442.

⁴² Ibid., 442n34. See also his earlier article "'Typologie' et 'Allégorisme,'" *Recherches des sciences religieuses* 34 (1947): 180-226.

⁴³ Crouzel, *Origen*, 79. His first major work on Origen's exegesis is *Origène et la "connaissance mystique"* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961).

systematized and for that reason it sacrifices an essential aspect of Christian reality.”⁴⁴

Nevertheless, his overall judgment of Origen’s exegesis, provided that it is stripped of its threefold framework, remains positive:

Origen and Jerome practiced both kinds [of exegesis] without running into problems. . . . Literal exegesis . . . aims to recover what the sacred author meant. . . . Spiritual exegesis gives the passage its place in the mystery of Christ. . . . There is no need to contrast things which are complementary.⁴⁵

More recently Karen Torjesen has argued that Origen’s exegesis is fundamentally audience-oriented, as reading and interpreting Scripture are the means by which Christians are taught the saving doctrines of Christ.⁴⁶ She also follows a twofold division within Origen between the literal meaning of Scripture, which records how Christ taught the people of the Old Testament, and the spiritual meaning, through which he teaches present-day readers.⁴⁷ In contrast, Frances Young departs from previous commentators by de-emphasizing the literal/spiritual dichotomy as a way of categorizing patristic exegesis in general.⁴⁸ Instead she emphasizes the multivalence of scriptural texts, especially when they are read intertextually, as they usually are by the Fathers.⁴⁹ Intertextual reading was common both within the Bible itself

⁴⁴ Crouzel, *Origen*, 82. See also his article “La distinction de la ‘typologie’ et de l’ ‘allégorie,’” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 65 (1964): 161-74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁶ Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*.

⁴⁹ “For such people [i.e., upper-class literati] what we now call ‘intertextuality’ was an important feature of literature, one text achieving its status by its allusive and mimetic relationship with others that had the status of classics” (*ibid.*, 11).

and within the ancient Greek scholarly tradition that sought to interpret Homer by Homer.⁵⁰ It is no surprise that Origen draws upon this tradition, which is part of the secular *παιδεία*, as something useful for biblical studies.

Young makes an important point for the interpretation of Origen's hermeneutics, which is that an appreciation of the intertextual nature of much of his spiritual reading should qualify the very use of the word *allegorical* in describing it. That is, often Origen is not so much trying to construct or discern an allegory per se as seeking, by means of concordance-work on the Bible, to discover to what certain words refer.⁵¹ These references may be double or even triple (psychic and spiritual). For ancient interpreters, Young writes,

The fundamental question for understanding meaning was discerning the reference. This did not mean a simplistic literalism. . . . Language was symbolic, and its meaning lay in that to which it referred. The difference between 'literal' and 'allegorical' references was not absolute, but lay on a spectrum. . . . Often to interpret something allegorically was simply to recognize metaphor rather than taking something very woodenly according to the letter. All language signified, and as sign was symbolic. The crucial question was what it symbolised or referred to.⁵²

When Young speaks of Origen specifically, she does not collapse his psychic and spiritual readings into one but actually refers to them as "secondary and tertiary levels" in "a complete

⁵⁰ For example, Porphyry: "Since I think it fit to clarify Homer from Homer. . ." (*ἀξιῶν δὲ ἐγὼ Ὅμηρον ἐξ Ὁμήρου σαφηνίζειν*. . ., *Quaest. Hom.* I, 63, my translation).

Porphyry, *Quaestionum Homericarum liber I*, edited by Angelo Raffaele Sodano (Naples: Giannini, 1970).

Cf. McGuckin, "Origen as Literary Critic," 123n11.

⁵¹ In chapter 4 I will show how his twofold interpretation of the waters above and below the firmament is a perfect example of this principle of intertextuality.

⁵² Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 120.

educational system”⁵³ that, she argues, the Fathers were building to replace the traditional Greek *παιδεία*.

Young’s approach seems to me to pave the way for the work of Dively Lauro, who by means of a study of Origen’s homilies and commentaries defends his theoretical distinction between the psychic and spiritual senses as, not just legitimate, but actually critical to the proper understanding of his exegesis. She writes: “The nonliteral, moral [i.e., psychic] sense, and more specifically its practical distinction from and relationship with the other nonliteral, spiritual sense, is the key to his exegetical effort.”⁵⁴ As I already mentioned, she also highlights the importance of the usefulness of Scripture for Origen.

These themes have been very recently identified by Heine as well, who specifically identifies three key principles of Origen’s hermeneutics. First: “Christ unlocks the obscurity of Scripture.”⁵⁵ All the difficult and confusing passages that exegetes must deal with in the Old Testament (and also in the New) are solved by reference to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Thus what might be a problem for scriptural interpreters is actually a benefit, for the “stumbling-blocks” in Scripture are revelations of mysteries, as long as you know how to unlock them by using the key that is Christ. Second: “all Scripture must be useful.”⁵⁶ Once again this reinforces the need for allegorical interpretations, for many of the histories of the Old Testament, especially when they contain problematic elements, though usually historically true, on the surface do not

⁵³ Ibid., 292.

⁵⁴ Dively Lauro, *Soul and Spirit*, 36.

⁵⁵ Heine, *Origen*, 134.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

seem to be of any benefit to contemporary Christians. Third: Scripture's obscurities can be explained intertextually.⁵⁷ The hidden meaning of a particular word or phrase can often be discovered by looking at how the same word or phrase is used elsewhere.

Overall, the drift of recent Origenian scholarship seeks a positive appreciation of Origen's hermeneutics, if not an actual "defense" of them.⁵⁸ I intend to follow in this trajectory, believing that Origen's and Basil's biblical hermeneutics vis-à-vis philosophical cosmology have something to offer modern readers of the Bible, though, of course, they are not to be imitated slavishly, seeing as how knowledge of both cosmology and the Bible have progressed considerably in the intervening centuries.

Exegetical Predecessors

Not content with taking Origen's Pauline presentation of his hermeneutical system at face value, many scholars have sought in his works hints of non-biblical influences. Crouzel affirms such influences generally, mentioning in particular: rabbinic exegesis, which he says influenced Paul himself; Old and New Testament apocrypha; the Stoic practice of reading Homer and Hesiod allegorically; the Platonist worldview; Philo; and the disciples of the heretic Valentinus.⁵⁹ As I showed above with Daniélou's condemnation of Philo's purported influence on Origen, the detection of non-biblical influences on Origen's exegesis is sometimes coupled with a negative judgment upon those influences. With the exception of Plato, all of the alleged sources above

⁵⁷ Ibid., 135-36.

⁵⁸ "I certainly do not pretend to have defended his view of, or approach to, scriptural interpretation in this study" (Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 244).

⁵⁹ Crouzel, *Origen*, 78-79.

have been studied by Jean Pépin⁶⁰ and Dawson.⁶¹ These studies reveal the intellectual environment in which Origen works, but they do not deprive him of the originality of either his method or his exegesis. It is not my intention to pursue critical questions about Origen's predecessors and sources in this dissertation. My interest lies more in the direction of the milieu recently identified by Heine. He ignores most of the purported influences above, instead focusing on Origen's education in the Alexandrian philological and grammatical scholarship and the Jewish and Christian milieus and literature of second-century Alexandria.⁶² In other words, Origen's exegesis is best seen as stemming from his appropriation of the Greek *παιδεία* in which he was first formed.⁶³

BASIL AS AN EXEGETICAL DISCIPLE OF ORIGEN

Unlike Origen, Basil never writes a treatise on hermeneutics. He does not need to: by including Origen's treatise from *De princ.*, IV, as the first chapter of his and Gregory Naz.'s *Philocalia*, he makes Origen's hermeneutics his own. That he shares Origen's hermeneutics is confirmed in his *Homilia in Psalmos*, in which he puts them into practice. However, the matter is problematized by an apparent conflict between those hermeneutics and what Basil says later in his *Homiliae in hexaemeron*, in which he seems to oppose the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. In what follows I will both explain how Basil follows Origen and attempt to solve the problem of the apparent inconsistency.

⁶⁰ Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, rev. ed. (Paris: Études Augustinennes, 1976).

⁶¹ Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*.

⁶² Heine, *Origen*, 22-64.

⁶³ Thus chapter 1.

When one considers both Basil's exegetical theory and his exegetical praxis in his homilies on the Psalms, one sees that Basil is a disciple of Origen. Sometimes his continuity with Origen extends even to the verbal level: in his homily on Psalm 32,⁶⁴ for instance, he uses the exact terminology of Origen to describe the literal sense of Scripture, namely "the bodily sense" (*τὸν σωματικὸν νοῦν*, *Hom. in Ps. 32*, 6 [PG 29, 340c] = *De princ.* IV, 2.5, my translation). William Tieck cites several convincing examples of allegorizing interpretations in Basil's sermons on the Psalms: *Hom. in Pss.* 28, 1, 3; 32, 6; 45, 4,⁶⁵ nor is this list exhaustive. To quote one example, here is how Basil begins his sermon on Psalm 28:

Now, according to the history, it will seem that the order was given to the priests and Levites who had acquitted themselves of the work. . . . But, according to our *νοῦν*, which contemplates the sublime and makes the law familiar to us through a meaning which is noble and fitted to the divine Scripture, this occurs to us: the ram does not mean the male among the sheep; nor the tabernacle the building constructed from this inanimate material; and the going out from the tabernacle does not mean the departure from the temple; but the tabernacle for us is this body. . . . And the finishing of the tabernacle is the departure from this life, for which Scripture bids us to be prepared, bringing this thing and that to the Lord. (*Hom. in Ps. 28*, 1 [PG 29, 281ab])⁶⁶

⁶⁴ I follow the enumeration of the Psalms in the LXX, the Old Testament of Basil and Origen.

⁶⁵ William Arthur Tieck, *Basil of Caesarea and the Bible*, PhD diss. (NY: Columbia University, 1953), 174nn1,3.

⁶⁶ *πρὸς μὲν οὖν τὴν ἱστορίαν δόξει τοῖς ἱερεῦσι καὶ τοῖς λευίταις ἀφεμένοις τοῦ ἔργου τὸ παράγγελμα δίδοσθαι τοῦτο. . . . πρὸς δὲ τὸν ἡμέτερον νοῦν τὸν τὰ ὑψηλὰ θεωροῦντα, καὶ διὰ τῆς μεγαλοφυοῦς καὶ πρεπούσης τῇ θείᾳ γραφῇ διανοίας οἰκιοῦντα ἡμῖν τὸν νόμον, ἐκεῖνα ἡμῖν ὑποπίπτει· οὔτε κριὸς τὸ ἄρρεν ἐν τοῖς προβάτοις νοεῖται, οὔτε σκηνὴ τὸ ἐκ τῆς ἀψύχου ταύτης ὕλης συμπηγνύμενον οἶκημα, οὔτε ἐξόδος σκηνῆς ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ ναοῦ ἀναχώρησις, ἀλλὰ σκηνὴ μὲν ἡμῖν τὸ σῶμα τοῦτο. . . . ἐξόδιον δὲ σκηνῆς ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ βίου τούτου ἀναχώρησις, πρὸς ἣν παρασκευάζεσθαι ἡμᾶς ὁ λόγος παρεγγυᾷ, τάδε τινὰ καὶ τάδε κομίζοντες τῷ κυρίῳ.*

Basil, *Exegetic Homilies*, translated by Agnes Clare Way, FOTC 46 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

I am not sure whether νοῦν here means “mind” or “sense” or both. If the former meaning, the statement seems almost subjective, as if the Christian interpreter is reading a Christian meaning into the passage. This does not seem right, though, because Basil elsewhere speaks of the spiritual meaning of Scripture being hidden within the text, to be discovered, not invented, by the interpreter moved by the Holy Spirit (ibid. 45, 1 [PG 29, 416b]), which is also Origen’s view. If the latter meaning, the word ἡμέτεραν means “Christian.” I prefer the latter interpretation because it parallels πρὸς τὴν ἱστορίαν. Either way the passage is a demonstration of how Basil puts into practice Origen’s hermeneutic, as he here first explains the historical or literal meaning of the passage and then offers a psychic interpretation that makes the passage useful for Christians.

From this passage it can also be seen, as Tieck says, that “generally his [Basil’s] method is first to ascertain the literal sense in its grammatical and/or historical reference, and then, if a higher sense is developed at all, to base it upon this.”⁶⁷ I think that this is apparent from the passage quoted if it is taken as a whole, in context, notwithstanding his statement that “the ram does *not* mean the male among the sheep.” He means only that the ram does not mean the male among the sheep *at the psychic level*. Like Origen, he develops both literal and allegorical interpretations. Even the literal sense (or “historical” sense, as Basil also calls it) of the Bible has its own value: “If you will read the things in each history which God did to the faithless nations, you will find that the statement has much force even according to the bodily meaning (τὸν

⁶⁷ Ibid., 174.

σωματικόν νοῦν)” (ibid. 32, 6).⁶⁸ In fact, this is also the viewpoint of Origen, who is careful to note that the bodily meaning of Scripture is usually edifying and relates true history (*De princ.*, IV, 2.8).

By way of exception, sometimes Basil explicitly rejects the literal interpretation of a passage. For instance, Ps 33:16-17 speaks of God’s “eyes,” “ears,” and “face,” but these words are not meant literally, since a literal interpretation of them would make Scripture “seem to be unreasonable” (*ἄλογον εἶναι δοῖται*, ibid. 33, 11). This approach to anthropomorphic passages is identical to that of Origen, who specifically mentions simple Christians taking anthropomorphic language in Scripture literally (*De princ.*, IV, 2.2, quoted above).

Similarly, commenting upon Ps 33:21 (“The Lord will guard all their bones; / not one of them will be crushed”), Basil questions whether the passage should be taken literally: “Is it necessary to be content with the letter and to be satisfied with the ordinary meaning that falls upon our ears . . . ?” (*Hom. in Ps. 33*, 13 [PG 29, 381c], my translation)⁶⁹ He then opts for a figurative reading because he has learned from experience that God does in fact allow the bones of righteous people, the martyrs in particular, to be crushed (ibid.). To take the passage literally would, again, make the Bible say something manifestly unreasonable, so instead Basil argues that human body parts referred to in Scripture can signify the soul, which he also calls “the

⁶⁸ Way mistakes *νοῦν* here to mean the human mind, rather than the meaning of the text (definition III in *A Greek English Lexicon* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940], s.v. *νόος*), translating it, “according to our corporeal intelligence,” an Anglicization of the Latin *corporalem intelligentiam*.

ἀναλεγόμενος δὲ τὰ ἐφ’ ἐκάστης ἱστορίας, ὅσα περὶ τὰ ἄπιστα ἔθνη ἐνήργησεν ὁ θεὸς εὐρήσεις καὶ κατὰ τὸν σωματικόν νοῦν πολλὴν ἔχον τὴν δύναμιν τὸ ῥητόν.

⁶⁹ *πότερον δεῖ ἐπὶ τῆς λέξεως μεῖναι καὶ ἀρκεσθῆναι τῇ κατὰ τὸ πρόχειρον προσπιπτούσῃ ταῖς ἀκοαῖς ἡμῶν ἐννοίᾳ . . . ;*

hidden man” (τοῦ κρυπτοῦ ἀνθρώπου, *ibid.* [PG 29, 384a], my translation) and “the inner man” (τοῦ ἔσω ἀνθρώπου, *ibid.* [PG 29, 384b]). He immediately quotes eight examples from Scripture to support this exegetical principle: Pss 3:8d (“The teeth of sinners you shattered”); 18:9cd (“The commandment of the Lord is radiant, / enlightening the eyes”); 118:131a (“I opened my mouth and drew breath”); Prov 3:23b (“And that your foot will not stumble”); Eccl 2:14a (“As for the wise, their eyes are in their head”); Isa 42:18 (“Hear, you that are deaf, / and you that are blind, look up to see!”); Jer 4:19a (“My belly, I feel pain in my belly”); and Luke 8:8 (“Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear”). In fact, he has taken this principle of the metaphorical interpretation of body parts directly from Origen, who says in the prologue to his renowned commentary on the Song of Songs that “you will find the names of the members of the body transferred to those of the soul” (*In Cant.*, prol., 2.9).⁷⁰ Origen quotes several examples from Scripture to support this, including three that Basil also quotes: Prov 3:23b; Eccl 2:14a; and Luke 8:8. Thus it is clear that Basil has here adopted not just the principle itself, but even several of his scriptural proofs, directly from Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs.

Basil also adopts Origen’s threefold division of Christians. For instance, in the prologue to his homilies on the Psalms, he says that a psalm “is the elementary exposition of beginners, the improvement of those advancing, [and] the solid support of the perfect” (*Hom. in Ps. 1, 2*

⁷⁰ *inuenies etiam membrorum nomina corporalium transferri ad animae membra.*

Origen, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, edited by Luc Brésard, OCSO, Henri Crouzel, SJ, and Marcel Borret, SJ, 2 vols., SC 375-76 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991-1992).

———, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, translated by R. P. Lawson, ACW 26 (NY: The Newman Press, 1957).

[PG 29, 213a)].⁷¹ “Beginners” is the equivalent of Origen’s “simple” and “those advancing” of “the one who has made some progress,” while they both call the highest class “the perfect” (*De princ.*, IV, 2.4). Again, Basil says that “The teachings [of Scripture] are not simple, but varied and manifold, and embrace words moral and natural and the so-called supersensible (*ἐποπτικῶς*)” (*Hom. in Ps.* 44, 9 [PG 29, 408c]).⁷² Basil has taken this threefold division directly from Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs, where he says that the three books of Solomon teach three sciences: the Book of Proverbs the moral (*ethicam* = *ἠθικάν*), the Book of Ecclesiastes the natural (*physicam* = *φυσικάν*), and the Song of Songs the supersensible (*epopticen* = *ἐποπτικήν*) (*In Cant.*, prol., 3.1). This threefold division also corresponds with Origen’s hermeneutical division of body, soul, and spirit, where the body is the natural, the soul the moral, and the spirit the supersensible. Thus it is clear that Basil has taken over Origen’s hermeneutical theory, though it remains to be seen how he will develop it.

Basil puts this theory into practice throughout the homilies on the Psalms, even though, like Origen himself, he does not clearly label his interpretations as “spiritual,” “psychic,” and “bodily.” For example, he gives a threefold interpretation to the phrase found in the superscription of Psalm 44: “over those that will be changed” (*ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀλλοιωθησομένων*). First, the bodily meaning refers “in an obscure manner” (*κεκρυμμένως*) to human beings (*Hom. in Ps.*

⁷¹ εἰσαγομένοις στοιχείωσις, προκοπτόντων αὐξήσις, τελειουμένων στήριγμα.

⁷² οὐ μονοειδῆ τὰ δόγματα, ἀλλὰ ποικίλα καὶ πολύτροπα, ἠθικούς τε καὶ φυσικούς καὶ ἐποπτικούς λεγομένους περιέχοντα λόγους.

I have replaced Way’s “esoteric” as a translation for *ἐποπτικούς* with the more descriptive “supersensible.” Etymologically, the adjective *ἐποπτικός* means “above (*ἐπὶ*) what can be seen (*ὁπτικόν*).”

44, 1 [PG 29, 388a]): “For we especially of all rational beings are subject to variations and changes day by day and almost hour by hour” (ibid.).⁷³ Second, the spiritual meaning is detected through the use of the future tense (“those who *will* be changed”) and refers to “the doctrine of the resurrection” (ibid. 44, 2 [PG 29, 389a]),⁷⁴ when corruptible flesh will be changed into incorruptible (1 Cor 15:42-44). Third, the psychic meaning, which Basil says can be understood only by “those who have ears according to the inner man” (*Hom. in Ps.* 44, 2 [PG 29, 389b]),⁷⁵ refers to “those who are careful of themselves and are always advancing through their exercises of piety toward something better” (ibid.), i.e., ascetics.⁷⁶ All three meanings refer to human beings, but the psychic reading adds an ascetic element, while the spiritual reading speaks of human beings resurrected. Here it is clear how Basil follows in the footsteps of Origen, discovering psychic and spiritual meanings, usually in addition to the bodily meaning.

Other examples of bodily, psychic, and spiritual readings can be found in the homilies on the Psalms. For instance, for Ps 7:7 he provides both a spiritual interpretation that refers to Jesus’ resurrection and a historical interpretation that refers to the time of David (ibid. 7, 4 [PG 29, 236c]). For Ps 28:3a (“The Lord’s voice is over the waters”) he offers first a literal interpretation, “in regard to the perceptible” (*πρὸς τὸ αἰσθητόν*, my translation), which refers to the noises clouds make (ibid. 28, 3 [PG 29, 289b]), then a spiritual interpretation which indicates the voice

⁷³ ἡμεῖς γάρ ἐσμεν οἱ μάλιστα πάντων τῶν λογικῶν ἀλλοιωσέσι τε καὶ τροπαῖς ταῖς ἐφ’ ἐκάστης ἡμέρας καὶ ὥρας σχεδὸν ὑποκείμενοι.

⁷⁴ τὸν τῆς ἀναστάσεως . . . λόγον.

⁷⁵ τοῖς ἔχουσιν ὦτα κατὰ τὸν ἔσω ἄνθρωπον.

⁷⁶ τοῖς ἑαυτῶν ἐπιμελομένοις καὶ αἰεὶ διὰ τῶν γυμνασίων τῆς εὐσεβείας ἐπὶ τὸ μείζον προκόπτουσιν.

heard at Jesus' baptism (ibid. [PG 29, 289c]), then finally a psychic interpretation, by which thunder, "according to ecclesiastical diction,"⁷⁷ may refer to "the tradition that, after baptism, comes to be in the souls of those already being perfected by the lofty speech of the Gospel" (ibid. 28, 3 [PG 29, 292a], my translation).⁷⁸ The temple of David mentioned in the superscription of Psalm 29 is, "according to the mental" (*κατὰ τὸ νοητόν*, my translation), i.e., according to the spiritual interpretation, the incarnation, but psychically it is the Church, the dedication of which is "the renewal of the mind" of each individual member of the Church (ibid. 29, 1 [PG 29, 305c-307a]).⁷⁹

The Ascetic Character of Exegesis

Another characteristic of Basil's exegesis that he shares with Origen is its ascetic nature. On the basis of their common concern for reading Scripture "attentively" (from the Greek words *προσοχή* [attention] and *προσέχειν* [to pay attention to]), Martens has shown that "Both Basil and Origen locate scriptural exegesis within an ascetic way of life."⁸⁰ I think that the ascetic nature of scriptural exegesis gives it at least three characteristics: first, it should be accurate, thus requiring

⁷⁷ *κατὰ τὸν ἐκκλησιαστικὸν λόγον.*

⁷⁸ *τὴν μετὰ τὸ βάπτισμα γινομένη ἐκ τῆς μεγαλοφωνίας τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς τῶν ἤδη τελειουμένων παράδοσιν.*

⁷⁹ *τὴν ἀνακαίνωσιν τοῦ νοῦς.*

The terminology here is confusing, since the "mental" (*νοητόν*, i.e., spiritual) reading is actually different from the reading that speaks of the renewal of the "mind" (*νοῦς*, i.e., the soul). However, I believe that my distinction is correct not because of the wording, which I do not expect to be technically precise since Basil uses varying terms for things hermeneutical, but because of the meaning of his words: the former, spiritual reading refers to the revelation of Christ whereas the latter, psychic reading refers to the moral progress of the individual soul.

⁸⁰ Peter W. Martens, "The Ascetic Character of Biblical Exegesis according to Origen and Basil of Caesarea," in vol. 2 of *Origeniana Octava*, 1116.

much time and energy; second, because the Bible contains a spiritual message (often hidden), it can be understood correctly only by spiritual people; and third, its message is directed toward human perfection, which is understood from an ascetic point of view.

As for the first characteristic, to interpret the Bible accurately, which is the task of the biblical scholar, is a time-consuming practice that requires total commitment and the full attention of the interpreter. It cannot be done on the side while being engaged in some other full-time occupation. Basil's homily on Psalm 45, seizing on v. 11a ("Be at leisure [*σχολάσατε*, my translation],⁸¹ and know that I am God!"), contains an invitation to the ascetic life, which includes the accurate interpretation of Scripture, impossible for ordinary, working people, who are too busy to read the Bible carefully: "As far as we devote our time (*σχολάζομεν*) to affairs outside of God, we are not able to make progress in the knowledge of God. Who, anxious about the things of the world and sunk deep in the distractions of the flesh, can pay attention to (*προσέχειν*) the words of God and be sufficiently accurate in such mighty objects of contemplation?" (*Hom. in Ps. 45, 8* [PG 29, 428c])⁸²

⁸¹ *σχολάσατε*, as Basil takes it, not in the sense of just having time to spare but of having free time to devote to ascetic activities. I doubt that many people today would regard forth-century Christian asceticism as "leisurely"!

⁸² *ἐφ' ὅσον μὲν τοῖς ἔξω θεοῦ σχολάζομεν πράγμασιν, οὐ δυνάμεθα χωρῆσαι γνώσιν θεοῦ. τίς γὰρ μεριμνῶν τὰ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ ἐμβαθύνων τοῖς περισπασμοῖς τῆς σαρκὸς δύναται τοῖς περὶ θεοῦ λόγοις προσέχειν καὶ τῇ ἀκριβείᾳ τῶν τηλικούτων θεωρημάτων ἀρκεῖν;*

Partially quoted (in his own translation) in Martens, "Ascetic Character," 1118.

Way translates *σχολάζομεν* as "we are engaged in," but I have opted to retain the specific reference to time inherent in the word *σχολάζομεν* since it is the scriptural word *σχολάσατε* that prompts this remark. She also has "be intent on" for *προσέχειν*, which I have changed to match with Martens's use of the word *attention*.

This rhetorical question then leads into the second point: because the Bible contains the words of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, it can be understood rightly only by the person who lives the life of the Spirit, that is to say, by the ascetic. So this is about more than just making a professional and vocational commitment to being a biblical scholar rather than undertaking a secular profession, though that is logistically part of it (the first characteristic). It is also about living the ascetic lifestyle, the goal of which is to become free from the worldly anxieties and carnal distractions that afflict ordinary people, who usually spend their time engaged in daily labor and pleasurable activities (like dancing, drinking, and sex—see below) rather than in the study of Scripture and spiritual exercises. This is identical to Origen’s viewpoint, which I explained above by reference to Martens’s recent book, according to which the biblical scholar should not just possess technical proficiency but also live the life of ascetic, spiritual perfection.

The second ascetic characteristic of exegesis leads naturally to the third: if the message can be understood properly only by ascetics, then it also has an ascetic message and purpose. Ascetic themes constantly emanate from Basil’s *Homiliae in Psalmos*, as the audience is exhorted to shun material and temporal pleasures and instead focus on spiritual goods. He preaches:

Every soul becomes dizzy and changes from one side to the other in its reasonings, choosing virtue when things eternal are in its thoughts, but, when it looks to the present, preferring pleasure. Here it beholds the comforts of the flesh, there the enslavement of the flesh; here drunkenness, there fasting; here intemperate laughter, there abundant tears; in this life dancing, in that prayer; here flutes, there groans; here fornication (*πορνείαν*), there virginity. While, therefore, that which is truly good can be apprehended by the reason through faith . . . , yet the sweetness of sin has pleasure ready and flowing through every sense. (Ibid., 1, 5 [PG 29, 224b])⁸³

⁸³ ἡλιγγιᾷ οὖν πᾶσα ψυχὴ καὶ μετοκλάζει τοῖς λογισμοῖς, ὅταν μὲν ἐνθυμηθῇ τὰ αἰώνια τὴν ἀρετὴν αἰρουμένη, ὅταν δὲ ἀποβλέψῃ πρὸς τὰ παρόντα τὴν ἡδονὴν προτιμῶσα. ὧδε βλέπῃ σαρκὸς εὐπάθειαν, ἐκεῖ δουλαγωγίαν σαρκός·

The moral message of Scripture, as interpreted and preached by Basil, is frequently ascetic in nature. He declares: “Both Psalms [38 and 61] treat, for the most part, of patience, through which the passions of the soul are reduced to order, all arrogance is banished, and humility is acquired” (ibid. 61, 1 [PG 29, 469c]).⁸⁴ Commenting upon Ps 61:8a (“With God is my deliverance and my glory”), after listing a number of secular professions that glory in various skills (e.g., athletes, warriors, architects, orators), he pronounces: “It is proper to pity the glory of all these and to deem happy those who make God their glory” (ibid. 61, 4 [PG 29, 477a]).⁸⁵ He is addressing himself to “servant[s] of the great King” (ibid.),⁸⁶ by which he probably means fellow ascetics.⁸⁷

Basil’s Apparent Rejection of Allegorical Exegesis

A problem arises when one, after having read his homilies on the Psalms, reads Basil’s *Homilia in hexaemeron* and there discovers that his explicit hermeneutic throughout is to take words, not figuratively, but only according to their ordinary meaning. Thus he declares at the beginning of the ninth homily, “But as for me (ἐγὼ δέ), when I hear ‘grass,’ I think of grass”

ὥδε μέθην, ἐκεῖ νηστεῖαν· ὥδε γέλωτας ἀκρατεῖς, ἐκεῖ δάκρυον δαψιλές· ἐνταῦθα ὄρχησιν, κάκει προσευχήν· αὐλοῦς ὥδε, κάκει στεναγμούς· ὥδε πορνείαν, κάκει παρθενίαν. ἐπεὶ οὖν τὸ μὲν ἀληθινῶς ἀγαθὸν λογισμῷ ληπτὸν ἐστὶ διὰ πίστεως . . ., τὸ δὲ τῆς ἀμαρτίας ἡδὺ πρόχειρον ἔχει καὶ διὰ πάσης αἰσθήσεως ρέουσιν τὴν ἀπόλαυσιν.

Way has the archaic-sounding *incontinence* for πορνείαν.

⁸⁴ περὶ ὑπομονῆς τοίνυν ἐκάτερος ψαλμός τὴν πλείστην ποιεῖται πραγματείαν, δι’ ἧς καταστέλλεται μὲν τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ θυμούμενον, ὑπερφηφάνιας δὲ πάσης ἐξορισθείσης, κατορθοῦται ταπεινώσις.

⁸⁵ ὅν πάντων ἐλεεῖν τὴν δόξαν προσῆκε, μακαρίζειν δὲ τοὺς τὸν θεὸν ἑαυτῶν δόξαν ποιουμένους.

⁸⁶ δοῦλος εἶ τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως.

⁸⁷ Jean Bernardi, *La prédication des Pères cappadociens: le prédicateur et son auditoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 34, cites this as a possible exception to his opinion that these homilies are generally addressed to a wide audience.

(*Hom. in hex.*, IX, 1, my translation).⁸⁸ His use of the personal pronoun *ἐγώ* emphasizes how his own method of literal exegesis is in direct opposition to that of those who read the Bible allegorically and “do not admit the common meanings of the Scriptures” (*ibid.*).⁸⁹ Rousseau suggests that Basil does not stay entirely true to this literal hermeneutic,⁹⁰ and likewise Tieck says that Basil fails to “liberate himself from it [allegory] completely.”⁹¹ I disagree, though, as I can find no allegorical interpretations in these homilies. There are, of course, many analogies, as Rousseau points out,⁹² and a couple of strained attempts to find hints of the Son of God (*Hom. in hex.*, III, 2; IX, 6), though not by means of allegory or by disregarding “the common meanings” of words. In fact, Basil compares allegorical interpretations to “dream interpretations” (*ὀνειράτων συνκρίσεις*, *ibid.*, III, 9) and “old wives’ tales” (*γραιῶδεις μύθους*, *ibid.*, my translation). He thinks that, at best, allegorical interpretations are “neatly made” (*κεκομψευμένον*) by the interpreter, though “not . . . altogether true” (*ἀληθῆ . . . οὐ πάνυ*, *ibid.*). In other words, these interpreters are reading into the text, perhaps even cleverly, an allegorical meaning which they falsely imagine to be native to the text itself.

⁸⁸ *ἐγὼ δὲ χόρτον ἀκούσας χόρτον νοῶ.*

Cf. *Hom. in hex.*, III, 9: “Let us consider water as water” (*τὸ ὕδωρ ὕδωρ νοήσωμεν*).

⁸⁹ A fact not reflected in Way’s translation, which simply says “I.”

οἱ μὴ καταδεχόμενοι τὰς κοινὰς τῶν γεγραμμένων ἐννοίας τὸ ὕδωρ οὐχ ὕδωρ λέγουσιν.

⁹⁰ Rousseau, *Basil*, 323n25.

⁹¹ Tieck, *Basil*, 174.

⁹² Rousseau, *Basil*, 323n22.

In contrast to such interpretation, Basil believes that the interpreter must always remain faithful to the ordinary meaning (*βούλημα* or *έννοια*) of Scripture: “Passing over in silence all figurative and allegorical explanation, at least for the present (*έν γε τῷ παρόντι*), let us accept the concept of darkness simply and without curiosity, following the meaning of the Scripture” (ibid., II, 5).⁹³ To depart from the meaning of Scripture can lead to heresy and rejection by God, which is why he is so fierce in his criticism of allegorical interpretation: “Even if we err in our opinion, nevertheless, if by the assistance of the Spirit we do not depart from the meaning of the Scripture, we ourselves shall not be judged entirely deserving of rejection” (ibid., II, 1).⁹⁴ In his opposition to allegorical reading, Basil is first and foremost concerned with such a method being pressed into the service of heresy. Instead of following the meaning of Scripture, heretics do the opposite, Basil argues, and twist passages of the Bible to fit their own teaching, thus making the Bible follow their own doctrine: “The counterfeiters of the truth, who do not at all thoroughly teach their minds to follow Scripture, but pervert the meaning of the Scriptures according to their own understanding. . .” (ibid., II, 2, my translation).⁹⁵ Basil is emphatic about the importance of

⁹³ *πάσαν οὖν τροπικὴν καὶ δι’ ὑπονοίας ἐξήγησιν έν γε τῷ παρόντι κατασιγάσαντες, τοῦ σκότους τήν έννοιαν ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀπεριεργάστως, ἐπόμενοι τῷ βουλήματι τῆς γραφῆς, ἐκδεξώμεθα.*

Way translates *έν γε τῷ παρόντι* as “for the present time,” ignoring the particle *γε*. I have preferred to emphasize the force of the particle (“at least”) because I will later argue that Basil’s ignorance of figurative interpretation is not absolute: there is a legitimate time for it.

Cf. *Hom. in hex.*, IV, 5: “Give your attention to the meaning of the Scriptures” (*ἐπίσησον δὲ τῇ έννοίᾳ τῶν γεγραμμένων*). He pairs the phrase *δι’ ὑπονοίας* (deeper or allegorical) with *τροπικός* (figurative) without making any technical distinction between them.

⁹⁴ *ἐάν τοῦ βουλήματος τῆς γραφῆς μή ἐκ πέσωμεν τῇ βοηθείᾳ τοῦ πνεύματος, καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐκ ἀπόβλητοι παντελῶς κριθσόμεθα.*

⁹⁵ *οἱ παραχαράκται τῆς ἀληθείας, οἱ οὐχὶ τῇ γραφῇ τὸν ἑαυτῶν νοῦν ἀκολουθεῖν ἐκδιδάσκοντες, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ οἰκεῖον βούλημα τήν διάνοιαν τῶν γραφῶν διαστέφοντες. . . .*

following the meaning of the Bible, as indicated by his use of the emphatic negative *οὐχί* (“not at all”) and the perfective prefix *ἐκ* (“thoroughly”) with the verb *διδάσκειν* (to teach).⁹⁶ One of the ways in which heretics twist the meaning of the Bible is by finding in a given word a deeper or allegorical sense. For example, Gen 1:2 (“And darkness was over the abyss”), Basil tells us, is used by people who “pervert the words according to their own meanings (*ὑπονοίας*)”⁹⁷ to make myths (*μύθων*) and “rather impious fabrications” (*πλασμάτων δυσσεβεστέρων*, *ibid.*, II, 4).⁹⁸ Instead of taking the word *σκότος* (“darkness”) “as is natural” (*ὡς πέφυκεν* – in other words, literally) to mean “some unlighted air” (*ἀέρα τινά ἀφώτιστον*), “a place overshadowed” (*τόπον σκιαζόμενον*), or “a place deprived of light” (*τόπον φωτός ἐστερημένον*), heretics have taken it to mean “evil itself, having its beginning from itself” (*ibid.*).⁹⁹ He names the Marcionites, Valentinians, and Manichaeans specifically.

By what criteria can Basil distinguish between exegesis that follows the meaning of Scripture and exegesis that does not? Since he allows for mistakes in interpretation (“even if we err,” *ibid.*, II, 1), “the meaning of Scripture” cannot refer to the exact meaning of a particular text, but must refer to an interpretation that accords with the message of the Bible taken as a whole, as it is understood by the catholic and orthodox Church. I think that he means that as long

⁹⁶ Again, neither fact being reflected in Way’s translation, which says simply, “do not teach.”

⁹⁷ *πρὸς τὰς ἰδίας ὑπονοίας παρατρεπόντων τὰ ρήματα.*

Way translates *ὑπονοίας* as “notions,” but I have used “meanings” because this is the same word used to signify the meaning of a scriptural passage.

⁹⁸ Cf. *Hom. in hex.*, IX, 1: “Changing [a word’s meaning] according to their own meanings” (*ἐπὶ τὰς οἰκείας ὑπονοίας παρατρέψαντες*). Once again I have used the translation “meanings” instead of Way’s “notions.”

⁹⁹ *αὐτὸ τὸ κακόν, παρ’ ἑαυτοῦ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔχον.*

as one is within the bounds of orthodox doctrine, there is room for a diversity of opinions within the Church about what a given passage means. This is borne out by his frequent use of the word *perhaps* (τάχα) to qualify his interpretations. a specific example of multiple interpretations is his treatment of the πνεῦμα that was present over the primordial water: it could mean either a wind or (as he prefers) the Holy Spirit (ibid., II, 6). Fidelity to the meaning of Scripture in this sense is thus not the result of scholarly prowess or adherence to some philological method but a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is equivalent to fidelity to the faith of the Church, for which heretics have substituted their own doctrines. Allegorical interpretation thus becomes a method that heretics use to discover in a biblical passage a meaning contrary to the overall message of the Bible, as interpreted by the Church.

It does not follow from this that Basil thinks that all interpretations are equal, as long as they are orthodox. Philological methods are useful for judging competing interpretations. Thus he supports interpreting the πνεῦμα of Gen 1:2 as the Holy Spirit on the basis of intertextuality: “there is named [in Scripture] no other Spirit of God than the Holy Spirit which completes (συμπληρωτικόν) the divine and blessed Trinity” (ibid., II, 6),¹⁰⁰ a reading that also has the benefit of having been “approved by those before us” (ibid.).¹⁰¹ In the same passage, to interpret the meaning of the word ἐπεφέρετο (“was being carried along,” Gen 1:2), Basil refers to the Syriac translation of the Bible, which “because of its resemblance to the Hebrew language

¹⁰⁰ μηδέν ἄλλο πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἢ τὸ ἅγιον τὸ τῆς θείας καὶ μακαρίας τριάδος συμπληρωτικὸν ὀνομάζεσθαι.

Way translates this as “forms an essential part of” (taken from *A Greek English Lexicon*, s.v. συμπληρωτικός), but the word *part* should not be used to refer to one of the Persons of the Trinity since God is one and not made up of parts.

¹⁰¹ τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν ἐγκριθέν.

approached somewhat more closely to the sense of Scripture” (*Hom. in hex.*, II, 6).¹⁰² Likewise, the different Greek translations of the Old Testament found in the *Hexapla* of Origen can be of use in understanding ambiguous words (e.g., *Hom. in Ps.* 44, 4; 48, 1 [PG 29, 396b; 432c]). Although orthodoxy is an essential criterion in exegesis, it does not by itself guarantee accuracy of interpretation, for which philological methods are valuable.

In addition to allegorizing the word *σκότος*, the heretics similarly allegorize the word *ἄβυσσος* (“abyss”), saying that it means “a mass of opposing powers” (*δυνάμεων πλήθος ἀντικειμένων*, *Hom. in hex.*, II, 6). Basil’s most recent editors, Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta and Stig Rudberg, here refer the reader to the first of Origen’s *In Genesim homiliae*, where Origen says that the abyss is where the devil and his angels will be confined.¹⁰³ Although Origen’s interpretation of the abyss is indeed similar to the one Basil is denouncing, it is not identical. Origen does not say that the abyss *is* a group of demons, but rather that it is the *place* to which they will one day go. By itself this may be an insignificant difference, but what is a major difference is that Origen does not say, as the dualistic heretics do, that the darkness is sovereign, self-existent evil. This heretical doctrine is what Basil really opposes, and his rejection of the allegorical interpretation of the word *σκότος* serves this end. He shows that the dualistic doctrine has no basis in Scripture and argues that the allegorical reading is a perversion of what Scriptures says because it tries to impose a worldview alien to Scripture on the text. Origen, as Basil well

¹⁰² *διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὴν Ἑβραϊδα γειτνίασιν, μᾶλλον πως τῇ ἐννοίᾳ τῶν γραφῶν προσεγγίζειν.*

He reports that the Syriac version, instead of *ἐπεφέρετο*, has (the Syriac equivalent of) *συνέθαλπε* (“thoroughly warmed,” my translation).

¹⁰³ I deal with this passage thoroughly in chapter 4.

knows, does not hold to a dualistic understanding of good and evil, so this cannot be a confrontation with Origen. Origen's interpretation of the abyss only happens to overlap in a small way with this heretical interpretation. Thus I disagree with Pépin, who says that Basil means Origen here.¹⁰⁴ In fact, Basil's word against Origen will not arrive until the third homily. Probably the detection of Origen here has been wrongly influenced by that passage.

If Basil's condemnation of allegorical interpretation in the hexaemeral homilies is taken to be absolute, as it may appear to be,¹⁰⁵ there is an obvious contradiction with the homilies on the Psalms. Thus Amand de Mendieta is able to call Basil's exegesis in the hexaameron "anti-origénienne"!¹⁰⁶ In the 19th century, Eugène Fialon believed that Basil gradually moved away from allegorical exegesis, using it less and less as he matured:

Cette tendance aux exagérations de l'allégorie disparaît dans la maturité de l'âge et du talent. . . . Ainsi ce grand esprit épurait insensiblement sa doctrine, devenait de moins en moins exclusive, et, contemplant dans leur simple majesté la beauté des écritures, arrivait à la plénitude de la vérité.¹⁰⁷

Richard Lim likewise reluctantly suggests (though he does not in the end accept this) that Basil's earlier enthusiasm for Origen may show that "he was not at all critical of it [allegory] around 358

¹⁰⁴ Jean Pépin, *Théologie cosmique et théologie Chrétienne (Ambroise, Exam. I 1, 1-4)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 401n2. His truncated quotation of *Hom. in hex.*, II, 4, *πονηρὰ δύναμις*, is misleading because he leaves out *ἀρχική τις . . . ἀντεξαγομένη τῷ ἀγαθῷ*. The allegorizing heretics are not talking about the devil, but the aforementioned self-existent evil, locked in an eternal conflict with God. Origen speaks of the devil and the demons and says nothing about the darkness symbolizing evil itself.

¹⁰⁵ As Amand de Mendieta takes it in his review of Giet Stanislas, ed., *Basile de Césarée: Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron*, *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 47 (1952): 223.

¹⁰⁶ Amand de Mendieta, "Préparation," 352.

¹⁰⁷ Eugène Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur saint Basile, suivi de l'Hexaméron* (Paris: E. Thorin, 1869), 294-95.

CE.”¹⁰⁸ Like Lim, I think that this is a weak hypothesis, as Basil himself gives no hint of having had a change of mind. Moreover, Gregory Naz., in his eulogy for Basil, states that Basil employed a threefold interpretation of Scripture (*Orat.*, LXIII, 67).¹⁰⁹ Surely he means here the hermeneutic of their common teacher, Origen, the very one Basil employs in the homilies on the Psalms. So if Basil does undergo a hermeneutical conversion late in life, Gregory Naz. is either ignorant of it or wants to cover it up, neither of which is at all likely.

Other explanations have also been offered by scholars: McGuckin, claiming that Basil never abandons the literal meaning of the Bible as Origen was occasionally willing to do,¹¹⁰ speculates that Gregory Naz. is the primary compiler of the *Philocalia*.¹¹¹ That supposition can be neither proven nor disproven and, moreover, is based on a false premise. I already showed two instances when Basil does set aside the literal or ordinary meaning of a scriptural text because the alternative would be to fall into unreasonable ideas, such as that God has eyes or that

¹⁰⁸ Richard Lim, “The Politics of Interpretation in Basil of Caesarea’s ‘Hexaemeron,’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990): 351.

¹⁰⁹ “When I peruse his other commentaries . . . after inscribing them in three forms on the solid tablets of his heart, I am persuaded not to be content with the literal interpretation, or to fix my attention on things merely on the surface [*or*, on lofty things alone, τὰ ἄνω μόνον], but to advance further and to proceed from depth to depth” (ὅταν ταῖς ἄλλαις ἐξηγήσῃ . . . τρισσῶς ἐν ταῖς στερραῖς ἑαυτοῦ πλαξί τῆς καρδίας ἀπογραφάμενος, πείθομαι μὴ μέχρι τοῦ γράμματος ἵστασθαι μηδὲ βλέπειν τὰ ἄνω μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περαιτέρω διαβαίνειν καὶ εἰς βάθος ἔτι χωρεῖν ἐκ βάθους).

My alternate translation for τὰ ἄνω μόνον would have Gregory Naz. condemning a method that ignores the literal sense. McCauley’s translation has it as another way of condemning literalism.

Gregory Naz., *Discours 42-43*, edited by Jean Bernardi, SC 384 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992).

———, “On St. Basil the Great,” translated by Leo P. McCauley, SJ, in *Funeral Orations*, FOTC 22, 27-99 (NY: Fathers of the Church, 1953).

¹¹⁰ The same claim is made by Tieck: “Nowhere in his writings do we meet with a disavowal of the literal sense, as we do with the Alexandrians [e.g., Origen]” (*Basil*, 173).

¹¹¹ McGuckin, “Patterns,” 45.

he will prevent the bones of righteous people from being broken. Gribomont tries to find significance in the small amount contained in the *Philocalia* that concerns allegory: “Dans tout le livre . . . bien peu des séductions de l’allégorie.”¹¹² However, the *Philocalia* contains the entire passage in which Origen puts forward his threefold interpretation of Scripture, including even the part that says some biblical passages have no bodily meaning and are only allegories (*De princ.*, IV, 2.5). By including this passage, Basil makes his own the very theory, with all its parts, upon which all of Origen’s allegorical readings are based. So I would say that it contains everything needed to support “the seductions of allegory.”

Lim argues that, in spite of appearances (especially *Hom. in hex.*, IX, 1), Basil’s condemnation of allegory is not absolute and that Basil in fact condemns only what Lim calls “translational” allegory, i.e., an interpretation that denies the literal meaning of a passage and sees in it only an allegory to be translated.¹¹³ Is it true that when disputing with the heretics over the meaning of the words *σκότος* and *ἄβυσσος*, and also when disputing with Origen about the waters,¹¹⁴ he opposes viewpoints that see these passages as *merely* allegories. However, Basil says nothing to indicate that the translational nature of the interpretation specifically is his problem. Moreover, translational allegory is part of Origen’s method (and Basil’s, at least in the homilies on the Psalms), since some passages are said to lack a bodily meaning if a literal

¹¹² Gribomont, “L’Origénisme,” 283.

¹¹³ Lim, “Politics,” 357.

¹¹⁴ For which, see chapter 4.

reading would be absurd.¹¹⁵ Thus I think that if Lim's narrow interpretation of Basil's critique is to be upheld, it must be narrowed even further: Basil opposes the *unnecessary*, translational-allegorical interpretation of passages that have coherent and reasonable literal interpretations. Thus, to take again the example of the darkness over the abyss, it is perfectly reasonable, at least in Basil's eyes, to understand the passage as saying that, in the beginning, there was an absence of light in the universe. This very narrow interpretation of Basil's criticism is, it must be conceded, conjectural and tenuous, for Basil does not qualify his condemnation in this manner and in fact gives the impression that he opposes allegorical interpretation in toto.

Lim makes another suggestion about Basil's hermeneutics that I believe rests on more solid ground, especially in the light of my account of Basil's hermeneutics in the homilies on the Psalms. Lim argues that Basil's criticism of allegorical interpretation simply puts into practice Origen's (and Basil's) theoretical, threefold classification of Christians, which goes hand in hand with his threefold interpretation of the Bible (*De princ.*, IV, 4.11). Lim writes: "Basil was leading his humble congregation by the hand in a gradual anagogy, using the literal hermeneutics which he considered to be most appropriate to his audience."¹¹⁶ Since Basil's audience for the hexaemeron was made up of ordinary people, as evidenced by *Hom. in hex.*, III, 1, where he mentions tradesmen in the audience, and other passages,¹¹⁷ Lim argues that we should expect him to stick to the literal sense. Thus "Basil is not categorically rejecting the allegorical method

¹¹⁵ Lim (ibid.) claims that Origen does not practice translational allegory, which is just not true. His interpretation of the super-heavenly water is a good example of a translational allegorical interpretation of (again, see chapter 4).

¹¹⁶ Lim, "Politics," 352.

¹¹⁷ See ibid., 361, for examples.

per se, but . . . he is warning his specific, and largely unsophisticated, audience not to abandon the literal meaning of scriptures in favor of more arcane spiritual meanings.”¹¹⁸ Thus he concludes that “we should revise the notion that he was converted late in life to the literalist school from the Origenist allegorical method which he both used and helped to propagate through his compilation of the *Philocalia*.”¹¹⁹ This thesis is both clever and compelling in its explanation of the apparent contradiction between Basil’s use of allegorical interpretations in the homilies on the Psalms and his disavowal of them in the hexaemeral homilies. It is simpler, and thus more probable, than the thesis that Basil changed his mind, because it assumes continuity rather than discontinuity.

However, there is a problem: Stephen Hildebrand has recently cast doubt on Lim’s thesis by pointing out that in the homilies on the Psalms, where Basil does use allegorical readings and explicitly mentions Origen’s threefold hermeneutic, there is no indication that his audience consists of perfect, or even somewhat advanced, Christians.¹²⁰ He quotes Jean Bernardi, who argues that most, if not all, of the homilies are addressed “au grand public.”¹²¹ Bernardi bases this judgment partly on some disparaging remarks Basil makes about his audience’s sins (*Hom. in Ps.* 29, 3; 32, 2 [PG 29, 312c; 325c-328a]).¹²² In addition, the homily on Psalm 114 is explicitly given on the occasion of a vigil for the feast day of some martyrs, a liturgical

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 361-62.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 364.

¹²⁰ Stephen M. Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 137-38.

¹²¹ Bernardi, *Prédication*, 33-34, quoted in Hildebrand, *Trinitarian Theology*, 137n177.

¹²² Bernardi, *Prédication*, 33-34.

celebration at which one would expect to find a variety of Christians (ibid. 114, 1 [PG 29, 484a-b]).¹²³ Yet in these same three homilies Basil offers figurative interpretations, as, for instance, when he says that, in Ps 32:2, the lyre represents the body and “the harp of ten strings” the Ten Commandments (ibid. 32, 2 [PG 29, 325c-328b]), or that the infants the Lord protects (Ps 114:6a) are both actual infants¹²⁴ and infants in their souls, i.e., those who humble themselves through conversion (*Hom. in Ps.* 114, 4 [PG 29, 489c-492a]). It must be conceded, then, that though Lim’s thesis may hold for the hexaemeral homilies, it does not hold for the homilies on the Psalms, in which Basil uses figurative interpretation freely in spite of his audience’s simplicity.

Must we then return to the older theory that Basil at some point abandons his Origenist convictions? I do not think so, for the theoretical basis for Basil’s reticence toward allegorical interpretation in his homilies on Genesis 1 comes not from an external source (such as the Antiochenes)¹²⁵ but in fact lies within Origen’s hermeneutical theory. It seems to me that Basil, without abandoning this theory, has grown more cautious about the use of figurative readings in public homilies. The occasion for such a development – not rupture – in his thinking is probably the bad use to which Basil has seen heretics put allegorical interpretation, as, for example, when they allegorize the word *σκότος* to support their dualism. Basil still holds that certain passages

¹²³ Ibid., 33.

¹²⁴ Interestingly, Basil employs a God-of-the-gaps argument to explain how it is possible for a fetus to form in the womb.

¹²⁵ “The influence of Theophilus, and of Antioch generally, is not unlikely” (Rousseau, *Basil*, 323n21). Lim, however, argues that Basil’s exegesis does not bear any of the hallmarks of Antiochene exegesis and thus concludes: “I would argue that Basil’s dependence on this Antiochene [Diodore, the Antiochene most likely to have influenced Basil since they corresponded] was very limited if [it existed] at all” (“Politics,” 363).

should not be taken literally; otherwise he would have to believe that God is corporeal. Basil fights against such literalistic anthropomorphizing even in the hexaemeral homilies, when he comments upon God's speaking in Gen 1:3, 6:

Let us first inquire how God speaks. Is it in our manner? . . . Does He thus manifest His hidden thought by striking the air with the articulate movement of the voice? Surely, it is fantastic to say that God needs such a roundabout way for the manifestation of His thoughts. Or is it not more in conformity with true religion to say that the divine will joined with the first impulse of His intelligence is the Word of God? (*Hom. in hex.*, III, 2)¹²⁶

I think that he has learned how the criterion of “unreasonableness,” while valid in itself and necessary for dealing with some passages, is abused by heretics to set aside the teaching of Scripture. After all, the Gnostics probably thought it unreasonable to think that evil exists merely by the toleration of an omnipotent God; thus they discovered a self-existent evil symbolized by the “darkness” of Gen 1:2. This issue of the abuse of allegorical interpretation on the grounds of “unreasonableness” recurs, I think, when Basil criticizes Origen's interpretation of the super-heavenly waters.¹²⁷ Heretical, figurative interpretations of Scripture pose a threat to Basil's simple audience, who cannot grasp them, so he chooses not to use them at all when preaching on Genesis and even strongly discourages them from pursuing them because of the danger of heresy. It seems that it was the disappointment of members of his audience at his exclusively literal interpretation of Genesis 1 that prompts his criticism of allegorical interpretations, which he assures them he knows full well (*Hom. in hex.*, IX, 1). Simple Christians do not need such

¹²⁶ *πρῶτον μὲν . . . ζητῶμεν πῶς ὁ θεὸς διαλέγεται. ἄρα τὸν ἡμέτερον τρόπον; . . . οὕτω διὰ τῆς τοῦ ἀέρος τυπώσεως, κατὰ τὴν ἑναρθρον τῆς φωνῆς κίνησιν, τὸ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ νόημα σαφηνίζει. καὶ πῶς οὐ μυθῶδες τῆς τοιαύτης περιόδου λέγειν τὸν θεὸν χρῆζειν πρὸς τὴν τῶν νοηθέντων δήλωσιν; Ἡ εὐσεβέστερον λέγειν ὅτι τὸ θεῖον βούλημα καὶ ἡ πρώτη ὁρμὴ τοῦ νοεροῦ κινήματος, τοῦτο λόγος ἐστὶ τοῦ θεοῦ;*

¹²⁷ The topic of chapter 4.

readings, and Basil is perfectly capable of deriving exhortatory advice for them by drawing analogies between animal behavior and human morals. This is no disavowal of Origen but in fact is consistent with Origen's hermeneutical theory. Basil's practice in the hexaemeral homilies may even be considered more consistent with the theory than his earlier practice when he employed figurative readings quite freely to a general audience.

Of course, Origen himself, the originator of the theory, also employs figurative readings freely in his own homilies. However, he lives and preaches in a time when Christianity is illegal, when more advanced and even "perfect" Christians constitute a higher share of his audience, compared to Basil preaching during a time of the state-sponsorship of Christianity when the preacher has some reason to be skeptical of the genuineness of some people's religion. This point cannot be pressed very far, though, since even Origen gives the distinct impression that most Christians are simple, not because of a lack of piety and faith but simply because of a lack of understanding and sound reasoning. It is true that Basil has modified Origen's practice, but, again, in a way consistent with the original theory.

In addition to this developing appreciation of the needs of simple Christians, I would like to suggest, as a matter of only secondary importance, that Basil's change of approach between the two sets of homilies comes also from a difference in the literary genre of the biblical texts at hand.¹²⁸ When Basil gives allegorical interpretations of the Psalms, his goal is sometimes to give

¹²⁸ Cf. Hildebrand: "In comparing the homilies on the Psalms and those on Genesis, we must remember the very great difference between these biblical books as well as their different handling among the Fathers" (*Trinitarian Theology*, 138-39). I agree with this statement, but I disagree with him when he argues that even the hexaemeral homilies contain allegorical interpretations. He cites, for instance, Basil saying that the phases of the moon are an image of human inconstancy (*Hom. in hex.*, VI, 10), but this is an analogy, not an allegory. Basil is not saying that the words of Genesis that narrate the creation of the moon have a hidden referent other than what is obvious, which is what an allegory is. He is rather drawing a moral parallel, that is, an analogy, between a created thing (the moon with its phases) and human nature (which changes like the moon). This is what he does throughout

a Christian meaning to those parts of the Old Testament, such as the priests with their animal sacrifices, which Christians believe have been rendered obsolete by the coming of Jesus. Such passages, if taken only literally, would be unlikely to provide edification to simple Christians, who might find the practices offensive. A text like Genesis 1, on the other hand, because it does not talk about obsolete laws and rituals, requires no allegorical interpretation. However, the question of scriptural genre is by no means an all-encompassing criterion, since we often see Basil offering figurative interpretations alongside literal interpretations of verses from the Psalms that are not distinctly Jewish and that do not seem to require allegorization.

More important, and related to the question of the genres of the scriptural texts at hand, is the question of the rhetorical purposes of the respective homilies. The homilies on the Psalms seem to me to be more strictly exegetical than those on Genesis 1, and in them Basil makes use of interpretations of all three kinds, as the text at hand seems to dictate. If one sense dominates in the Psalms homilies, it is the psychic because the Psalms often speak of the relationship between the soul and God. In contrast, the “chief purpose in the *Hexaemeron* . . . was to present a complete cosmology.”¹²⁹ Genesis 1, which narrates the order and timing of the creation of the universe by God, is a privileged source of information about the universe because it has been given by the servant and friend of God, Moses (*Hom. in hex.*, IX, 1). That Basil says this in the same passage in which he criticizes allegorical interpretation is significant: the problem with allegorical readings that dispense with the literal sense of Genesis 1 is that they undermine the

the homilies when he compares human beings, both favorably and unfavorably, to various animals, or to the trees. Although he takes his inspiration from the text of Genesis 1, he does not claim to be giving an exegesis of it when making these analogies. Basil consistently avoids allegory in these homilies. Thus Rousseau rightly points out that in the hexaemeron “analogy . . . is preferred” to allegory (*Basil*, 323n22).

¹²⁹ Rousseau, *Basil*, 320.

scriptural cosmology, leaving room for some other cosmology (e.g., the dualistic one) to enter covertly. The text must be guarded against such corruption. Besides cosmology, the homilies on the hexameron also have a great deal to say about morality, but, as I already noted, Basil gets the lessons he wants here by making analogies to various animals God created, without needing to depend on the kind of psychic interpretation that predominates in the Psalms homilies.

Although I have given good reasons to believe that Basil does not renounce Origen and allegorical interpretation, I must ask myself, as Lim also did, whether this interpretation of Basil's criticism makes him seem disingenuous.¹³⁰ McGuckin says something of this sort: "These are graceful but highly rhetorical remarks that have been taken far too literally by subsequent commentators."¹³¹ Lim himself does not quite answer the question, but says only that many people would probably not be content to receive only the literal meaning of the Bible if they were at the same time told that that sense is only the flesh of Scripture intended for the "simple."¹³² In other words, Basil hides the value of the higher senses from his audience for their own good. It is not that he wants to keep them in the dark, but that, as a careful teacher, he does not want them to stray beyond the curriculum that he thinks is suitable for them at their present level of knowledge. I would not say that he is being disingenuous but rather agree with McGuckin that his criticism of allegorical interpretation is "highly rhetorical," even to the point that it has misled and confused later interpreters into thinking that Basil has abandoned Origen,

¹³⁰ Lim, "Politics," 363.

¹³¹ McGuckin, "Patterns," 46.

¹³² Lim, "Politics," 363.

when in fact he develops, in his own way and for his own audience and times, the hermeneutical tradition that Origen began.

CHAPTER 3

The Nature of Matter: “The earth was invisible and unformed” (Gen 1:2a)

A point of conflict between the cosmology of many early Christians, including both Origen and Basil, and the prevailing cosmology of natural philosophers is whether matter (*ὕλη*) is created or uncreated.¹ The philosophical background for this dispute is a widely held understanding of matter that goes back to Aristotle, who made a theoretical distinction between matter as such (called “prime” or “primary” matter), which is formless and has absolutely no qualities, and the forms that matter takes in actual things. Both Origen and Basil accept this theory, but reject the implication that primary matter is therefore uncreated, with only forms coming and ceasing to be. A. H. Armstrong, taking one phrase of Basil literally, has argued that Basil rejects this theory.² However, Johannes Zachhuber has recently shown that this interpretation of Basil’s words, when placed in the wider context of other remarks he makes

¹ Young points this out as proof “that Christian intellectuals were not ‘captured’ by Greek philosophy,” as once was commonly thought by scholars (“*Creatio ex nihilo*: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 [1991]: 139). She cites the second-century apologist and bishop Theophilus as the first Christian known to have taught that the universe was created by God “out of nothing” and not from preexistent matter (142). Gerhard May, however, cites Tatian, a disciple of Justin, as the first, even though he did not say explicitly that God “created” matter (*Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought*, translated by A. S. Worrall [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994], 150-52). The formality and definiteness of Theophilus’s statement (*τὰ πάντα ὁ θεὸς ἐποίησεν ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων εἰς τὸ εἶναι*, *Adu. Aut.*, I, 4, quoted by May, *Creatio*, 156n47) leads May to assume “that he owed his concept of creation to an older tradition,” which, however, cannot be specified exactly (*ibid.*, 156-57).

Not all Christians believed in *creatio ex nihilo*. Young cites Justin, Athenagoras, Hermogenes, and Clement as accepting the prevailing philosophical point of view (“*Creatio*,” 141).

² A. H. Armstrong, “The Theory of the Non-existence of Matter in Plotinus and the Cappadocians,” *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962): 427-29.

about form and matter, is very probably mistaken.³ Indeed, I do not think that Basil has any reason to oppose the theory itself; he is not interested in pushing the boundaries of natural philosophy or creating unnecessary conflicts with it. What he cares about is defending the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which does not require rejecting the entire theory of primary matter but only the idea that primary matter is uncreated. While Origen shares this apologetic concern, his engagement with the subject goes deeper and has the potential to advance philosophical thinking on the subject, at least for philosophers willing to accept God's revelation of his power, as taught by the Church.

Origen's brief argument that matter was created has been preserved from his lost commentary on Genesis⁴ by Eusebius in his *Praeparatio euangelica*, VII, 20.1-9,⁵ and is also found in a slightly more compact form in *De princ.*, II, 1.4. His argument from his commentary concludes with a quotation of Gen 1:2a ("Yet the earth was invisible and unformed"), indicating that it was originally made by way of comment on that verse. Apparently the words *invisible* (*ἀόρατος*) and *unformed* (*ἀκατασχεύαστος*) were cause for some Christians to think that the

³ Johannes Zachhuber, "Stoic Substance, Non-Existent Matter? Some Passages in Basil of Caesarea Reconsidered," *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 425-30.

⁴ For information about this lost commentary, see Ronald E. Heine, "Origen's Alexandrian *Commentary on Genesis*," in vol. 1 of *Origeniana Octaua*, 63-74. He speculates that it followed a Q&A format, covered only Genesis 1-4, and was concerned with refuting heterodox interpretations (64-65).

⁵ Eusebius, *Die Praeparatio Evangelica*, edited by Karl Mras and Edouard des Places, 2nd ed., 2 vols., Eusebius Werke 8, GCS (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982-1983).

———, *Evangelicae praeparationis, libri XV*, edited and translated by Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_pe_00_eintro.htm (accessed March 12, 2013).

scriptural cosmology supports the philosophical hypothesis that the universe was made from preexistent matter.

Basil, too, rejects the idea that matter is uncreated (*Hom. in hex.*, II, 2-3). Like Origen, he does so in the context of commenting upon Gen 1:2a, and, in point of fact, he reproduces an argument made by Origen about how this mistaken theory arose from a bad analogy between human craftsmen and God. This is not a coincidence, especially given what I have already demonstrated of Basil's dependence upon Origen as an interpreter of Scripture and that Basil knows Origen's Genesis commentary (for he include extracts from it in the *Philocalia*). Nevertheless, much of Basil's treatment of the topic is independent of Origen's. I do not think that this is because he at all disagrees with Origen's arguments. Rather, it is because of the differing rhetorical contexts of their arguments: both of Origen's arguments appear in scholarly contexts, whereas Basil must tailor his treatment for a popular, homiletic context.

ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF HYLOMORPHISM

Both Origen's and Basil's treatments of the nature of matter take place in the light of Aristotle's hylomorphic understanding of the universe.⁶ In Aristotle's physics, all substances in the universe are made of both form (*μορφή*) and matter (*ύλη*, also called "prime" or "primary" [*πρώτη*] matter, to distinguish it from a more general meaning of matter as "material"). Here is how Aristotle defines matter, in one passage:⁷

⁶ I have found Lindberg's summary of Aristotle's theory helpful (*Beginnings*, 287-88), as well as that of David Bostock (trans., *Metaphysics: Books Z and H*, Clarendon Aristotle Series [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000], 72-74).

⁷ This passage contains one of three "classic" definitions from Aristotle's own works quoted in Heinz Happ, *Hyle: Studien zum Aristotelischen Materie-Begriff* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 296-97.

By matter I mean what is not said to be in its own right any thing, or any quantity, or anything else by which being is determined. For there is something of which each of these is predicated, and which itself has a being different from that of each of the predicates—for while others are predicated of substance, substance is predicated of matter—and so the last thing will not be in its own right either a something, or of any quantity, or anything else at all. Nor will it be in its own right the negations of these, for they too will belong to it only coincidentally. (*Metaph.*, Z, 3 [1029a20-25])⁸

Matter can thus be defined as the underlying substance from which all things that exist are made, abstracted from all their qualities. Thus matter is neither hot, nor cold, nor wet, nor dry, nor anything else whatsoever. *Form*, on the other hand, can be defined as all the qualities that a particular thing has, abstracted from the matter itself. Since matter is totally bereft of qualities, it has the potential to become anything and everything.

This distinction can be understood by analogy with the way a thing, such as a statue, is made of a particular material, such as bronze:⁹ “As for the underlying nature, it must be grasped by analogy. As bronze stands to a statue, or wood to a bed, or [the matter and] the formless before it acquires a form to anything else which has a definite form, so this stands to a substance (*οὐσίαν*) (*Phys.*, I, 7 [191a7-11]).¹⁰ It must be remembered that this is, as he says, an analogy: a

⁸ λέγω δ' ὑλὴν ἢ καθ' αὐτὴν μήτε τί μήτε ποσὸν μήτε ἄλλο μηδὲν λέγεται οἷς ὥρισταί τὸ ὄν. ἔστι γάρ τι καθ' οὗ κατηγορεῖται τούτων ἕκαστον, ὃ τὸ εἶναι ἕτερον καὶ τῶν κατηγοριῶν ἐκάστη (τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα τῆς οὐσίας κατηγορεῖται, αὕτη δὲ τῆς ἥλης), ὥστε τὸ ἔσχατον καθ' αὐτὸ οὔτε τί οὔτε ποσὸν οὔτε ἄλλο οὐδὲν ἐστίν· οὐδὲ δὴ αἱ ἀποφάσεις, καὶ γὰρ αὐταὶ ὑπάρξουσιν κατὰ συμβεβηκός.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, edited by W. D. Ross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

———, *Metaphysics: Books Z and H*, translated by Bostock.

⁹ This analogy does not imply that Aristotle believed in a divine creator of forms. See David Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 173-81.

¹⁰ ἢ δὲ ὑποκειμένη φύσις ἐπιστητὴ κατ' ἀναλογίαν. ὥς γὰρ πρὸς ἀνδριάντα χαλκός ἢ πρὸς κλίνην ξύλον ἢ πρὸς τῶν ἄλλων τι τῶν ἐχόντων μορφὴν [ἢ ὑλὴ καὶ] τὸ ἄμορφον ἔχει πρὶν λαβεῖν τὴν μορφὴν, οὕτως αὕτη πρὸς οὐσίαν ἔχει.

material like bronze is not *matter* in the technical sense, i.e., it is not *primary matter*. Rather, bronze itself has both primary matter and form, for it has particular qualities, such as its weight, durability, color, etc., which can be abstracted from the primary matter itself. Four qualities are of particular importance for Aristotle, because they are the four that combine to constitute the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water), which are simple substances that combine to create all the complex substances that we see in the world.¹¹ Thus fire is hot and dry, air is hot and wet, earth is dry and cold, and water is cold and wet.¹²

Aristotle's theory is worked out in the context of explaining how change occurs: things can come to be and cease to be, but the underlying matter remains the same; only the forms change. Thus water can turn into air, and so forth. In this theory, then, the underlying matter of things is outside the world of change and becoming.

Considered, however, as possible, it [matter] does not in itself [pass away], but is necessarily incorruptible and uncreated (*ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀγέννητον ἀνάγκη αὐτὴν εἶναι*). If it came to be, there would have to be something underlying, out of which, as a constituent, it came to be; that, however, is the material nature itself, so it would have to be before it had come to be. (Ibid, I, 9 [192a 27-31])¹³

Aristotle, *Physics*, edited by W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

———, *Physics*, translated by W. Charlton, Clarendon Aristotle Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). Charlton translates *οὐσίαν* as “a reality,” but I always use “substance” for consistency and clarity.

¹¹ Complex because they can somehow be reduced to a combination of two or more of the elements. Thus a substance like iron may appear to be simple to us, but according to Aristotle it can be reduced to some combination of elements.

¹² There is a nice diagram of this in Lindberg, *Beginnings*, 54.

¹³ *ὥς δὲ κατὰ δύναμιν, [ἢ ὕλη] οὐ [φθείρεται] καθ' αὐτό, ἀλλ' ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀγέννητον ἀνάγκη αὐτὴν εἶναι. εἴτε γὰρ ἐγίγνετο, ὑποκεῖσθαι τι δεῖ πρῶτον ἐξ οὗ ἐνυπάρχοντος· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν αὐτὴ ἡ φύσις, ὥστ' ἐστὶ πρὶν γενέσθαι.*

Charlton translates *ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀγέννητον ἀνάγκη αὐτὴν εἶναι* as “can neither be brought to be nor destroyed.” For consistency and clarity, I will always translate *ἀγέννητον* as “uncreated.”

One cannot say that matter itself came to exist, Aristotle argues, because then it itself would have to come into existence from something else underlying it, since nothing comes from nothing. But that is what matter itself is—that which underlies all things. Consequently, primary matter must be uncreated.

Aristotle's theory gained currency among the Stoics, who traced the idea back to his teacher, Plato.¹⁴ They found support for this in a passage of Plato that contains an idea that bears some resemblance to Aristotle's theory of matter: "But if we speak of it [i.e., the mother and receptacle of what has come to be, of what is visible or perceivable in every other way] as an invisible and characterless sort of thing, one that receives all things and shares in a most perplexing way in what is intelligible, a thing extremely difficult to comprehend, we shall not be misled" (*Tim.*, 51a).¹⁵ However, Plato speaks not of matter but of a "receptacle" (ὑποδοχήν). It has been argued that Basil espouses a specifically Stoic notion of matter.¹⁶ In part this is because he uses the words *substance* (οὐσία) and *matter* synonymously (as does Origen—see note 35 below). However, such a use of the word *substance* is found even in Aristotle (e.g., *Metaph.*, H,

¹⁴ See David Sedley, "Hellenistic Physics and Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, edited by Keimpe Algra *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 385.

¹⁵ ἀλλ' ἀνόρατον εἶδος τι καὶ ἄμορφον, πανδεχές, μεταλαμβάνον δὲ ἀπορώτατά πη τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ δυσαλωτότατον αὐτὸ [τὴν τοῦ γεγονότος ὄρατοῦ καὶ πάντως αἰσθητοῦ μητέρα καὶ ὑποδοχήν] λέγοντες οὐ ψευσόμεθα.

Plato, *Opera*, edited by John Burnet, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900-1907).

———, *Timaeus*, translated by Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000).

¹⁶ R. M. Hübner, "Gregor von Nyssa als Verfasser der sog. ep. 38 des Basiliius," in *Epektasis: Mélanges patristique offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou*, edited by Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser, 463-90 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972).

1 [1042a26-b8]).¹⁷ This fact, as Mark Delcogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz say, cautions against assuming a Stoic background for Basil's use of the terms just because of this synonymy.¹⁸ David Robertson also argues against aligning Basil with Stoicism, in part because "a sharp distinction between Aristotelian and Stoic logic . . . by the fourth century had partly broken down."¹⁹ He concludes that "Basil is somewhere in between Stoic and Aristotelian doctrines of substance, while his mind is also guided on these matters by his theological predecessors and contemporaries."²⁰ That Basil espouses an eclectic understanding of hylomorphism is also indicated by his probable use of a contemporary manual of philosophy in composing these homilies; such a manual would have drawn upon various philosophers and philosophical ideas.²¹ My use of the word *Aristotelian* in this chapter is intended to refer to the hylomorphic theory in general, irrespective of nuances applied by particular schools of thought, such as the Stoics.

¹⁷ Cited in Mark Delcogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, trans., *Against Eunomius*, FOTC 122 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 71n286.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ David G. Robertson, "Stoic and Aristotelian Notions of Substance in Basil of Caesarea," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998): 416n88.

²⁰ Ibid., 417.

²¹ "Je suppose qu'en préparant ces homélies l'évêque de Césarée a emprunté cette documentation [philosophique et même scientifique] . . . à un *manuel philosophique*. . . . Ce recueil dont je postule l'existence, dans le cas précis de Basile, devait être à la fois méthodique et doxographique, assez détaillé et éclectique (Platon et Aristote n'y étaient nullement négligées ; bien au contraire !), mais néanmoins de tendance nettement stoïcienne. Ce manuel philosophique devait contenir beaucoup de données scientifiques ; il devait être inspiré par un stoïcisme largement ouvert et sympathique à d'autres formes de pensée" (Amand de Mendieta, "Préparation," 365).

ORIGEN

In the context of explaining how change is possible, Origen clearly adopts Aristotle's hylomorphic theory of substance, which Aristotle himself also offered as an explanation of change. Origen writes:

Now by matter we mean that which underlies bodies, namely, that from which they take their existence when qualities have been applied to or mingled with them. We speak of four qualities, heat, cold, dryness, wetness. These qualities, when mingled with the *hyle* or matter (which matter is clearly seen to have an existence in its own right apart from these qualities we have mentioned), produce the different kinds of bodies. But although, as we have said, this matter has an existence in its own right without qualities, yet it is never found actually existing apart from them. (*De princ.*, II, 1.4)²²

Origen thinks that this theory is useful for the theological cosmology he develops in *De principiis*. His use of the theory illustrates in practice how philosophy can be beneficial for those studying the Scriptures. However, Origen's summary of Aristotle's theory is followed immediately by a criticism of an integral part of that theory, namely the idea of the uncreated nature of matter: "I cannot understand how so many distinguished men have supposed [matter] to be uncreated, that is, not made by God himself the Creator of all things, but in its nature and power the result of chance" (*ibid.*).²³ Origen criticizes this idea because he believes in *creatio ex nihilo*. Though Origen says he does not know why the philosophers have erred in this matter, I

²² *materiam ergo intellegimus quae subiecta est corporibus, id est ex qua inditis atque insertis qualitatibus corpora subsistunt. qualitates autem quattuor dicimus: calidam, frigidam, aridam, humidam. quae quattuor qualitates ἕλγ, id est materiae, insertae (quae material propria ratione extra has esse inuenitur quas supra diximus qualitates) diuersas corporum species efficient. haec tamen material quamuis, ut supra diximus, secundum suam propriam rationem sine qualitatibus sit, numquam tamen subsistere extra qualitates inuenitur.*

He also mentions this theory in *C. Cels.*, III, 41; IV, 56.

²³ *nescio quomodo tanti et tales uiri ingenitam, id est non ab ipso deo factam conditore omnium putauerunt, sed fortuitam quondam eius naturam uirtutemque dixerunt.*

think it is because they had no reason, not being Christians, to make an exception to the axiom that nothing comes from nothing. He believes this doctrine, not because of his exegesis of a particular passage of Scripture, though in support of it he does cite 2 Macc 7:28 (“Look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed,” *ibid.*, II, 1.5),²⁴ but because it is part of “the apostolic teaching” (*praedicationem apostolicam*, *ibid.*, I, pref., 4). *Creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine of the Church’s faith,²⁵ which teaches, as Origen puts it, that God, “when nothing existed, caused the universe to be” (*ibid.*).²⁶ That Origen rejects an integral aspect of Aristotle’s theory of matter shows how natural philosophy, while helpful, remains subordinate to theology. Insofar as Aristotle’s theory contradicts Church doctrine, it must be rejected. Thus both aspects of the handmaid metaphor are here illustrated: usefulness and subordination.

Origen does not merely assert the Church’s teaching as a matter of pure faith but tries to demonstrate it rationally. He does not shrink from this task and must think that the reasons for believing it are strong, since he expresses puzzlement about the fact that “so many distinguished” philosophers have embraced an idea he judges to be erroneous. His argument is dense and not easy to follow.²⁷ His explanation of his position in *De princ.*, II, 1.4, is in substance the same as

²⁴ But Young (*pace* Origen), relying on May (*Creatio*, 6-8), argues that this verse “impl[ies] no more than that the world came into existence when it was previously not there” (“*Creatio*,” 143-44).

²⁵ May traces the development of this doctrine, which, according to him, “achieves its essentially permanent form” in Irenaeus (“*Creatio*,” 148).

²⁶ *cum nihil esset, esse fecit uniuersa.*

²⁷ I have found two commentarial explanations of it: Henri Crouzel, SJ, “Un fragment du *Commentaire sur la Genèse* d’Origène et la création de la matière à partir du néant,” in *Agathé elpis: Studi storico-religiosi in onore di Ugo Bianchi*, edited by G. Sfameni Gasparro, 417-26 (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1994); and Holger Strutwolf, “*Philosophia christiana*: Beispiele christlich-philosophischer Argumentation gegen die platonische Vorstellung von der ‘Ungewordenheit der Materie’ in der *Preparatio evangelica* des Euseb von Caesarea,” in

the one he also provides in his commentary on Genesis.²⁸ The latter is slightly more developed, so I shall follow it, with reference to the former.

In his commentary on Genesis, Origen defends *creatio ex nihilo*, not against the natural philosophers, but against fellow Christians who have adopted the hypothesis of the philosophers,²⁹ apparently because it seems to them to be in harmony with the statement that “the earth was invisible and unformed” (Gen 1:2a).³⁰ This is in fact the exegesis of the second-century heretic Hermogenes, whose commentary on Gen 1:2a Tertullian describes as follows: “To begin with, he refers the word ‘earth’ to matter, ‘because,’ so he says, ‘it is the earth which was made out of it,’ and he interprets ‘was’ as indicating that it has always existed in the past, being unborn and uncreated (*infecta*); finally, *invisible and unfinished* because—so he will have it—matter was formless (*informem*), confused, and unordered ” (*Adu. Herm.*, 23.1).³¹ A similar explanation

Quaerite faciem eius semper: *Studien zu den geistesgeschichtlichen Beziehungen zwischen Antike und Christentum (Dankesgabe für Albrecht Dihle zum 85. Geburtstag aus dem Heidelberger “Kirchenväterkolloquium”)*, edited by Andrea Jördens *et al.*, 360-64 (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2008).

²⁸ As Henri Crouzel also notes: “Le raisonnement ne diffère pas essentiellement de celui du fragment: il est cependant un peu moins compliqué. Cette coïncidence n’a rien d’étonnant: selon Eusèbe les huit premiers livres du *Commentaire sur la Genèse et le Traité des Principes* sont de la même période de la vie d’Origène” (“Fragment,” 423).

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*: “La citation de *Gn* 1, 2, qu’Origène commente en cet endroit, semble montrer qu’il ne s’adresse pas directement aux philosophes, mais à des chrétiens tentés par cet enseignement philosophique” (419).

³⁰ Cf. *De princ.*, IV, 4.6: “Very many, indeed, think that the actual matter of which things are made is referred to in the passage written by Moses in the beginning of Genesis, [. . . Gen 1:1-2a], for by the phrase “an earth invisible and without form,” it seems to them that Moses was alluding to nothing else but formless matter” (*quam plurimi sane putant ipsam rerum materiam significari in eo, quod in principio Genesis scriptum est a Moyse: . . . inuisibilem namque et incompositam terram non aliud eis Moyses quam informem materiam uisus est indicare*).

³¹ *nam et terrae nomen redigit <in> materiam, quia terra sit quae facta est ex illa, et “erat” in hoc dirigit, quasi quae semper retro fuerit, innata et infecta, “inuisibilis” autem et “rudis,” quia informem et confusam et inconditam uult fuisse materiam.*

Tertullian, *Contre Hermogène*, edited by Frédéric Chapot, SC 439 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999).

is found in Basil. When Basil first brings up the philosophical interpretation, he begins by recording the argument of his opponents: “This [matter], they say, is naturally invisible and unformed, being without qualities because of its condition, and dissociated from all form and shape. Having taken it over, the Craftsman formed it by His own intelligence, brought (ἤγαγε) it to order, and thus through it gave visible things existence” (*Hom. in Hex.*, II, 2).³² It is clear that this interpretation depends upon the hylomorphic theory of matter. Within the framework of this theory, primary matter can be described as “invisible” because something formless cannot be seen, since everything that is seen has both color and shape, i.e., form. Obviously it can also be called “unformed” because by its very definition it has not yet received form.

According to Origen, the fundamental reason that some Christians espouse the philosophical hypothesis of “underlying uncreated matter” is that they assume an analogy between human craftsmen and the divine Craftsman: “Because of human craftsmen he cannot

———, *The Treatise against Hermogenes*, translated by J. H. Waszink, ACW 24 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1956). He translates *infecta* as “unmade” and *informem* as “shapeless.”

Quoted in May, *Creatio*, 141–42n132. See also 144n152 for other Christians who mention this exegetical tradition, which apparently goes back to Judaism (6n24). Thus Clement, who does not believe in *creatio ex nihilo*, says that the philosophers, being plagiarists, developed their theory of matter specifically from Gen 1:2a (*Strom.*, V, 90.1).

Clement, *Stromata: Buch I–VI*, edited by Otto Stählin, GCS 52 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960).

³² Αὕτη γάρ, φησί, καὶ ἀόρατος τῇ φύσει καὶ ἀκατασκευάστος, ἀποιοῖς οὐσα τῷ ἑαυτῆς λόγῳ, καὶ παντὸς εἶδους καὶ σχήματος κεχωρισμένη, ἣν παραλαβὼν ὁ τεχνίτης τῇ ἑαυτοῦ σοφίᾳ ἐμόρφωσε καὶ εἰς τάξιν ἤγαγε καὶ οὕτω δι’ αὐτῆς οὐσίωσε τὰ ὁρώμενα.

Basil’s words “having taken over” (παραλαβὼν) and “brought to order” (εἰς τάξιν ἤγαγε, which Way translates as “reduced to order”) are, as Rudberg and Amand de Mendieta note, an allusion to Plato’s *Timaeus*, which says that God “having taken over (παραλαβὼν) all that was visible . . . brought it to order (εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν) from disorder” (πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὁρατὸν παραλαβὼν . . . εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας, 30a). Here Plato does not speak of God forming primary matter (which is not a Platonic concept), for he says that God took over “all that was visible,” whereas primary matter is invisible (as the earth is invisible in Gen 1:2a). Apparently Plato’s statement has been assimilated into a hylomorphic framework. This is not surprising since the Stoics traced the doctrine back to Plato.

accept that God makes the things that exist without underlying uncreated matter, since neither can a sculptor make his proper work without bronze, nor a carpenter without wood, nor an architect without stones” (ap. Eusebius, *Praep. eu.*, VII, 20.1, my translation).³³ This is the very analogy that Aristotle himself used to help explain the distinction between form and matter (*Phys.*, I, 7 [191a7-12], quoted above). Those who argue for the uncreated nature of matter are, Origen concludes, “comparing dissimilar things” (*ἀνομοίως παραβάλλουσι*, ap. Eusebius, *Praep. eu.*, VII, 20.9, my translation).³⁴

Origen does not merely assert that the analogy is bad, but tries to explain why a Christian should believe that God made matter itself. His argument is twofold. The first part (*ibid.*, VII, 20.3-5) hinges on the concept of God’s power (*δύναμις*), and the second (*ibid.*, VII, 20.6-8) on God’s providence (*πρόνοια*). To believe that God did not make matter is to limit God’s power, which Origen knows his opponents, being Christians themselves, will not wish to do. Thus he begins his argument: “We must question him about God’s power, whether God, if He wills to establish whatever He chooses, there being no defect nor weakness in His will, cannot establish that which He chooses” (*ibid.*, VII, 20.1). The philosophical point of view also removes the need for God’s providence, for if matter (“the substance,” *τὴν οὐσίαν*)³⁵ can exist without God having created it, then so, too, can the “qualities” (*τὰς ποιότητες*) of the matter, “the reason being the

³³ διὰ τοὺς ἀνθρωπίνους τεχνίτας μὴ δύνασθαι παραδέξασθαι τὸν θεὸν χωρὶς ὕλης ἀγενήτου ὑποκειμένης κατασκευάζειν τὰ ὄντα, ἐπεὶ μὴδὲ ἀνδριαντοποιὸς χωρὶς χαλκοῦ τὸ ἴδιον ἔργον ποιῆσαι δύναται μὴδὲ τέκτων χωρὶς ξύλων μὴδὲ οἰκοδόμος χωρὶς λίθων.

³⁴ The argument against drawing such an analogy is used by other Christians as well. See May, *Creatio*, 74n59.

³⁵ *Matter* (*ὑλη*) and *substance* (*οὐσία*) are synonyms in Origen’s argument.

same in both cases” (ibid., VII, 20.2). But Christians cannot accept that even the forms in the universe are uncreated, for then God would not be creator at all.

Origen’s argument about God’s power goes as follows: if matter is uncreated, then, without it, God would have been powerless to make the universe and be its creator (ibid., VII, 20.3). So it was “lucky” (*εὐτυχηκέναι*) he happened to find the very matter he needed (ibid., VII, 20.3), in just the right quantity (ibid., VII, 20.4) and having just the right potential to receive the exact qualities he wished to bestow on it (ibid., VII, 20.5). Or, if this is not the result of luck, then it must be the result of “some providence anterior to God” (ibid.).³⁶ Origen does not pursue the concept of an anterior providence, nor does he need to: he knows that his Christian opponents would reject such a concept as blasphemous, which is exactly what Origen thinks their doctrine is because it makes God impotent. This argument is recapitulated in *De princ.*, II, 1.4, where he says that in the philosophical way of thinking, one must conclude that God was lucky to have found the very matter he needed. But the philosophers have failed to appreciate God’s power, for they have assumed that “God could not make anything when nothing existed” (*De princ.*, II, 1.4).³⁷ On the contrary, God’s power is so immense that he could create from nothing the exact matter he needed to make the universe. I think that Origen is correct in saying that the pagan philosophers did not appreciate God’s power, for they did not imagine that it could transcend the axiom that nothing comes from nothing.

Having explained how belief in uncreated matter makes God impotent (ibid., VII, 20.3-5), Origen then explains how it destroys any reason for believing in God’s providence (ibid., VII,

³⁶ *πρόνοιά τις πρεσβυτέρα θεοῦ.*

³⁷ *deus non potuerit aliquid facere, cum nihil esset.*

20.6-8). He uses a *reductio ad absurdum*, and so he begins by putting himself in the shoes of his opponents: “if we admit as a hypothesis that matter is uncreated (*ἀγένητον*) . . .” (ibid., VII, 20.6).³⁸ He proposes a hypothetical question: “if without any providence supplying the substance (*τὴν οὐσίαν*) to God it has become such as it is, what could providence, if it existed, have done more than their spontaneous chance [did]?” (ibid.)³⁹ It is clear from what he says next that the answer to the hypothetical question is “nothing.” The matter from which the universe was made was the best possible matter for the universe God wanted to make.

Origen does not mention here the logical possibility that this universe, “such as it is,” could be inferior to a universe that God could have made had he been able to make his own matter, perhaps superior to the matter that happened to be available to him. Had he pursued this avenue, he could have then argued that such an idea would also be a blasphemous affront to God’s power because it would mean that God actually wanted to make a better universe, but was unable to realize his will owing to the limitations of the matter with which he had to work and his inability to make from nothing the matter he really wanted. It seems to me that his argument would have been stronger and clearer had he made this explicit (as Basil does—see below).

The argument continues: if the matter God needed in order to create the universe existed without his providence, then it should also be possible for the forms themselves to exist without

³⁸ καθ’ ὑπόθεσιν γοῦν ἀποδεξάμενοι τὸ ἀγένητον εἶναι τὴν ὕλην.

Gifford translates *ἀγένητον* as “unoriginate.”

³⁹ εἰ προνοίας οὐχ ὑποβαλλούσης τὴν οὐσίαν τῷ θεῷ τοιαύτη γεγένηται, εἰ πρόνοια ἦν ὑφεστῶσα, τί ἂν πλέον πεποιήκει τοῦ αὐτομάτου;

Gifford translates *οὐσίαν* as “material substance,” which is indeed the sense of it.

God's providence (ibid., VII, 20.6). In other words, if providence is unnecessary to explain how matter exists, then, Origen argues, providence is also unnecessary to explain how forms exist. But matter together with its forms is nothing but the universe (*κόσμος*) itself, so if they are both uncreated, then the universe itself is uncreated. He knows that his Christian opponents will agree that it is absurd to believe that the universe is uncreated and that it exists apart from God's providence; therefore it is equally absurd, he argues, to believe that the matter God needed to make this universe could have already been there for him apart from his making it (ibid., VII, 20.8). This argument is briefly recapitulated in *De princ.*, II, 1.4, when Origen says that the philosophers are hypocrites for criticizing as impious people who deny God's providence, when they do the very same thing by asserting that matter is uncreated.

Another argument is found in *De princ.*, II, 1.4, which has no parallel in the fragment from the Genesis commentary. Origen argues that, if God did create matter himself, then the matter he created is "the same as that matter which these men call uncreated."⁴⁰ Given the choice, then, of calling this matter created or uncreated, it is impious to say that it is uncreated. The force of this argument is lost on me, for he does not explain why the matter being the same whether it is uncreated or created makes it impious to say that it is uncreated. Perhaps it is best that he did not include this argument in his commentary.

In *De principiis*, IV, 4.6, Origen returns again to the question of matter. He does not change his position nor offer any new arguments for it, but he does mention the possibility of

⁴⁰ *similem atque eandem ut est illa, quam isti ingenitam dicunt.*

affirming *creatio ex nihilo* by denying the concept of primary matter altogether (as some Platonists seem to have done).⁴¹ Origen says that some Christians

have ventured to assert that bodily nature consists of nothing else but qualities. For if hardness and softness, heat and cold, wetness and dryness, are qualities, and when these and all the others like them are taken away nothing is conceived to lie beneath, then the qualities will appear to be everything. As so those who hold this opinion have endeavored to establish the following argument, that since all who say that matter is uncreated allow that its qualities were created by God, the result is that even according to their view matter is not uncreated if qualities are everything. (*De princ.*, IV, 4.7)⁴²

As Crouzel notes,⁴³ this is not Origen's own position (which he has already given in II, 1.4), for he goes on to explain why one should not in fact reject the concept of primary matter (*ibid.*).

Origen explicitly considers, and thinks worth mentioning, the possibility of rejecting the hylomorphic viewpoint altogether in order to defend the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

He does not, however, take this route himself, as appealing as it may seem for apologetic purposes, for he thinks homomorphism a good philosophical theory.

⁴¹ Armstrong refers to Plotinus arguing against those who reject the concept of primary matter, and notes that this "is perhaps the only example in late Greek philosophy of a total rejection of the idea of *ύλη* and an attempt to conceive reality as constructed exclusively of forms (a position which Plotinus himself sometimes comes very near)" ("Theory," 427). Richard Sorabji names the Neoplatonists Porphyry, Proclus and Simplicius as taking the view that individuals are simply "bundles of qualities," rather than a combination of qualities and primary matter (*Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983], 292).

⁴² *ausi sunt dicere nihil aliud esse naturam corpoream quam qualitates. si enim duritia et mollities, calidum et frigidum, humidum et aridum qualitas est, his autem uel ceteris huiusmodi amputatis nihil aliud intellegitur subiacere, uidebuntur qualitates esse omnia. unde et hi, qui haec adserunt, adseuerare conati sunt, quoniam omnes, qui materiam infectam dicunt, qualitates a deo factas esse confitentur, inueniatur per hoc etiam secundum ipsos nec material esse infecta, si quidem qualitates sint omnia.*

⁴³ Crouzel, "Fragment," 423-24.

BASIL

Before discussing Basil's remarks against the philosophical view of matter, I shall examine their context: Basil is preaching on Genesis 1 and has just reached verse 2a. His first move is to explain what he thinks this verse means. He must interpret the words *invisible* (ἀόρατος) and *unformed* (ἀκατασκεύαστος). As for the latter: "The complete formation (τελεία κατασκευή) of the earth is its abundance" (*Hom. in hex.*, II, 1, my translation). But since the earth did not yet have any vegetation at all, "Scripture reasonably spoke of it as unformed" (*ibid.*). The same is true of the sky, though the text does not say so explicitly, because it did not yet possess its "proper adornment" (τὸν οἰκεῖον κόσμον), which is the moon, sun, and stars (*ibid.*). As for the former, Basil gives two explanations for why the earth was invisible: either because human beings did not yet exist to see it, thus making it "invisible" in the sense of "unseen" (the word ἀόρατος has both meanings)⁴⁴ or because it was covered with water and there was no light (*ibid.*). Basil seems to prefer the latter interpretation, as he later restates it alone (*ibid.*, II, 3)

After this, Basil begins his criticism of those who say that Gen 1:2a means that matter is uncreated. I shall look at this criticism in the light of Origen's argument, which Basil certainly knows.⁴⁵ The rhetorical contexts for Origen's argument and Basil's are different: the former is

⁴⁴ *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. ἀόρατος.

⁴⁵ Not only does the *Philocalia* contain extracts from Origen's Genesis commentary, but it also includes, as chapter XXIV, an extract from *Prae. eu.*, VII, 22. This passage in Eusebius almost immediately follows Origen's fragment on matter (*ibid.*, VII, 20), so Basil would have known Origen's argument not only directly from the commentary, but intermediately through the *Praeparatio euangelica* as well!

The fragment from *Prae. eu.*, VII, 22 (= *Phil.*, XXIV), is a refutation, in the form of a Platonic dialogue, of the heretical idea that primary matter is the source of evil. Interestingly, though Basil and Gregory Naz. acknowledge that they have taken the fragment from Eusebius, they also claim (wrongly) that it was originally authored by Origen (Eusebius said it was from someone named Maximus)! It is actually from Methodius of Olympus, but Basil and Gregory Naz. had found it in a work attributed to someone named Adamantius, whom they

found in a commentary and takes the form of a tightly reasoned argument having two parts. The latter is given in a sermon and is less compact. Basil has four basic arguments against the idea that matter is uncreated: 1) it makes matter equal to God in honor, 2) it either makes matter equal to God in power or denigrates God's power, 3) it cannot explain how matter came into contact with God's power, and 4) it is based on a false analogy between human beings and God. I think that the fourth of these arguments is taken from Origen. There may be some very general resemblance between Basil's second argument and Origen's argument from God's power, as well as between Basil's third argument and Origen's argument from providence.

I believe that the reason Basil does not draw more extensively upon Origen's arguments owes to the rhetorical contexts: for the most part, Origen's arguments are unsuitable, as they stand, for a homily because they are too densely logical and philosophical for Basil's congregation. Thus they are not appropriate for these homilies on Genesis 1, which, although they contain philosophical discussions about physics and perhaps even seek "to present a complete cosmology,"⁴⁶ are not aimed at a philosophical or scholarly audience of Christians but ordinary, "simple" believers.⁴⁷ Basil does not seek to educate his audience about physics per se, but to edify them in their Christian faith (which includes physics insofar as it pertains to a scriptural cosmology) and offer what "is most profitable for our hearers" (*ὠφέλιμον τοῖς*

wrongly assumed was Origen because that was Origen's nickname (see Éric Junod, ed., *Philocalie 21-27: Sur le libre arbitre*, SC 226 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1976], 66-68). Although Basil does not draw on this interesting fragment in the hexaemeron, it serves as a reminder of how Origen stands in the background behind his treatment of primary matter. Of course, in this case it is not really Origen, but Basil thought it was, and the principle ideas of the fragment are at any rate in conformity with Origen's own ideas (ibid., 70-71).

⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Basil*, 320.

⁴⁷ See Lim, "Politics," 361-62.

ἀκούουσιν, *Hom. in hex.*, I, 9; cf. IX, 1).⁴⁸ As Rousseau says, for Basil “Scripture’s purpose was . . . moral rather than ‘scientific.’ The very reading of Scripture, therefore, was a moral rather than a merely intellectual endeavor.”⁴⁹ The many points he raises on issues of natural philosophy serve this fundamentally moral purpose and are supposed to direct his hearers’ attention to God the creator of all: “Should any of these things [i.e., physical theories] which have been said seem to you to be plausible, transfer your admiration to the wisdom of God which has ordered them so” (*ibid.*, I, 10; cf., I, 11).⁵⁰ Origen’s arguments, while they do serve the Christian faith by defending doctrine and thus can also be considered edifying, would probably not so much edify Basil’s congregation as baffle them. Basil is still able to defend Christian doctrine, though not as thoroughly as Origen does, with some simpler statements.

After explaining why Gen 1:2a has led some Christians to adopt the philosophical hypothesis of uncreated matter, Basil begins his refutation by arguing that this hypothesis makes matter equal to God in honor: “If matter itself is uncreated, it is, in the first place, of equal rank with God, worthy of the same honors” (*Hom. in hex.*, II, 2).⁵¹ In itself, this would seem to be bad

⁴⁸ I agree with E. Amand de Mendieta when he says that “l’énorme proportion, vraiment massive, d’opinions philosophiques et de données scientifiques” are given “au service apologétique de la foi chrétienne et orthodoxe” (“Préparation,” 350).

⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Basil*, 327. Cf. Amand de Mendieta: “Ces neuf homélies . . . sont de fait des ‘homélies’ au sens chrétien et patristique du term : discours simple et familier, prononcé à l’église, instruction catéchétique ou exégétique, où se mêle l’exhortation morale et spirituelle” (“Préparation,” 350).

⁵⁰ *Τούτων ἂν σοι δοκῇτι πιθανὸν εἶναι τῶν εἰρημένων, ἐπὶ τὴν οὕτω ταῦτα διαταξαμένην τοῦ θεοῦ σοφίαν μετὰ θες τὸ θαῦμα.*

Cf. *ibid.*: “Le but principal (je ne dis pas l’unique) qu’il s’assigne explicitement est donc d’inciter ses auditeurs et ses auditrices, et plus tard ses lecteurs, à élever leurs regards depuis les beautés du monde visible jusqu’à leur Auteur invisible et paternel” (354-55).

⁵¹ *Εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀγέννητος αὕτη, πρῶτον μὲν ὁμότιμος τῷ θεῷ, τῶν αὐτῶν πρεσβείων ἀξιουμένη.*

enough, but Basil takes it one step further by quoting the natural philosophers themselves⁵² who he says define uncreated matter, bereft of qualities, as “the most extreme unsightliness” (τὴν ἐσχάτην ἀμορφίαν) and “unshapen ugliness” (τὸ ἀδιατύπωτον αἶσχος, *ibid.*). How could such ugliness be equal to God?

Basil’s second argument has two prongs: on the one hand, if it is asserted that uncreated matter has the potential “to take in entirely the intelligence of God,”⁵³ they again put it on par with God himself, this time with respect to his power (*ibid.*). On the other hand, if it is asserted that “matter is inferior to the activity of God,”⁵⁴ then they denigrate God’s power by implying that he was incapable of making the universe he would have preferred, had he had better material with which to work. Interestingly, this is the very possibility that Origen neglected to mention (which I explained above). To adopt this viewpoint, that uncreated matter is inferior to God’s ability, is “a more absurd blasphemy” (ἀτοπώτεραν βαλφημίαν, *ibid.*). It is better, though still wrong and blasphemous, to believe that uncreated matter was equal to God’s power, so that at least God was able to make the universe he desired, than to say that he had to settle for some inferior universe.

Basil has another argument against the philosophical viewpoint: “Let them answer us as to how the active power of God and the passive nature of matter came in contact with one

⁵² Amand de Mendieta and Rudberg cite Alcinous, Calcidius, and Posidonius as examples. However, they do not use the exact words Basil quotes. Posidonius uses the adjectives *ἄποιον* (as Basil) and *ἄμορφον* (like Basil’s *ἀμορφίαν*) to describe matter (frg. 92, *The Fragments*, vol. 1, edited by L. Edelstein and I. G. Kidd [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972]). Calcidius calls it *informitas* and *turpitude* (*Timaeus*, edited by J. H. Waszink *et al.*, *Plato Latinus* 4 [London: Brill, 1962], 292).

⁵³ ὅλην ὑποδέχασθαι τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ἐπιστήμην.

⁵⁴ ἐλάττων ἢ ὕλη τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνεργείας.

another” (ibid., II, 3).⁵⁵ I am not certain exactly what he means by this, though surely the question is hypothetical and implies that the union of divine power and formless matter is inexplicable. At this point in their critical edition Rudberg and Amand de Mendieta refer to two passages that argue against matter being uncreated: Philo’s *De opificio mundi* (2.8-9) and an extract from St. Dionysius, the third-century bishop of Alexandria and disciple of Origen, preserved in Eusebius’s *Praeparatio euangelica* (VII, 19.1-8). In the former passage, Philo uses terminology similar to Basil’s: “active cause” (*δραστήριον αἷτιον*) and “the passive” (*τὸ παθητόν*), versus Basil’s “active power” (*ἡ δραστική δύναμις*) and “passive nature” (*ἡ παθητική φύσις*) (*De op. mundi*, 2.8).⁵⁶ He also accuses those who say that matter is uncreated of being impious, but his argument (that if God did not make matter himself, then he would not care for it) is not one used by Basil (ibid., 2.10-11). I do not think that their common use of the concepts “active” and “passive” is enough to prove direct dependence of Basil upon this passage. The latter passage, from Dionysius, seems to me closer to Basil’s argument: “For let them tell us the cause for which, though both be uncreated (*ἀγενήτων*), God on the one hand is impassible, unchangeable, immovable, actively operative, while the other is on the contrary passive (*παθητή*), changeable, unstable, transformable. How then could they harmonize and agree in their course?” (ap. Eusebius, *Praep. eu.*, VII, 19.5-6).⁵⁷ He says that there must be some cause for the two different

⁵⁵ ἐπεὶ ἀποκρινάσθωσαν ἡμῖν πῶς ἀλλήλοις συνέτυχον ἢ τε δραστικὴ τοῦ θεοῦ δύναμις καὶ ἡ παθητικὴ φύσις τῆς ὕλης.

⁵⁶ Philo, *Opera quae supersunt*, edited by Leopold Cohn *et al.*, 7 vols. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1896).

⁵⁷ εἰπάτωσαν γὰρ τὴν αἰτίαν, δι’ ἣν, ἀμφοτέρων ὄντων ἀγενήτων, ὁ μὲν θεὸς ἀπαθής, ἀτρεπτος, ἀκίνητος, ἐργαστικός, ἡ δὲ τὰ ἐναντία παθητή, τρεπτή, ἄστατος, μεταποιουμένη. καὶ πῶς ἔρμωσαν καὶ συνέδραμον;

Gifford translates *παθητή* as “passible.”

substances both being uncreated, but such a cause would itself be “higher than each of them” (*ἐκατέρου κρείττονα*⁵⁸), which is blasphemy (ibid., VII, 19.2).⁵⁹ Still, there does not seem to be any particular reason to think that Basil is drawing on Dionysius. I also think that Basil’s argument could be a very simplified version of Origen’s argument from providence, though, once again, there is no verbal correspondence. In other words, Basil asks whether the union of God’s power with the matter he needed was just luck. Did they just happen to come together? If not, who arranged their meeting? Basil does not develop this argument at all, nor does he say anything, as Origen does, about how God found exactly as much matter, and of such a kind, as he needed. Thus it is impossible to say whether his statement has any direct connection to the argument of Origen. Nevertheless, I am confident that Basil’s argument stems from the general, Alexandrian strain of thought exemplified by Philo, Origen, and Dionysius. However, since he does not develop it, nothing more specific can be said about it. Whatever the exact sense of his words, as with his other two short arguments, Basil does not dwell on this argument. It is enough for him simply to deploy each of his arguments in a few words and then move on, adopting a kind of “shotgun” approach. This is a homily for his congregation and not the place for a careful philosophical discussion.

Each of these three arguments occupies only about six lines of text, yet Basil devotes a whole paragraph (22 lines) to developing Origen’s argument that the notion of uncreated matter

⁵⁸ Strutwolf glosses this as “ontologisch höherstehend” (“*Philosophia*,” 362).

⁵⁹ Interestingly, Dionysius also argues that matter cannot be uncreated because “uncreatedness is, so to speak, his [God’s] substance” (*οὐσία ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, ἡ ἀγεννησία*, ibid., VII, 19.3, my translation), the very idea Basil attacks in *Contra Eunomium*. Of course, this does not mean that Basil could not draw upon other elements of Dionysius’s argument.

follows from a bad analogy (*Hom. in hex.*, II, 2). Origen himself does not dwell on this point and speaks of it in only his first and penultimate sentences. Origen is more concerned with developing two logical arguments against his opponents, where Basil prefers to offer three very short arguments and then explain at some length where the mistaken viewpoint came from. As I already mentioned, Origen knows that it is not enough to say where a mistaken idea came from – that is the genetic fallacy – he has to explain why the view is wrong. He offers the analogy as an explanation, not a refutation. No doubt Basil knows this, too, and thus he does make three arguments (albeit very short ones). However, I think that he also knows that his audience would have a very hard time following such carefully crafted, philosophical arguments as Origen’s, whereas a discourse about where the mistaken idea came from will be easy to follow and leave most listeners feeling satisfied and thinking (albeit wrongly) that the idea has thus been disproved. The genetic argument, then, is the main thrust of Basil’s assault on the idea of uncreated matter.

Basil fleshes out Origen’s argument about the bad analogy without adding any really new content, with the notable exception that he says that the adoption of the analogy by some Christians results from “the poverty of human nature,”⁶⁰ and, more specifically, “the baseness of their thoughts” (*λογισμῶν ταπεινότητα*, *ibid.*, my translation). The analogy is appealing because it fits with our experience. However, God’s power far transcends what the poor human mind can comprehend, for God can create something from nothing. He returns to this talk of inferiority at the end of the paragraph: “Let those cease, therefore, from their mythical fictions, who attempt in the weakness of their own reasonings to measure power incomprehensible to their understanding

⁶⁰ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως ἡ πενία.

and wholly inexpressible in human speech” (ibid.).⁶¹ This command has the rhetorical effect of belittling his opponents and making them seem arrogant, imagining that they can understand God’s ways. It is almost *ad hominem*, though his point is not that his opponents are too stupid to understand, but that human nature itself is incapable. What Basil’s argument lacks in depth it makes up for with rhetorical force as he demolishes the root cause of his opponents’ mistaken notion.

Basil borrows one of Origen’s specific examples of a human art that requires a material medium: “Since among us each art is definitely occupied with a certain material, as the art of metalworking with iron, and of carpentry (τεκτονική) with wood (ξύλα) . . .” (*Hom. in hex.*, II, 2). Origen had said: “Neither can a sculptor make his proper work without bronze, nor a carpenter (τέκτων) without wood (ξύλων), nor an architect without stones” (*Praep. eu.*, VII, 20.1, my translation). This verbal link, noted by Basil’s editors, confirms that here, unlike with his other arguments, Basil draws directly upon Origen.

Does Basil Reject Hylomorphism?

A passage in *Hom. in hex.*, I, confuses matters because in it Basil can be interpreted as rejecting the Aristotelian view of primary matter altogether.⁶² Here is the passage:

⁶¹ παυσάθωσαν οὖν μυθικῶν πλασμάτων, ἐν τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ τῶν οἰκείων λογισμῶν τὴν ἀκατάληπτον διανοίαν καὶ ἄφατον παντελῶς ἀνθρωπίνῃ φωνῇ δύναμιν ἐκμετροῦντες.

⁶² Thus Armstrong, “Theory,” 427-29. John F. Callahan may have taken the same view a few years before Armstrong; he says that Gregory Nyss. “tends to dissolve all matter into these [incorporeal] qualities, just as Basil in this last passage warns us that the element earth is capable of being analyzed out of existence” (“Greek Philosophy and the Cappadocian Cosmology,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 [1956]: 42). However, his meaning is unclear to me, especially since Basil does not say that the *element* itself will be nothing, but that the *substance* (i.e., matter) will be nothing. Markos A. Orphanos notes how this passage appears to contradict the hylomorphism that Basil elsewhere espouses (e.g., *Hom. in hex.*, I, 8) and is content with saying that Basil’s “conception of matter is rather unclear and inconsistent” (*Creation and Salvation according to St. Basil of Caesarea* [Athens: n.p., 1975], 55). Sorabji also cites this passage as saying that “the substratum [i.e., matter] is not a separately conceivable thing”

These same thoughts, let us also recommend to ourselves concerning the earth, not to be curious about what its substance is; nor to wear ourselves out by reasoning, seeking the underlying thing (τὸ ὑποκείμενον) itself; nor to search for some nature destitute of qualities, existing without quality of itself; but to realize well that all that is seen around it is set down in the formula of its being, being complements of its substance (τὸν τοῦ εἶναι κατατέτακται λόγον συμπληρωτικὰ τῆς οὐσίας ὑπάρχοντα). You will end with nothing if you attempt to eliminate by reason each of the qualities that exist in it. In fact, if you remove the black, the cold, the weight, the density, the qualities pertaining to taste, or any others which are perceptible, the underlying thing will be nothing (οὐδὲν ἔσται τὸ ὑποκείμενον). (*Hom. in hex.*, I, 8)⁶³

Clearly the “nature destitute of qualities” is primary matter, which Basil says cannot be discovered by the human mind. What leads Armstrong to say that Basil rejects Aristotle’s theory is the final statement that “the underlying thing will be nothing.”⁶⁴ Armstrong, without argument,

(*Time*, 292). P. M. O’Cleirigh actually argues that Basil has taken the idea of rejecting primary matter from Origen’s mention of Christians who go that route in *De princ.*, IV, 4.7 (“Prime Matter in Origen’s World Picture,” *Studia Patristica* 16 [1985]: 263). It is an interesting hypothesis, but rendered moot if, as I believe, Basil does accept the theory of primary matter.

⁶³ Τὰ αὐτὰ δὲ ταῦτα καὶ περὶ γῆς συμβουλευόμεν ἑαυτοῖς, μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν αὐτῆς τὴν οὐσίαν ἣτις ποτὲ ἔστι, μηδὲ κατατρίβεσθαι τοῖς λογισμοῖς αὐτὸ τὸ ὑποκείμενον ἐκζητοῦντας, μηδὲ ζητεῖν τινα φύσιν ἔρημον ποιότητων, ἅποιν ὑπάρχουσιν τῷ ἑαυτῆς λόγῳ, ἀλλ’ εὖ εἶδέναι ὅτι πάντα τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν θεωρούμενα εἰς τὸν τοῦ εἶναι λόγον συμπληρωτικὰ τῆς οὐσίας ὑπάρχοντα. εἰς οὐδὲν γὰρ καταλήξεις, ἐκάστην τῶν ἐνυπαρχουσῶν αὐτῇ ποιότητων ὑπεξαίρεισθαι τῷ λόγῳ πειρώμενος. ἐάν γὰρ ἀποστήσῃς τὸ μέλαν, τὸ ψυχρόν, τὸ βαρὺ, τὸ πυκνόν, τὰς κατὰ γεῦσιν ἐνυπαρχούσας αὐτῇ ποιότητας ἢ εἴ τινες ἄλλαι περὶ αὐτὴν θεωροῦνται, οὐδὲν ἔσται τὸ ὑποκείμενον.

τὸ ὑποκείμενον is commonly translated “substrate” or “substratum,” though Way has “foundation.” My translation expresses what the word literally means.

“All that is seen around it is set down in the formula of its being, being complements of its substance” (τὸν τοῦ εἶναι κατατέτακται λόγον συμπληρωτικὰ τῆς οὐσίας ὑπάρχοντα) is taken from the translation of Delcogliano and Radde-Gallwitz, trans., *Against Eunomius*, 109n82. Zachhuber translates it as follows: “has been rendered fully by the account of being as complete of the *usia*” (“Stoic Substance,” 427). Way has “is related to the reason of its existence, forming an essential part of its substance.”

For οὐδὲν ἔσται τὸ ὑποκείμενον Way has “There will be no basic substance,” which is potentially confusing since *substance* is the usual translation for οὐσία.

⁶⁴ As in Origen’s argument, here *substance* refers to primary matter. Basil does not employ a strict, technical vocabulary, for in the preceding paragraph he says that the substance of heaven is delicate, which is a quality.

takes these words at face value. Certainly, taken thus, they do seem to deny the existence of primary matter. They seem to say that if you mentally strip away all qualities from a substance, nothing will be left, and thus no primary matter. But should these words be taken literally?

Zachhuber challenges Armstrong's reading by juxtaposing this apparently anti-Aristotelian passage with another passage of Basil's from *Contra Eunomium* (II, 4):

Whenever we hear 'Peter,' the name does not cause us to think of his substance—now by 'substance' I mean the underlying matter (*ύλικόν ύποκείμενον*), which the name itself cannot ever signify—but rather the notion of the distinguishing marks that are considered in connection with him is impressed upon our mind. For as soon as we hear the sound of this designation, we immediately think of the son of Jonah. . . . None of these is his substance, understood as subsistence.⁶⁵

Here Basil defines *substance* as “the underlying matter.” Apparently *subsistence* (*ύπόστασις*)⁶⁶ is here used as another synonym, as Basil says. The context of this passage is Basil's argument that God's substance is unknowable. Zachhuber argues from Basil's equation of substance with matter that Basil cannot believe that matter does not exist, because then he would be saying that substance does not exist, which would make everything he says about the unknowability of

⁶⁵ ὅταν γοῦν ἀκούσωμεν Πέτρον, οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ νοοῦμεν ἐκ τοῦ ὀνόματος – οὐσίαν δὲ λέγω νῦν τὸ ὑλικόν ὑποκείμενον, ὅπερ οὐδαμῶς σημαίνει τοῦνομα –, ἀλλὰ τῶν ιδιωμάτων ἃ περὶ αὐτὸν θεωρεῖται τὴν ἔννοιαν ἐντυπούμεθα. εὐθὺς γὰρ ἐκ τῆς φωνῆς ταύτης νοοῦμεν τὸν τοῦ Ἰωάννα . . . ὣν οὐδὲν ἐστὶν οὐσία, ἢ ὡς ὑπόστασις νοουμένη.

Basil, *Contre Eunome*, edited by Bernard Sesboüé, SJ, et al., 2 vols., SC 299, 305 (Paris: Cerf, 1982-1983).

———, *Against Eunomius*, translated by Mark Delcogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz. They translate *ύλικόν ὑποκείμενον* as “material substrate,” while Zachhuber has “material substratum.”

Cf. *Hom. in hex.*, VI, 3, where Basil also apparently puts forward the hylomorphic theory: “In the first place, we divide all composite bodies into the recipient substance and the supervenient quality” (*Πρώτον μὲν οὖν ἐκ τοῦ τὰ σύνθετα πάντα οὕτω παρ' ἡμῶν διαιρεῖσθαι, εἰς τε τὴν δεκτικὴν οὐσίαν καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐπισυμβᾶσαν αὐτῇ ποιότητα*).

⁶⁶ There is no adequate English translation for this word, which is why it is often simply transliterated. Even the Latins did not know what to do with it and had to invent the word *subsistentia* (from which the English *subsistence* derives) to translate it, since the word *substantia* was already used to translate *οὐσία*. And the words could hardly be conflated once the Trinity came to be thought of as one *οὐσία* in three *ύπόστασεις*.

God's substance nonsense. Granted, there is a vast chasm separating God's substance from material substance (i.e., matter) since God is immaterial. However, Basil must see an analogy here since the whole point of this passage about Peter's name is to demonstrate that, just as Peter's name does not refer to his material substance but to his "distinguishing marks," such as that he is the son of Jonah, so God's name does not designate his (immaterial) substance but rather his attributes. It is these attributes that, unlike God's substance, can be known. Zachhuber says that if Basil in fact believes that material substance does not exist, as Armstrong argues, then this analogy between Peter's substance and God's substance is very bad indeed, as it would imply that God has no substance!

Zachhuber entertains the possibility that Basil simply changed his mind on this point. After all, he wrote *Contra Eunomium* early in his career⁶⁷ and preached the hexaemeral homilies late in his career. However, Zachhuber observes, there is another passage in *Contra Eunomium* (I, 12-13) that both concerns the idea of substance and parallels something Basil says in the homilies, indicating continuity rather than discontinuity in his thought. In this passage, Basil employs an *a fortiori* argument against Eunomius: human beings cannot even say what the substance of the earth is, which is beneath their feet. How much less can they say what the substance of God is, who is far above them! To show that Eunomius cannot say what the substance of the earth is, Basil again adverts to the Aristotelian understanding of matter. To say what the earth's substance is (again, he is using the word *substance* in the sense of *matter*),

⁶⁷ According to Rousseau, it was written after a synod held in Constantinople (359) but before Basil's ordination (362) (*Basil*, 67, 98, 101, 104n30). Fedwick dates it to 364 ("Chronology," 10n57). Either way, it was many years before the hexaameron.

Eunomius would have to rely on his senses,⁶⁸ but the senses perceive only qualities, such as color and heat; they cannot get to the underlying matter itself, which lacks all qualities. Therefore, earth's substance is unknowable. In a similar but even greater way, God's substance is unknowable, not just by human beings but by any "rational nature" except God himself (ibid., I, 14). God's qualities, however, such as his goodness, can be known. The passage in the hexaemeral homilies that parallels this I have quoted above: *Hom. in hex.*, I, 8. This is where Basil urges his listeners not to try to discover the substance of the earth, the very same passage in which he seems to say that the substance, understood as primary matter, does not even exist. In the parallel passage from *Contra Eunomium* (I, 12-13), Basil clearly does not deny the existence of primary matter; rather, he assumes it to make a point about God's substance. Realizing this and seeing how similar it is to what Basil says in *Hom. in hex.*, I, 8, leads one to believe that Basil's concluding statement in *Hom. in hex.*, I, 8, means no more than what his argument in *Contra Eunomium* (I, 12-13) means, namely that the underlying matter is unknowable by human beings; yet it does exist. Thus I agree with Zachhuber that Basil's point in *Hom. in hex.*, I, 8, is "to reject speculative interest in *usia*."⁶⁹ Basil makes this clear when he urges his readers not to "become dizzy" (*ἰλιγγιάσει*) in the mind by trying to solve philosophical problems like these (*Hom. in hex.*, I, 8). Instead they should be content with the simplicity of Scripture. This rhetorical context, even apart from the argument from Zachhuber that I just explained, should give one serious reason to hesitate to take the phrase "the underlying thing will be nothing"

⁶⁸ Alternately, he could rely on a "rational account" (*λόγος*). Basil dismisses this possibility with three rhetorical questions: "What sort of rational account is this? Where is it located in the scriptures? Which of the saints handed it down?" (*ποῖω τούτῳ; ποῦ τῆς γραφῆς κειμένῳ; ὑπὸ τίνος τῶν ἁγίων παραδοθέντι; C. Eun.*, I, 12)

⁶⁹ "Stoic Substance," 427.

literally. But the parallel passage from *Contra Eunomium* clinches the matter. Basil does not reject the notion of primary matter.

INTERPRETATION

The differences between Origen's and Basil's respective criticisms of the hypothesis of uncreated matter are more of form than of content. The similarities are significant. Both authors have the same goal: to defend the orthodox doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* against Christians who use Gen 1:2a to support a philosophical understanding of matter as uncreated. They both take for granted a hylomorphic view of matter, and they both claim (Basil drawing directly upon Origen here) that such people are misled (as indeed Aristotle himself was) by an analogy between human craftsmen, who must create from a preexistent material, and the divine Craftsman, who makes exactly the material that he wants. Where they primarily differ is in the form that their arguments take. Origen argues with the philosophical Christians, trying to prove that their viewpoint is impious both because it limits God's power and because it makes his providence unnecessary, while Basil takes a few passing shots at their view without really engaging it. Basil's criticisms seem to stem from a generally Alexandrian milieu, though they do not draw directly upon any known source.

The reason for this difference is literary form: Origen writes for a scholarly audience, and Basil preaches to a congregation. Had Basil written a commentary on Genesis, I would not be surprised to find him use Origen's arguments there, or to develop his own arguments against the philosophers. Still, what Basil lacks in depth of argument he makes up for in rhetorical impact, as he accuses his opponents of thinking that their own, weak thoughts could understand how the

almighty power of God creates. This rhetoric is symptomatic, again, of the homiletic genre, and would seem out of place in Origen's scholarly treatment.

What their arguments have in common illustrates their shared viewpoint that philosophy (along with other elements of secular learning) is to be appropriated in the service of theology. I advert once again to Origen's metaphor of secular learning, and philosophy in particular, as handmaid. Neither author is afraid to use the philosophical theory of hylomorphism to aid in theological talk about the cosmos. For Basil, the Aristotelian concept of quality-less, and therefore unknowable, matter is even an aid in arguing that the substance of the Trinity is unknowable by any rational intellect except God's own. And yet both theologians are obligated to uphold the doctrine of the Church that the universe was created, not from preexistent matter, but from nothing. Such a doctrine, as Young points out, is proof of the limits by which philosophy is bound for most of the Fathers, including Basil and Origen. Although the idea of uncreated matter makes sense within the context of hylomorphism, it cannot be maintained by orthodox Christians. On this point, philosophy must submit to theology.

Here one might expect Aristotle's hylomorphic theory itself to be cast off, in order more easily to dispense with the notion of uncreated matter that is part and parcel with it.⁷⁰ This is exactly what some Christians did, according to Origen. Basil can be interpreted as taking this route if his words "the underlying substance will be nothing" are interpreted literally. However, as Zachhuber showed, such an interpretation does not fit with what Basil says about substance (i.e., matter), and the substance of the earth in particular, in *Contra Eunomium*. In fact, Basil

⁷⁰ O'Cleirigh implies that Origen ought to have done this in order to avoid the "discontinuity" of affirming the existence of primary matter but also saying that God made it ("Prime Matter," 260-61).

does not seek to break new philosophical ground by casting off a widely held theory; if anything, when it comes to the question of matter, he displays a lack of interest in natural philosophy, which he describes a waste of time that will just make one's head hurt: "Therefore, I urge you to abandon these questions and not to inquire upon what foundation it [the earth] stands. . . . Set a limit, then, to your thoughts, lest the words of Job [38:6] should ever censure your curiosity as you scrutinize things incomprehensible" (*Hom. in hex.*, I, 8-9).⁷¹ It is remarks like these that have led Amand de Mendieta to upbraid Basil for being anti-scientific.⁷² There may be some truth to that criticism; after all, Basil is a bishop, not a philosopher. However, I do not think that this is just bald prejudice, and I should like to draw attention to the rhetorical context of his seemingly anti-scientific remarks. Basil does not give an absolute judgment upon natural philosophy as such. Rather, he discourages his congregation from becoming bothered about a particular philosophical question (what the substance of the earth is), which they will be unable to answer and which has nothing to do with the Christian religion. Even in this homily, immediately after saying that they would become "dizzy" thinking about the question if they tried, Basil goes on to discuss differing philosophical opinions on the question! He would not do this if he thought that natural philosophy as such is wicked or a waste of time.

⁷¹ Ταῦτά τε οὖν καταλιπόντα σε, μηδὲ ἐκεῖνο ζητεῖν παραινῶ, ἐπὶ τίνος [ἡ γῆ] ἔστηκεν. . . . Διὰ τοῦτο ὅρους ἐπίθεες τῇ διανοίᾳ, μήποτε σου τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης ὁ τοῦ Ἰωβ λόγος καθάψηται περισκοποῦντος τὰ ἀκατάληπτα.

⁷² Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta, "The Official Attitude of Basil of Caesarea as a Christian Bishop towards Greek Philosophy and Science," in *Orthodox Churches and the West*, edited by Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 40-44. He labels this text (*Hom. in hex.*, I, 8-9) "The frivolous and useless curiosity of the Greek philosophers about the essence of heaven and earth." In regard to III, 8, he says: "Basil renewed for his hearers, in a childish and even insulting manner, the traditional Christian attack against the errors or the lies of the philosophers who contradict each other. . . . It must be said that sometimes the Cappadocian bishop did not shrink from intolerable rhetorical exaggeration. . . . We may regret that Basil . . . publicly pronounced such unjust and offensive words against the Greek philosophers. In this passage, his irony is very heavy and unpleasant" (32).

Moreover, in seeing Basil as anti-science, there is a real danger of anachronism. Basil's dismissive remarks are directed against a sectarian natural philosophy that lacks the scientific means to adjudicate disputes about concepts such as matter. Basil says: "The wise men of the Greeks wrote many works about nature, but not one account among them remained unaltered and firmly established, for the later account always overthrew the preceding one. As a consequence, there is no need for us to refute their words; they avail mutually for their own undoing" (*Hom. in hex.*, I, 2).⁷³ This complaint about the inconclusive, sectarian nature of philosophy he borrows from philosophers themselves, and it is a commonplace among the Fathers.⁷⁴ To Basil the disunity and uncertainty of philosophical ideas stand in contrast to the unity and certainty of the Christian faith as taught in the Bible. A second, related complaint against natural philosophy is that it is not practically useful.⁷⁵ "A concern about these things [i.e., substance] is not at all useful for the edification of the Church" (*ibid.*, I, 8).⁷⁶ The two complaints are connected, for inquiry on such questions about nature might be useful if they could be conclusively answered, but they cannot. Instead of this vain speculation, a Christian should rest content in the non-

⁷³ *πολλὰ περὶ φύσεως ἐπραγματεύσαντο οἱ τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφοί καὶ οὐδὲ εἷς παρ' αὐτοῖς λόγος ἔστηκεν ἀκίνητος καὶ ἀσάλευτος, αἰὲ τοῦ δευτέρου τὸν πρὸ αὐτοῦ καταβάλλοντος· ὥστε ἡμῶν μηδὲν ἔργον εἶναι τὰ ἐκείνων ἐλέγχειν· ἀκροῦσι γὰρ ἀλλήλοις πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν ἀνατροπὴν.*

Cf. *ibid.*, I, 11; III, 8. Amand de Mendieta labels these three texts "The traditional argument of the early Christian theologians against Greek philosophy," (*ibid.*, 29-32).

⁷⁴ Christopher B. Kaiser, *Creational Theology and the History of Physical Science: The Creationist Tradition from Basil to Bohr* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 15-17. Cf. his earlier article, "The Early Christian Critique of Greek Science," *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 1 (1982), 211-12; Amand de Mendieta, "Official Attitude," 30.

⁷⁵ Cf. Kaiser, "Critique," 212.

⁷⁶ *πρὸς τὸ μηδὲ προὔργου τι εἶναι εἰς τὴν τῆς ἐκκλησίας οἰκοδομὴν τὸ περὶ ταῦτα κατασχολεῖσθαι.*

philosophical, certain, singular answer the Bible provides: “In [God’s] hand are the ends of the earth” (Ps 94:4a).

Certainly this criticism sounds anti-scientific, but perhaps some modern scientists, if asked to weigh in on the ancient debates about primary matter, would also find little benefit in them. Thus Christopher Kaiser compares ancient Christian “agnosticism” about ancient science, which they saw as “hopelessly divided into opposing schools,” to modern scientific agnosticism about Christian theology!⁷⁷ He also points out that ancient Christian agnosticism about ancient science was not necessarily a bad thing and, at any rate, “was quite in keeping with general trends in the science of late antiquity. . . . Some historians have regarded this pragmatic tendency to be harmful. Others, however, have seen it as necessary, at least for that particular period.”⁷⁸

One should be careful, then, about calling Basil anti-science.

In dealing with philosophical cosmology, Basil is like a surgeon: he excises the one part of the Aristotelian theory that an orthodox Christian cannot accept, and leaves the rest of the theory intact. To throw the whole theory off would not be to respect philosophy’s role as a handmaid. His rejection of the hypothesis of uncreated matter comes not from a natural philosopher trying to advance the discussion, who might conclude that the theory itself is unsound, but from a bishop who needs to combat a heterodox reading of Gen 1:2a. I agree with Doru Costache’s reading, who emphasizes the pastoral nature of Basil’s interaction with natural philosophy: “In his approach to science St. Basil was concerned neither with remediating the inconsistencies of the various pagan worldviews nor with producing a supposedly more reliable

⁷⁷ Ibid., 211-12.

⁷⁸ Ibid., *Creational Theology*, 22.

scientific cosmography.”⁷⁹ His emendation of Aristotelian physics is not philosophically motivated nor a contribution to ancient philosophy; it is simply an act of apologetics.

Origen, too, must defend the doctrines of the faith, which he carefully lays out at the beginning of *De principiis*. But in his argumentation he comes much closer to being a philosopher than Basil does. For Origen does seek to engage the philosophical discussion about hylomorphism, though his purpose is to show where the fault lies when it says that matter is uncreated. For this reason it is important that he not reject the entire theory without due cause, which would be to devalue and dismiss natural philosophy. He notes that some Christians have done this, but rejects their approach, not because it fails to defend the Church’s teaching, but because it does away with a useful theory. Still, he is theologian, not a philosopher, and thus brings into the discussions something extrinsic to natural philosophy, namely God’s revelation. As Origen sees it, the reason that the philosophers, smart as they were, happened upon a mistaken idea (in the midst of a correct theory) was because they were ignorant of the power of God, who alone can make something from nothing. Here philosophy learns something profound from its mistress and must modify even a long and widely held idea. His arguments can be seen as a contribution to philosophy only if philosophy is understood in a way that is open to Christian revelation.

⁷⁹ Doru Costache, “Christian Worldview: Understandings from St. Basil the Great,” *Phronema* 25 (2010): 26.

CHAPTER 4

The Super-heavenly Water: “God separated between the water that was under the firmament and between the water that was above the firmament” (Gen 1:7)

Another point of conflict between Genesis and philosophical cosmology is the reference to super-heavenly water in 1:6-7: “And God said: ‘Let a firmament come into being in the midst of the water, and let it be a separator between water and water.’ And it became so. And God made the firmament, and God separated between the water that was under the firmament and between the water that was above the firmament.”

On the interpretation of these verses, Basil and Origen come into conflict. Origen gives them a twofold meaning: psychically, the water above represents the believer’s concentration on the things of heaven, while the water below represents demonic temptations; spiritually, the water above represents angels and heaven itself, while the water below represents the demons and their infernal abode. This is one of those passages that has no bodily meaning—the literal sense of the words is to be rejected.

Basil knows Origen’s spiritual interpretation, though he refers to it anonymously, and denounces it sharply as being on par with “old wives’ tales” (*γραιώδεις μύθους*, my translation, *Hom. in hex.*, III, 9). He prefers a literal interpretation: “Let us consider water as water” (*ibid.*).¹ Such an interpretation means affirming a cosmology in which water is found above the sky. Basil must defend this biblical cosmology against the Aristotelian theory of the natural positions of the

¹ τὸ ὕδωρ ὕδωρ νοήσωμεν.

four elements (earth, water, air, and fire), according to which water's natural place in the universe is under the air, not above it.

This hermeneutical conflict between a literal reading of the waters and allegorical readings may seem to call into question what I have argued for in the previous three chapters. Superficially, it may make Basil look like a fundamentalist for accepting a literal interpretation of Genesis over against philosophical cosmology (thus Amand de Mendieta). Likewise, it may make Origen look like a liberal who simply subordinates Scripture to secular learning. Against such a facile reading, I shall argue that an examination of the admittedly real conflict does not negate their shared understanding of philosophy as handmaid. Instead it reveals the different nuance that each theologian gives to that model. Basil, emphasizing the subordination of philosophy as handmaid, does not allow it to overturn the scriptural cosmology. Origen, emphasizing the usefulness of philosophy as handmaid, takes philosophical knowledge into account when interpreting Scripture, so as to avoid an interpretation that would seem unreasonable to the educated. This also underscores a hermeneutical difference between them: while Basil accepts the principle that Scripture should not be interpreted in ways that result in unreasonable conclusions, he narrows it so as to exclude philosophy from determining what is or is not considered unreasonable. Only interpretations that conflict with Church doctrine (such as the belief that God has no body) must be rejected. This more conservative understanding, befitting a bishop, safeguards the scriptural cosmology against heretical interpretations.

ORIGEN

In his first homily on Genesis, Origen distinguishes between “the heaven” (τὸν οὐρανόν) of 1:1 and “the firmament” (τὸ στερέωμα) of vv. 6-7, which God also names “heaven” (οὐρανόν)

in v. 8. Despite a single Greek word (*οὐρανός*) referring to both, I will refer to the latter as *the sky* (as in Gen 1:8 NETS) because this is precisely the distinction Origen is at pains to make.² Origen defines *heaven* (*caelum* = *οὐρανός*) as “all spiritual substance upon which God rests as on a throne or seat”³ while he defines *firmament* (*firmamentum* = *στερέωμα*), in contrast, as “the physical sky” (*corporale caelum*, *In Gen. hom.*, I, 2, my translation).⁴ This firmament or sky, as Gen 1:7 says, “separate[s] between the water that was under the firmament and between the water that was above the firmament.” Origen also qualifies heaven with the adjective *spiritual* (*spiritale*, *In Gen. hom.*, I, 2), in contrast to *physical* (*corporale*). The spiritual heaven is above the physical sky. The two different meanings of *caelum* are related. As Alan Scott says, “This is the solution he offers to the ambiguity of the Christian term ‘heaven.’”⁵

Having made this distinction, Origen says something that may be surprising: “That first heaven indeed, which we said is spiritual, is our mind, which is also itself spirit, that is, our spiritual man which sees and perceives God. But that physical sky (*corporale caelum*), which is called the firmament, is our outer man which looks at things in a physical way (*corporaliter*)”

² The English language has incorporated this distinction into itself: although the word *heaven* can be used as a synonym of *sky*, more often it refers to “the abode of God and of the angels and persons who enjoy God’s presence” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], s.v. “heaven”) while the word *sky* usually means “the apparent arch of or vault of heaven . . . ; the firmament” (*ibid.*, s.v. “sky”).

³ *omnis spiritalis substantia super quam uelut in throno quodam et sede deus requiescit.*

⁴ Origen, *Homélies sur la Genèse*, edited by Doutreleau, Louis, SC 7, 2nd ed. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1976).

———, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, translated by Ronald Heine, FOTC 71 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

⁵ Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 120.

(ibid.).⁶ The use of the verb *is* (*est*) here could lead one to believe that Origen is further defining his terms, but that is not the case. He is rather moving to another level of meaning, for these statements, if taken as definitions, would be incompatible with the previous definitions. Heaven is “all spiritual substance,” not the human mind, and the sky is a firm body that separates between the water below and above it, not the human body. What is going on here is that, having briefly explained the bodily sense of the text, Origen is now moving on to the psychic sense, as will become clear.⁷ Presumably his audience is accustomed to such an abrupt, unannounced transition. Later, when discussing the fructification of the earth (Gen 1:10-11), he gives a clear indication of his method: “*According to the letter*, the fruits are clearly those which ‘the earth,’ not ‘the dry land’ produces. But again *let us also relate the meaning to ourselves*” (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 3, emphasis mine).⁸

The psychic interpretation continues:

As, therefore, the firmament is called the sky (*caelum*) because it divides between those waters which are above it and those which are below it, so also man, who has been placed in a body, if he can divide and discern what the waters are which are higher, “above the firmament,” and what those are which are “under the

⁶ *illud quidem primum caelum, quod spiritale diximus, mens nostra est, quae et ipsa spiritus est, id est spiritalis homo noster qui uidet ac perspicit deum. istud autem corporale caelum, quod firmamentum dicitur, exterior homo noster qui corporaliter intuetur.*

I translate *corporal* and *corporaliter* as “physical” where Heine has “corporeal.”

⁷ Thus Gerald Bostock translates *est* as “represents” (“Origen’s Philosophy of Creation,” in *Origeniana Quinta [Papers of the 5th International Origen Congress—Boston College, 14-18 August 1989]*, edited by Robert J. Daly [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992], 253).

⁸ *Secundum litteram manifesti sunt fructus quos terra non arida producit. sed iterum referamus et ad nos.*

Cf. I, 11: “There is certainly no question about the literal meaning. . . . But it is not unprofitable to relate these words to those which we explained above in a spiritual sense” (*Secundum litteram quidem nulla quaestio est. . . . Aptare autem haec his quae supra exposuimus secundum spiritalem intellectum non otiosa res est*).

firmament” (Gen 1:7), will also himself be called sky (*caelum*), that is, heavenly man.⁹

The firmament parallels the human being: it is by dividing waters that each earns the name *sky* (*caelum*) or *heavenly* (*caelestis*). At this point the two meanings of the words *caelum* (or *caelestis*) clearly touch, for while the firmament is physical, the human mind is spiritual. The human mind is able to share in the spiritual heaven above the physical sky. From this point on Origen says nothing more about the sky. He is content simply to quote Gen 1:7, which he interprets as meaning that God called the firmament *sky* specifically because it divides the waters, though the scriptural text does not say this explicitly. Origen’s interest is not in the sky but in the human being, who must divide spiritual waters in order to become a heavenly person.

What are these waters that the heavenly person is to divide? For the water above, Origen hints at an answer by drawing upon two sayings of our Lord from John’s Gospel: “Rivers of living water will flow from within him” (7:38), “welling up to eternal life” (4:14) (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 2).¹⁰ The heavenly person does not simply divide this super-heavenly water from the water below, but actually understands it and partakes of it (*ibid.*). Origen explains more clearly what he is talking about: “By participation in that upper (*supernae*) water which is said to be above the skies, each of the faithful becomes heavenly, that is, when he applies his mind to lofty and

⁹ *Sicut ergo firmamentum caelum appellatum est ex eo quod diuidat inter eas aquas quae super ipsum et eas quae sub ipso sunt, ita et homo, qui in corpora positus est, si diuidere potuerit et discernere quae sint quae sunt superiores s u p e r f i r m a m e n t u m et quae sint quae sunt s u b f i r m a m e n t o, etiam ipse caelum, id est caelestis homo, appellabitur.*

I take *firmament* as the subject and *sky* as the predicate both because that is what Gen 1:8 says and because this way it is parallel with the human person being called sky. This is also how Bostock translates it (“Origen’s Philosophy,” 253). Heine translates it oppositely: “heaven is called the firmament,” which obscures Origen’s parallelism and contradicts Gen 1:8.

¹⁰ As Origen has it: *flumina de uentre suo educat quae uiuae salientis in uitam aeternam.*

exalted things, thinking nothing about the earth but totally about heavenly things, ‘seeking what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father’ (Col 3:1)” (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 2).¹¹ To partake of the super-heavenly waters is a metaphor for thinking about and seeking spiritually exalted things instead of mundane things. It is clear now that this is a psychic interpretation, for it is about how a Christian ought to conduct oneself.

For the water below, from which the heavenly person must remain separate, Origen naturally refers back to Gen 1:2b: “Darkness was over the abyss, and a divine wind was being carried along over the water.” This abyss he interprets by once again looking to the New Testament, this time to the Book of Revelation, which says: “[An angel] seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, which is the Devil or Satan . . . and threw it into the abyss” (20:2-3). The abyss, he explains, is where “‘the dragon and its angels’ (Rev 12:7) dwell” (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 2).¹² Earlier in his homily, when he first comments upon the abyss in Gen 1:2 (*ibid.*, I, 1), he also brings in a verse from Luke’s Gospel: “And [the demons] pleaded with him not to order them to depart to the abyss” (8:31).

So much for the abyss, but what does Origen think of the *waters* of the abyss? Twice he explicitly identifies the reference, first as “the sins and vices of our body”¹³ and then as “the

¹¹ *Illius ergo aquae supernae participio, quae supra caelos esse dicitur, unusquisque fidelium caelestis efficitur, id est cum sensum suum habet in arduis et excelsis, nihil de terra sed totum de caelestibus cogitans, quae sursum sunt quaerens, ubi Christus est in dextra patris.*

Heine translates *supernae* as “heavenly.” I have used the more literal “upper” only to avoid confusion with the word *caelestis*. Strictly speaking, the water is not heavenly but super-heavenly, “heavenly” here meaning “of the sky.” However, the water is indeed associated with the spiritual heaven, and in that sense can be called “heavenly.”

¹² *draco et angeli eius habitant.*

¹³ *peccata et uitia corporis nostri.*

thoughts of demons” (*daemonum sensus*, *In Gen. hom.*, I, 2). There is a close relationship between the sins of human beings and the thoughts of demons.¹⁴ Origen discusses this relationship when he deals with demonic temptations in *De princ.*, III, 2. There he rejects the opinion held by “the simpler sort of believers” (*simpliciores credentium*), i.e., most Christians, “that all the sins that human beings have committed come from the persistent influence of the contrary powers on the sinners’ minds” (*De princ.*, III, 2.1).¹⁵ On the contrary, he says, sins are the result of the overindulgence of our “natural desires” (*naturalibus desideriis*) for things like food, drink, and sex (*ibid.* III, 2.2). Nevertheless, it is true, he argues, that “when we indulge [our desires] to excess and offer no resistance to the first movements towards intemperance, then the hostile power, seizing the opportunity of this first offence, incites and urges us on in every way, striving to extend the sins over a larger field” (*ibid.*).¹⁶ Thus the “thoughts of demons” that are called the waters of the abyss probably refer to demons tempting people to let their sins, committed through their own indulgence, run rampant and multiply. To succumb to carnal temptation is the opposite of partaking in the heavenly water, which means setting aside

He defines the relationship between sins and vices: “the vices of the body, which are the materials of sins” (*uitia corporis, quae sunt materiae peccatorum*, *In Gen. hom.*, I, 2).

¹⁴ Although in the former instance he refers to “those waters which are under the sky” (*aquas istas quae sunt sub caelo*) and in the latter to “the waters of the abyss” (*aquis abyssis*), which may seem to be different waters, to be interpreted differently, he explicitly equates them: “that water which is below, that is, the water of the abyss” (*aqua quae subter est, id est aqua abyssi*, *In Gen. hom.*, I, 2).

¹⁵ *quod omnia peccata quaecumque commiserint homines ex istis contrariis uirtutibus mentem delinquentium per urgentibus fiant.*

¹⁶ *cum uero indulerimus ultra quam satis est, et non restiterimus aduersum primos intemperantiae motus, tunc primi huius delicti accipiens locum uirtus inimica instigat et perurget omni modo studens profusius dilatare peccata.*

Chadwick adds “our desires,” which I have enclosed in brackets.

mundane things to focus entirely on spiritual things. The ascetic element of this interpretation is clear.

At this point we have a glimpse of how Origen's nonliteral interpretation sometimes operates, namely, by means of intertextuality.¹⁷ Lim makes the point well: "What Origen does is to draw intertextually on other parts of scriptures to throw light on the particular line in Genesis."¹⁸ While one may label them allegorical, Origen's spiritual and psychic interpretations of the water below the sky are neither arbitrary nor fanciful.

However, this does not mean that Origen's nonliteral exegesis is always intertextual nor that it never bares traces of the arbitrariness often associated with the word *allegorical*. I think that as Origen continues to find a psychic meaning for the various parts of creation (e.g., the dry land, the earth, fruits, seed, luminaries, signs, sun, moon, creeping things, birds, the great sea monsters) his interpretation of Genesis 1 may become, perhaps, arbitrary. He explains why all the things created before humankind have an allegorical significance for humankind: "The allegorical figure showed what those things were which could adorn the lesser world, that is, man" (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 11).¹⁹ There is an analogy, expressed here through allegory, between what adorns the cosmos (macrocosm) and what adorns the human being (microcosm).²⁰ The idea that

¹⁷ See chapter 2.

¹⁸ Lim, "Politics," 356. See what I already said on intertextual reading in chapter 2.

¹⁹ *per allegoriae figuram ostenderetur quae essent quae exornare possent minorem mundum, id est hominem.*

Cf. I, 16: "These words have already been interpreted in their literal meaning. . . . But allegorically. . ." (*Iam haec interpretata sunt secundum litteram. . . . secundum allegoriam tamen. . .*).

²⁰ Cf. Gerald Bostock, "Origen's Doctrine of Creation," *The Expository Times* 118 (2007): 226.

there is a relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm goes back to Aristotle (*Phys.*, VIII, 2 [252b.24-27]).²¹ This, then, is another example of Origen making good use of philosophical concepts in his biblical exegesis.

Origen's allegorical reading of Genesis 1 does not so much tell a story as repeat the same moral lesson under different images, like variations on a theme. For example, as I just explained, he interprets the waters above and below the firmament as indicating spiritual thoughts and demonic temptations, a point he makes again when preaching about how God ordered the seas to produce creeping things and birds (Gen 1:20). This command of God indicates "that if our mind has been enlightened by Christ, our sun, it is ordered afterwards to bring forth from these waters which are in it 'creeping creatures' and 'flying birds,' that is, to bring out into the open good or evil thoughts" (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 8).²² He says that the human mind brings forth thoughts "from these waters [i.e., the seas] which are in it," but it is not clear what the waters here indicate. Moreover, on the literal level, the seas are not "in" the sky; the metaphor is contorted. Later he simply says that the waters (i.e., the seas) are "man's mind" (*mentem eius [hominis]*, *ibid.*, I, 12). This interpretation is essentially the same as the interpretation of the sky, which is our mind, separating spiritual thoughts from demonic thoughts. Both the sky, which separates the waters

²¹ Speaking of motion and rest, Aristotle says: "Now if this can occur in an animal, why should not the same be true also of the universe as a whole? If it can occur in a small world, it could also occur in a great one" (*εἰ δ' ἐν ζῳῳ τούτο δυνατόν γενέσθαι, τί κωλύει τὸ αὐτὸ συμβῆναι καὶ κατὰ τὸ πᾶν; εἰ γὰρ ἐν μικρῷ κόσμῳ γίγνεται, καὶ ἐν μεγάλῳ*).

Cited by Heine, trans., *Homilies*, 61n85.

²² *quia, si mens nostra illuminata fuerit a nostro sole Christo, iubetur postmodum ex his quae in ea sunt aquas producere re p e n t i a et u o l a t i l i a u o l a n t i a, id est cogitationes bonas uel malas proferre in medium.*

above and below, and the seas, which produce creeping creatures and birds, can allegorically represent the human mind thinking good and evil thoughts.

Pépin has identified some important cross-references within Origen's own oeuvre to help interpret the super-heavenly water: *C. Cels.*, V, 44; VI, 19; and *In Luc. hom.*, XXIII, 177, which I shall now examine.²³ In his polemic against Celsus Origen twice offers an interpretation of Ps 148:4-5b: "Praise him, you heavens of heavens / and you water above the heavens! / Let them praise the name of the Lord." He understands the subjects of this divine praise to be alive. He says, "We know that even some of the lesser [creatures] (*τῶν ἡττόνων*) of God have risen above the skies and all sensible nature" (*C. Cels.*, V, 44),²⁴ and in another place he call these beings "those who have risen above sensible things" (*ibid.*, VI, 19).²⁵ When preaching on Luke 3:9-12, he also quotes these verses to show that the Scriptures sometimes refer to "angels and invisible virtues" (*In Luc. hom.*, XXIII, 177, my translation).²⁶ Two other important cross-references are cited by Gerald Bostock: *Hom. in Ps.* 36, 2.5 and *In Io. comm.*, XIII, 7.41.²⁷ In the former Origen says that the "mystical" (*mystica*) meaning of the firmament dividing the waters is that the realm

²³ Pépin, *Théologie cosmique*, 401-02. He also cites *In Ps.* 148, 4 and *Sel. in Ps.* 76, 17; 148, 4. These are Origenist fragments that may or may not come from Origen himself, which I shall not discuss.

²⁴ ἐπιστάμεθα καί τινα τῶν ἡττόνων τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπερاناβεβηκέναι τοὺς οὐρανούς καὶ πᾶσαν αἰσθητὴν φύσιν.

Chadwick adds the word *creatures*, which I have enclosed in brackets.

²⁵ τοῖς ὑπεραναβεβηκόσι τὰ αἰσθητὰ.

²⁶ *angelos et uirtutes inuisibiles.*

Origen, *Die Homilien zu Lukas in der Übersetzung des Hieronymus und die griechischen Reste der Homilien und des Lukas-Kommentars*, edited by Max Rauer, Origenes Werke 9, GCS 49 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1930).

²⁷ Bostock, "Origen's Philosophy," 254nn18-19.

of mortals is divided from the realms of angels.²⁸ In the latter he says that “each [angel] has within itself ‘a spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (John 4:14).”²⁹ Putting all these statements of Origen together, I conclude, with Bostock, that the super-heavenly waters represent heaven itself.³⁰ Thus the physical sky (firmament) divides between the material world and the spiritual heaven. I think that Origen’s reference to angelic beings in *Contra Celsum* can be explained by synecdoche: when the Psalm commands the super-heavenly waters (i.e., heaven) to praise God, it means the inhabitants of heaven. This may not be a mere literary device, for Origen probably does not see a real difference between heaven and the heavenly beings. After all, heaven is not a literal, physical place, but “all spiritual substance.” The angels themselves are spiritual substances.

I infer by analogy with Origen’s interpretation of the super-heavenly waters that the waters of the abyss can also be taken in a spiritual sense as demonic creatures, though I have not found any statement in which he says so explicitly. I already showed that he clearly says that the abyss, where the waters are, is their habitat, so it only makes sense for the waters to represent its inhabitants. Again, it is not necessary to make a strict distinction between the abyss as the abode

²⁸ *ab initio creaturae non sine aliqua mystica ratione firmamentum factum esse dicitur quod separaret inter aquas et aquas et diuideret habitaculum mortalium a sedibus et habitaculis angelorum.*

Origen, *Homélies sur les Psaumes 36 à 38*, edited by Emanuela Prinzivalli, Henri Crouzel, SJ, and Luc Brésard, OCSO, SC 411 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1995).

²⁹ ἕκαστος [ἄγγελος] ἐν ἑαυτῷ πηγὴν ὕδατος ἀλλομένου εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

³⁰ Bostock, “Origen’s Philosophy,” 254.

of the demons and the waters of the abyss as the demons themselves, since the abyss is not a physical place.³¹

It is essential to notice that this interpretation of the super-heavenly water and the water of the abyss is different from the one given in his homily on Genesis 1. In fact, this is a spiritual interpretation, which reveals information about the spiritual world that God has made, which has a spiritual, angelic heaven and a demonic abyss. This spiritual reading complements the psychic reading. The psychic reading invites the listener to give all his or her attention to spiritual things alone, forgetting the sensible, physical world. This is the very activity, according to the spiritual reading, in which these heavenly creatures, which have risen above “all sensible nature,” are engaged. Likewise for the water below, the psychic reading warns the reader of the tempting thoughts of demons, who, according to the spiritual reading, live in the abyss. Dively Lauro’s thesis about the importance of not collapsing Origen’s two allegorical readings is here proved true: the spiritual and psychic readings are clearly distinct and yet inter-related.³² They complement one another.

Can we learn anything about Origen’s interpretation of the waters from the criticism of St. Jerome and St. Epiphanius? The latter, in a letter to the bishop of Jerusalem translated into Latin by the former, condemns Origen for saying both that the paradise from which Adam and Eve were expelled (Gen 3:16) was heavenly and not physical and that the waters above the sky

³¹ Bostock says that “the lower waters represent the substance of mere matter” (ibid., 255). I think that this statement, which lacks an accompanying citation, goes beyond what Origen says, which is that the abyss, covered in water, indicates the dwelling of the demons, while the “dry land,” which God names “earth,” is where human beings live. I do not think that the contrast is between the spiritual realm and the material realm, as Bostock argues, but between the angelic realm and the demonic realm (cf. Prinzivalli *et al.*, eds., *Homélies*, 112-13n5).

³² See chapter 2.

represent “certain fortitudes of angelic power,”³³ while the waters below represent “hostile virtues, that is, demons” (Jerome, *Ep.*, LI, 5, my translation).³⁴ Jerome himself repeats this criticism in his polemic against the same bishop, in slightly different words. He says that Origen interprets the super-heavenly waters as “holy and superior virtues” (*sanctas supernasque uirtutes*) and the waters of the abyss as “hostile and demonic [virtues]” (*Cont. Ioa. Hier.*, 7, my translation).³⁵ These statements do not exactly match Origen’s interpretation, as found in his first homily on Genesis, which says nothing of “superior virtues.” In the words of Pépin: “Cette interprétation allégorique est loin de rendre compte totalement des témoignages postérieurs.”³⁶ If all we had from Origen on this subject were the first homily on Genesis, I might reject their hostile testimony as untrustworthy due to this small discrepancy, but in fact the meaning of their words accords with what Origen says in *Contra Celsum*, even if the words themselves are a little different. For all we know, Origen may have used those exact words (in Greek, of course) in his

³³ *fortitudines quasdam angelicae potestatis*.

³⁴ *uirtutes contrarias, id est daemones*.

Jerome, *Epistolae*, edited by Isidor Hilberg, 3 vols., CSEL 54-56 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1910).

Cf. Epiphanius, *Pan.*, II, *haer.*, LXIV, 4.11: “[Origen] interprets whatever he can allegorically—Paradise, its waters, the waters above the heavens, the water under the earth” (*ἀλληγορεῖ δὲ λοιπὸν ὅσα περ δύναται, τὸν τε παράδεισον τὰ τε τούτου ὕδατα καὶ τὰ ἐπάνω τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ τὸ ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς*).

Epiphanius, *Panarion*, edited by Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer, 2nd ed., 3 vols, GCS 25, 31, 37 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976, 1980, 1985).

———, *The Panarion*, translated by Frank Williams, 2 vols., Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 35-36 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987, 1994).

³⁵ *contrarias et daemoniacas [uirtutes]*.

Jerome, *Opera omnia*, edited by Domenico Vallarsi, 11 vols., 2nd ed. (Venice: 1766-72) [PL 12-30].

³⁶ Pépin, *Théologie cosmique*, 401.

commentary on Genesis, which was still extant in their day. Thus I accept their witness as essentially reliable, for it confirms what we read in Origen himself.

At this point an ambiguity remains: are the super-heavenly water and the water of the abyss *merely* allegories, or is there a corresponding physical reality? In other words, do the verses that mention them have a bodily sense? Everything else in the Genesis story (e.g., the sky, the earth, the creeping things, the birds, the seas) has a bodily meaning, as Origen makes clear with statements like, “There is certainly no question about the literal meaning. . . . But it is not unprofitable to relate these words which we explained above in a spiritual sense” (*In Gen. hom.*, I, 11),³⁷ and, “These things have been said on that question, which can be raised about the literal meaning. But let us see also allegorically . . .” (*ibid.*, I, 14-15).³⁸ Yet nowhere in the homily does he give any indication of there being a physical reality to the waters (not that he expressly denies such either). As I showed above, it is precisely with respect to these waters and the abyss that Origen draws upon other parts of Scripture to discern the reference, a method he does not use when discovering an allegory, as for instance with the birds of the sky. For this reason I believe that it is very likely that Origen finds no bodily meaning here, which is to say that he sees only a metaphor.³⁹ He is confronted with an exegetical puzzle (“What are these waters?”), and, following the hermeneutical norms of his day, he turns to other parts of Scripture to solve it. His

³⁷ *Secundum litteram quidem nulla quaestio est. . . . aptare autem haec his quae supra exposuimus secundum spiritalem intellectum non otiosa res est.*

³⁸ *Haec quidem ad eam quaestionem dicta sunt, quae secundum litteram proferri potest. uideamus autem etiam per allegoriam . . .*

³⁹ Crouzel cites “les premiers chapitres de la *Genèse*” as one of the few scriptural passages to which Origen “donne un sens uniquement spirituel” (“Origène et le sens littéral dans ses ‘Homélies sur l’Hexateuque,’” *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 4 [1969]: 245).

solution is that these are not physical waters at all, but an obscure reference to transcendent, spiritual beings. At the end of this chapter I will comment on why I think he rejects a bodily interpretation.

BASIL

I already showed in chapter 2 how Basil, in his hexaemeral homilies, criticizes the way heretics give allegorical interpretations that undermine orthodox doctrine. In his third homily, Basil again attacks allegoresis. Only this time the criticism is directed not against heretics but against his fellow churchmen:

We have also some argument concerning the division of the waters with those writers of the Church who, on a pretext of the spiritual sense and of more sublime concepts, have recourse to allegories, saying that spiritual and incorporeal powers are signified figuratively by the waters, that the more excellent have remained up above the firmament, but the malignant remain below in the terrestrial and material regions. (*Hom. in hex.*, III, 9)⁴⁰

One cannot but immediately think that Origen is the source of this allegory that Basil, nearly a century later, attacks. Julien Garnier, who edited Basil's works in the 18th century, wrote:

“Conuenit inter eruditos Origenem indicari a Basilio oratio tertia in *Hexaem*, num. 9.”⁴¹ This consensus has continued: Fialon has seen a condemnation of Origen here,⁴² Tieck has no doubt

⁴⁰ ἡμῖν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἐστί τις λόγος περὶ τῶν διακριθέντων ὑδάτων, οἳ προφάσει ἀναγωγῆς καὶ νοημάτων ὑψηλοτέρων εἰς ἀλληγορίας κατέφυγεν, δυνάμεις λέγοντες πνευματικὰς καὶ ἀσωμάτους τροπικῶς ἐκ τῶν ὑδάτων σημαίνεσθαι· καὶ ἄνω μὲν ἐπὶ τοῦ στερεώματος μεμενηκέναι τὰς κρείττονας, κάτω δὲ τοῖς περιγείοις καὶ ὑλικοῖς τόποις προσαπομεῖναι τὰς πονηράς.

⁴¹ PG 29, clxxxvii C.

⁴² Fialon, *Étude*, 294.

that Basil has Origen in mind,⁴³ and very recently McGuckin has agreed.⁴⁴ Basil's current editors also refer the reader to Origen's *In Gen. hom.*, I, 2.

The same ambiguity here presents itself as with the criticisms of Jerome and Epiphanius. Basil's description, which is basically the same as theirs, namely that the waters represent spiritual beings, does not match exactly what Origen says. In that case I found the evidence from the *Contra Celsum* sufficient to maintain the accuracy of the criticism. Here, in the case of Basil, Pépin has found additional proof of the connection to Origen's interpretation in Basil's use of Ps 148:7 ("Praise the Lord from the earth, / you dragons and all abysses") (*Hom in hex.* III, 9).⁴⁵ Basil cleverly uses this verse to upset the allegory: the waters below, according to the allegorizing churchmen, are supposed to be "spirits of malice" that live in the abyss. Yet the abyss praises God: "Even the abyss, which those who speak allegories relegated to the inferior position, was not itself judged deserving of rejection by the psalmist, since it was admitted to the general chorus of creation" (*ibid.*).⁴⁶ This is not an allegory, Basil argues, for even the weather, which is also inanimate, is commanded to praise God (Ps 148:8). Origen's interpretation of the super-heavenly waters, as I showed, is informed by Psalm 148, and Basil specifically chooses Psalm 148 to explain that even the abyss praises God. This abyss referred to here is not where the devil lives, Basil argues, but where natural snakes live, which also are invited to praise God.

⁴³ Tieck, *Basil*, 172.

⁴⁴ McGuckin, "Patterns," 45n52.

⁴⁵ Pépin, *Théologie cosmique*, 401-02. I think that his analysis holds even though I disagree with his claim that Basil thinks specifically of Origen when denouncing the allegorizing of the abyss in *Hom. in Hex.*, II, 4 (see chapter 2).

⁴⁶ ὥστε καὶ ἡ ἄβυσσος, ἣν εἰς τὴν χείρονα μοῖραν οἱ ἀλληγοροῦντες ἀπέρριψαν, οὐδὲ αὐτὴ ἀπόβλητος ἐκρίθη τῷ ψαλμῳδῷ, εἰς τὴν κοινὴν τῆς κτίσεως χοροστασίαν παραληφθεῖσα.

Basil uses the broader context of Psalm 148 to refute Origen's interpretation of, not just the waters above, but also the abyss (and therefore the waters of the abyss). His explanation is a perfect counter to Origen's, precisely because he uses the same Psalm. Thus I agree with Pépin and the general consensus "inter eruditos" that it is indeed Origen that Basil has in mind here.

Lim rejects the consensus that Basil attacks Origen here. Partly he does this because he believes that Basil opposes a "translational" kind of allegory, which Lim disassociates from Origen. I explained in chapter 2 that Lim's interpretation of Basil's critique is conjectural and too broad; moreover, it ignores the fact that Origen did use "translational" allegory. In fact, I just argued that the passage about the super-heavenly waters is precisely such a place where he saw only an allegory or metaphor. So this argument of Lim's should be rejected and the consensus maintained.

However, Lim has additional reasons to dissociate Origen from Basil's attack. For instance, Basil mentions an explanation offered by the allegorists for why the demons are called "the sea," namely because they are "tumultuous" (*ἄστατον*), "factious" (*ταραχώδη*), and "agitated" (*στασιαστικά*, *Hom. in hex.*, III, 9). This explanation is not found in Origen.⁴⁷ Thus he argues that it is possible that "Basil is not referring to Origen in particular, but to certain later allegorists who might, or might not, have been specifically elaborating on Origen's exegesis."⁴⁸ Giet Stanislas says something similar in his edition of the hexaemeron: "Basile ne nomme pas Origène; . . . Mais ce sont bien des interprétations origénistes qu'il réproouve."⁴⁹ Given the

⁴⁷ Lim, "Politics," 356.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Stanislas Giet, ed., *Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron*, SC 26 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1950), 235n3.

explanation of why the demons are called “the sea” and the fact that Basil preaches nearly a century later and refers to churchmen in the plural (*τούς ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας*), Lim may be right in positing the existence of later allegorists, who have further developed Origen’s interpretation. On the other hand, such an explanation may have been offered in Origen’s lost Genesis commentary, to which Basil has access. Moreover, I do not understand what Lim means when he says that these later allegorists “might not have been specifically elaborating on Origen’s exegesis.” He admits that “it is not possible to deny wholeheartedly that many of notions [sic] which Basil enumerates and condemns can be traced to Origen.”⁵⁰ Even if it is conjectured that the allegorical interpretation reaches Basil from an intermediate source and with a new explanation, the interpretation is substantially the same, so Basil’s critique still applies to Origen.

Against the Natural Philosophers

Basil is eager to defend the Genesis creation account, taken literally, against rational, philosophical objections. He dismisses the Greek natural philosophers as heathens. After speaking a few words about the philosophical debates over the nature and number of the heavens, he says: “Leaving the accounts of outsiders to those outside, we are turning back to the explanation of the Church” (*Hom. in hex.*, III, 3).⁵¹ The explanation of the Church is, of course, based on the Bible, which he says is superior to heathen philosophy: “As the beauty in chaste women is far preferable to that of the prostitute, so is the excellence of our discourses [i.e.,

⁵⁰ Lim, “Politics,” 355.

⁵¹ ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν ἔξωθεν τοῖς ἔξω καταλιπόντες, ἡμεῖς ἐπὶ τὸν ἐκκλησιαστικὸν ὑποστρέφομεν λόγον.

Scripture] above that of the heathens” (ibid., III, 8).⁵² It is true that the Greek philosophers were heathens (i.e., non-Christians), yet that does not mean that the Greek philosophers must be left to nonbelievers. Basil’s rhetoric here replaces the handmaid metaphor with a more negative one, that of prostitute. This is one of those passages that Amand de Mendieta quotes to classify Basil as a fundamentalist,⁵³ but I stand by the qualifying remarks I made in this regard in the previous chapter.

Basil responds to two potential objections to the biblical belief that there is water above the sky: 1) that water would just flow off the sides of the firmament, and 2) that water does not belong above the sky. For Basil, the first objection is easy to answer: the fact that the sky is concave does not imply that the surface above it must be convex; it could be any shape (ibid., III, 4). A logical reply, but it offers a strange cosmology that seems to imply a flat earth with a sky like a roof (the top of which is not convex). In contrast, the commonly accepted cosmology of the time envisions the universe as spherical.⁵⁴ I do not think that Basil adopts a flat-earth cosmology for himself; it is rather the facile cosmology of the objectors themselves, for only someone who imagines the earth as flat with the sky like a roof can argue that super-heavenly water would just flow off the sides. Basil answers their objection from within their own primitive viewpoint: a roof with a concave interior need not have a convex exterior. His reply is logically valid.

⁵² *ὅσω γὰρ τὸ ἐν ταῖς σώφροσι κάλλος τοῦ ἐταιρικοῦ προτιμέτερον, τοσοῦτον καὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων λόγων πρὸς τοὺς ἐξώθεν τὸ διάφορον.*

⁵³ Amand de Mendieta, “Official Attitude,” 35.

⁵⁴ See the diagram of Plato’s and Aristotle’s cosmologies in Lindberg, *Beginnings*, 42 and 56, respectively.

For the second objection, Basil explains why there should be water in the sky by postulating that it serves as a kind of global cooling-system, intended to keep the element of fire in check, though eventually the fire will consume all the water when the universe reaches its appointed end (ibid., III, 5). This explanation runs counter to Aristotelian cosmology, which assigns a distinctive place to each of the four elements: fire, being the lightest element, has the highest place, followed by air, water, and finally earth (*Meteo.*, II, 2 [354b23-25]).⁵⁵ Water does not belong above the air, according to this cosmology. Here Thomas O’Loughlin thinks that Basil is “carefully avoid[ing] the real problem of ‘proper position.’”⁵⁶ Another way to put this could be that Basil does not ignore, but tacitly rejects, the theory of elemental positions. Christopher Kaiser thus regards Basil’s global cooling-system explanation as “ingenious,” seeing here a real achievement on Basil’s part in opposing the Aristotelian cosmology.⁵⁷ I would not go so far as Kaiser, though, because it seems to me that Basil’s position could be seen as a philosophical advance only if he coupled it with an argued justification for why the theory of elemental positions should be discarded. Absent that, his defense of the super-heavenly water seems *ad hoc* and discordant with an accepted physical theory, which Basil does not even acknowledge. As with the created nature of matter, Basil opposes a philosophical position as a

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Meteorologicorum libri quattuor*, edited by F. H. Fobes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

Cf. Lindberg, *Beginnings*, 55; Thomas O’Loughlin, “*Aquae Super Caelos* (Gen 1:6-7): The First Faith-Science Debate?” *Milltown Studies* 29 (1992): 93-94, 96.

⁵⁶ O’Loughlin, “*Aquae*,” 96.

⁵⁷ Kaiser, *Creational Theology*, 18. Costache seems to be wrong in saying that Basil “never objected” to any “feature pertaining to the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmography” (“Christian Worldview,” 24). John Callahan also asserts unequivocally, and erroneously, that Basil follows Aristotle’s theory “that different elements have their own proper natural positions in the universe” (“Greek Philosophy,” 40).

preacher, not as a philosopher himself. He does not need to give a thorough philosophical argument. He need only offer some plausible explanation to satisfy his audience, who may or may not know about the natural positions of the elements. In my opinion, there is no contribution to physics here.

INTERPRETATION

Origen takes the reference to super-heavenly waters in Gen 1:6-7 figuratively. He responds to an implied question he must have asked himself: “What are these waters?” Why does he need to ask such a question? Why not simply take the text at face value, as Basil does, and say that there is water above the sky? Although he does not explicitly answer this question, I shall pursue an answer by returning to his hermeneutical method.

Origen believes that the whole Bible contains hidden meanings, so no verse can simply be taken at face value. This is the most basic and straightforward answer. I would like to go further, though, and theorize that Origen rejects the possibility that the text can here refer to literal water precisely because that would contradict the cosmology accepted by natural philosophers.⁵⁸ If natural philosophers have shown something to be true, Scripture, Origen believes, should not be interpreted in such a way as to contradict that. This is the method he uses when interpreting Phil 2:10 (“at the name of Jesus / every knee should bend, / of those in heaven . . .”) metaphorically: “For it is not at all necessary to suppose that the bodies in heaven should be formed in such a way as to have corporeal knees, since their bodies have been demonstrated

⁵⁸ Scott reaches the same conclusion: “A dictum of Origen’s scriptural interpretation . . . was that if the literal interpretation of a passage was impossible, an allegorical interpretation must be necessary. One of the functions of pagan learning for Origen was to help determine what was possible” (*Life of the Stars*, 119).

to be spherical by those who have investigated such matters accurately” (*De orat.*, 31.3).⁵⁹ As I explained in chapter 2, according to Origen there are impossibilities and absurdities in the Bible, which the Holy Spirit has placed there to alert the reader’s attention to the hidden meanings of Scripture (*De princ.*, IV, 2.9). A reference to water above the sky, which is impossible according to the Aristotelian view of the universe, is just such a clue. Origen explicitly accepts this cosmology: “Of the four elements there are four spheres that underlie ethereal nature: in the middle, and the lowest, is the [sphere] of earth, then around that is the [sphere] of water, and the [sphere] of air is third, and the [sphere] of fire fourth, after which is the [sphere] of the moon, and the rest” (*In Io. comm.*, XIII, 40.266, my translation).⁶⁰ Thus he can hardly accept the notion of physical water being above the sky. This is why he must ask himself, “What are these waters?” The answer – the hidden meaning of the verse – he then uncovers by an intertextual study of Scripture. Origen’s interpretation here has the effect of accommodating the biblical text to philosophy, but this does not mean that philosophy is superior to the Bible. If it were, then he would not believe in *creatio ex nihilo*. Rather, this interpretive principle should be understood

⁵⁹ ἐσχηματίζεσθαι γὰρ τῶν ἐπουρανίων τὰ σώματα, ὡς καὶ γόνατα σωματικὰ ἔχειν αὐτὰ, ὑπολαμβάνειν οὐ πάνυ τι χρὴ, σφαιροειδῶν παρὰ τοῖς ἀκριβῶς περὶ τούτων διειληφόσιν ἀποδεδειγμένων αὐτῶν τῶν σωμάτων.

Cited by Scott, *Life of the Stars*, 117n21, 119n34.

Origen, *Die Schrift vom Gebet*, edited by Paul Koetschau, 295-403, Origenes Werke 2, GCS 3 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1899).

———, “On Prayer,” translated by Rowan A. Greer, in *Origen*, edited by Rowan A. Greer, The Classics of Western Spirituality, 81-170 (NY: Paulist Press, 1979).

⁶⁰ τέσσαρές εἰσιν σφαῖραι τῶν τεσσάρων στοιχείων αἱ ὑποκείμεναι τῇ αἰθερίῳ φύσει, ἐν μέσῳ μὲν καὶ κατωτάτῳ <ἡ> τῆς γῆς, περὶ αὐτὴν δὲ ἡ τοῦ ὕδατος, καὶ τρίτῃ ἡ τοῦ ἀέρος, τετάρτῃ δὲ ἡ τοῦ πυρός, μεθ’ ἣν ἡ τῆς σελήνης, καὶ ἑξῆς.

Cited by Scott, *Life of the Stars*, 117n21.

within the framework of philosophy as handmaid. In this capacity, cosmological knowledge here opens up for Origen the possibility of seeing in the waters a hidden reference to spiritual beings. He acts upon this possibility and thus avoids a conflict that, I believe, he would see as entirely unnecessary.

For Basil we must ask a different question: why does he criticize Origen's interpretation of the super-heavenly water? After all, this interpretation proceeds from their shared assumption about the usefulness of philosophy for biblical studies. Answering this question is important because it will help to distinguish any nuanced differences between Basil's and Origen's conceptions of philosophy as handmaid. I think that the context of one of Basil's anti-allegorical remarks helps answer it. In the middle of his denunciation of an allegorical reading of Genesis 1, Basil speaks of the vanity of the cosmologists: "Although those who have written about the world have argued much about the shape of the earth . . . I shall not be persuaded to say that our version of the creation is of less value because the servant of God [Moses] gave no discussion concerning the shape . . ." (*Hom. in hex.*, IX, 1).⁶¹ He must respond to those who find the cosmology of Genesis, taken literally, inadequate or embarrassing ("of less value"). The apparent poverty of the Genesis account, when compared to the cosmology of the philosophers, has led people to allegorize it. He criticizes this:

This is a thing of which they seem to me to be unaware, who have attempted by false arguments and allegorical interpretations to bestow on the Scripture a dignity of their own imagining. But, theirs is the attitude of one who considers

⁶¹ Οὐδὲ ἐπειδὴ οἱ τὰ περὶ κόσμου γράψαντες πολλὰ περὶ σχημάτων τῆς διελέχθησαν . . . οὐ παρὰ τοῦτο προαχθήσαν ἀτιμωτέραν εἰπεῖν τὴν ἡμετέραν κοσμοποιίαν, ἐπειδὴ οὐδὲν περὶ σχημάτων ὁ θεράπων τοῦ θεοῦ [Μωυσης] διελέχθη. . . .

The name Moses is found in some MSS, but presumably it is a gloss.

himself wiser than the revelations of the Spirit and introduces his own ideas in pretense of an explanation. (Ibid.)⁶²

People have tried to make Scripture operate on the level of natural philosophy by means of allegorical interpretations. This is not the purpose of Scripture, which is concerned not with “useless” (*ἄχρηστα*) information like the shape of the earth but with “the edification and guidance of our souls” (ibid.).⁶³ In fact, the two have come into conflict in their cosmologies. Basil sees the conflict between what Scripture says about the universe and what philosophers have said, and he chooses Scripture, which, after all, is superior to philosophy, as a mistress is superior to her handmaid.

Basil’s view is not totally unlike that of Origen, but he shows a true independence of thought from him.⁶⁴ Yet even when criticizing him he deliberately leaves his name unspoken, perhaps in respect. Basil’s independence from Origen is in evidence when he says: “I know the laws of allegory, although I did not invent them of myself, but have met them in the works of others” (ibid.).⁶⁵ He has learned them from Origen, but he has also seen how allegorical interpretation has been put to bad use, both by heretics who overturn the biblical worldview entirely by their dualism and by those (like Origen himself) who try to make the Genesis account agree with philosophical cosmology. Basil is unwilling to disregard the literal meaning of the

⁶² ὅ μοι δοκοῦσι μὴ συνειδότες τινὲς παραγωγαῖς τισι καὶ τροπολογίας σεμνότητά τινα ἐκ τῆς οἰκείας αὐτῶν διανοίας ἐπεχείρησαν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις ἐπιφημίσαι.

⁶³ εἰς οἰκοδομὴν καὶ καταρτισμὸν τῶν ψυχῶν ἡμῶν.

⁶⁴ Cf. Gribomont, who says about Basil’s development with respect to Origenism: “Je voudrais discerner divers moments, soit chronologiques, soit psychologiques, et reconnaître, après l’assentiment du disciple, l’accord indépendant, la réaction aux périls doctrinaux, enfin le jugement critique” (“L’Origénisme,” 282).

⁶⁵ οἶδα νόμους ἀλληγορίας, εἰ καὶ μὴ παρ’ ἑαυτοῦ εἰσευρών, ἀλλὰ τοῖς παρ’ ἐτέρων πεπονημένοις περιτυχών.

Genesis text just because it seems absurd to natural philosophers. Origen's hermeneutical principle that unreasonable interpretations of the Bible are to be avoided is thus significantly narrowed by Basil. It applies to passages that are unreasonable from the point of view of catholic doctrine, such as those parts of the Bible that speak of God anthropomorphically, since God is spirit. However, it does not mean that the Bible can be accommodated to natural philosophy, as it does for Origen.

This is especially the case with Genesis 1, which Basil holds up as a trustworthy source for cosmological knowledge, much more trustworthy, in fact, than the speculations of the philosophical cosmologists. If they think that the idea of super-heavenly water is absurd and impossible, that is no problem for Basil; he simply casts off, or ignores, Aristotle's understanding of the elements and their natural positions in the universe. It is no coincidence that Basil's attack on Origen in the third homily comes immediately after criticism of natural philosophers, as also when he brings it up again at the beginning of his ninth homily. To Basil the philosophers, being heathens, are like the heretics: an outside group with a worldview opposed to that of the Church. The philosophers have their vain speculations (though, admittedly, also some useful things to say, which Basil capitalizes upon), and the heretics their myths and allegories, but orthodox Christians should follow the plain meaning of Scripture and celebrate its elegant simplicity.

I believe that both Basil's and Origen's approaches should be understood within their shared metaphor of philosophy as handmaid, though they understand the principle differently. Origen's approach emphasizes the *usefulness* of philosophy. One of its useful functions is to specify what is and is not reasonable to believe. A well informed interpreter of Scripture can

make use of it to avoid interpretations that must be false. This may lead him or her to adopt figurative readings of certain passages, such as the passage about the super-heavenly water. One may be surprised, then, that Origen accepts *creatio ex nihilo*, but in that case he is bound by apostolic doctrine. Moreover, the Christian faith in God's almighty power, which was unknown to the philosophers, has revealed that it is actually reasonable to believe that God could make matter from nothing, which was not otherwise apparent.

In contrast to Origen, Basil's approach emphasizes the *subordination* of philosophy to theology. Philosophy is helpful in understanding the world and even God, but it does not have the authority to determine that a biblical idea is absurd. If the Bible says that there is water above the sky, then so be it, and any philosophical theory that says that water cannot be there will have to be emended or discarded, much as the Aristotelian concept of primary matter had to be emended to account for the doctrine of creation from nothing. This is not a total overthrowing of Origen's principle of unreasonableness, which still applies for anthropomorphic passages, but a restriction of it. Now only the Church's faith, not philosophy, will decide what is or is not an unreasonable interpretation of Scripture. Basil's version of the handmaid principle is more conservative, and thus better suited to protect the Church from heretical ideas. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, to see the handmaid principle given a conservative nuance by a bishop, whereas a scholar and philosophical theologian like Origen opts for a more liberal version. One should not go too far, though, in painting Origen as a theological liberal. He still feels himself bound by catholic doctrine and says that secular ideas often lead to heresy (*Phil.*, XIII, 3).

CHAPTER 5

Astrology: “Let the luminaries be for signs” (Gen 1:14b)

Origen is prompted by Gen 1:14b, in his commentary on the Book of Genesis, to give a Christian response to the theory and practice of astrology. He sees, and other Christians have seen, this verse as having an astrological meaning: “Let [the luminaries] be for signs.” The fundamental problem with astrology, from the Christian perspective, is that it implies fatalism and thus destroys free will. A secondary problem is the actual practice of astrology, which is forbidden in Christianity. Origen’s responses to these problems may seem surprising, for rather than refuting astrology in toto, as one might expect, he argues for an understanding of astrology that is compatible with Christian teaching.

As for the theory behind astrology, drawing upon the works of some philosophers, he argues that the movements of the stars and planets contain information about the future but denies that these movements *cause* the future events that they merely signify. His basis for believing that the stars and planets can predict the future is their manifest, predictable movements and connection to life on earth (e.g., the tides, night and day, the seasons). He then cogently explains how the mere knowledge of the future, which God and his prophets possess, is compatible with free will. Thus he expounds a theory of astrology free of fatalism.

As for the practice of astrology, he limits it to spiritual beings (i.e., angels) and a very few extraordinary human beings who were taught the art by God. He is able so to limit astrological practice by proving that it is impossible for human beings to make measurements of

the movements of the sky accurate enough for the purposes of casting horoscopes. Here, again, he makes use of arguments advanced by philosophers before him.

Basil also criticizes astrology, and in fact he borrows directly, sometimes verbatim, from Origen's commentary to do so. This is not surprising, given that Basil and Gregory Naz. included Origen's argument in the *Philocalia* (thanks to which we have access to it). Nevertheless, his goals are somewhat different from Origen's. Like Origen, he wishes to show how it is impossible for human beings to take accurate measurements of the sky. However, the arguments he uses to do so are much less developed and tend in the direction of mockery intended to belittle astrologers, all the while amusing his listeners. Moreover, Basil has no desire to construct, as Origen does, an astrological theory acceptable to Christians. He says nothing about theory at all, possibly in order to avoid confusing his audience, who might mistake a positive statement as somehow legitimating pagan astrology. In fact, he denies that Gen 1:14b has anything to do with astrology; rather, it merely means that the sky can be used to predict the weather (cf. Matt 16:3). I shall argue that these differences have less to do with a divergence between Basil's belief and Origen's and more to do with the different literary forms in which their anti-astrological treatments appear. Origen gives a more philosophical argument in a scholarly commentary. Basil, on the other hand, preaches and therefore adopts modes of rhetoric appropriate to that type of discourse, even while borrowing some of Origen's content.

In attacking, or at least radically re-formulating, the practice of astrology and astrological fatalism, both Origen and Basil draw upon the existing philosophical tradition of anti-astrological treatises. In so doing they demonstrate, yet again, the dual nature of secular learning (*παιδεία*) as handmaid. On the one hand, some ideas supported by noted philosophers, such as

fatalism (e.g., the Stoics) and the practice of astrology (e.g., Ptolemy), must be rejected because they conflict with Christian doctrines, such as free will, moral responsibility, and divine judgment. On the other hand, arguments offered by other philosophers (e.g., Carneades, Sextus Empiricus, and Plotinus) are helpful to Christian theologians, both in defending those same doctrines and in attacking the offending doctrines of the fatalistic philosophers and advocates of astrology. Thus both Origen and Basil prove that the theologian should make use of philosophical works selectively in order to support and defend Christian teaching. Moreover, Origen's careful preservation of much of astrology is indicative of the rigorous care that a theologian should exercise when opposing an idea supported by natural philosophy.

ORIGEN

Origen's anti-astrological treatise can be divided into five parts: first an introduction, and then four specific questions he proposes to answer. In the introduction, he first explains the overall problem, then offers an anti-Gnostic argument, and finally gives a summary of his whole argument, complete with a lengthy scriptural demonstration of God's foreknowledge. The four questions are: 1) how free will is compatible with divine foreknowledge (*Phil.*, XXIII, 7-13), 2) how the stars are only signs, not causes, of future events (*ibid.*, XXIII, 14-16), 3) that astrology is impracticable by human beings (*ibid.*, XXIII, 17-18), and 4) why God gave the stars as signs for angels to interpret (*ibid.*, XXIII, 19-21). Put another way, the four questions cover the topics of fatalism, astrological theory, astrological practice, and angelic astrology (which is also theoretical, as Origen does not know how the angels read the stars). By means of these questions Origen constructs his own version of astrological theory that respects its philosophical basis in

the manifest correspondence between the movements of the sky and life on earth, all the while divesting it of fatalism and superstition.

The first paragraph of Origen's introduction reveals the fundamental problem with astrology as it is commonly understood: it replaces human free will with destiny. Both pagans and even some Christians, he says, "fret themselves about the possibility that human affairs are subject to necessity and must ineluctably turn out as the stars, in their various configurations, direct. It follows from those who assert these things that free will (*τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῶν*) is eliminated and with it any possibility of praise and blame or any distinction between acceptable and blameworthy behavior" (*Phil.*, XXIII, 1).¹ Astrological fatalism, he declares, undermines faith and hope in the judgment of God; it also makes God responsible for human sins, since they would be destined to be committed on account of the stars, which God made (*ibid.*). The problem here is thus fatalism, not astrology per se. Nevertheless, because the movements of the stars seem to imply fatalism, as I shall explain, Origen's treatment of free will and fatalism will have profound consequences for how he understands astrology.

Fatalism (also called determinism) is the belief that everything that happens, happens "according to exceptionless laws."² In the ancient world this belief is associated with Stoicism,

¹ *περισπωμένων μὴ ἄρα ἡνάγκασται τὰ ἀνθρώπων πράγματα, καὶ ἀμήχανον ἄλλως γενέσθαι ἢ ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες κατὰ τοὺς διαφόρους σχηματισμοὺς ἐπιτελοῦσιν. ἔπεται δὲ τοῖς ταῦτα δογματίζουσιν ἐξ ὅλων τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῶν ἀναιρεῖν· διόπερ καὶ ἔπαινον καὶ ψόγον καὶ πράξεις ἀποδεκτάς πάλιν τε αὖ ψεκτάς.*

Origen, "Commentary on Genesis, Fragment from Book 3," translated by Joseph W. Trigg, in Trigg, *Origen*, 86-102. He translates formally *τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῶν* as "what is within in our power."

² *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Stoicism."

though its roots go back much further.³ Origen is by no means the first person to argue against it in order to preserve free will and, consequently, morality. In fact, Stoics themselves, like Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and Posidonius attempt to show how their own views on destiny can still allow for some kind of free will among human beings.⁴ For the first Greek philosophers, the necessity of all events is a consequence of the law of nature, which mechanically governs the universe. This law is best evidenced by the uniform and *predictable* motion of the sun, moon, stars, and planets.⁵ Not only are their movements predictable, but they demonstrably affect life on earth. As David Lindberg explains,

There were compelling reasons for believing that the heavens and the earth were physically connected. First, there were observational data that made the connection obvious: nobody could doubt that the heavens were the major source of light and heat in the terrestrial region; the seasons were plainly connected with solar motion around the ecliptic; the tides were apparently connected with lunar motion.⁶

This is, then, the bridge between fatalism and astrology: if the future comes from necessity and not from free choices, which are unpredictable, and if the future motions of the celestial bodies

³ See David Amand, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'antiquité grecque: Recherches sur la survivance de l'argumentation morale antifataliste de Carnéade chez les philosophes grecs et les théologiens chrétiens des quatre premiers siècles* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1945), 1-4.

⁴ See *ibid.*, *Fatalisme*, 7-13.

⁵ Franz Cumont describes the same worldview among the Babylonians: "From the leading fact established by them, namely, the invariability of the sidereal revolutions, the Chaldeans had naturally been led to the idea of a Necessity. . . . The divine stars were subject to an inflexible law, which made it possible to calculate beforehand all that they would bring to pass" (*Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* [NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912], 28-29).

⁶ Lindberg, *Beginnings*, 271. Cf. Junod: "L'existence d'une telle correspondance [entre les sphères planétaires et la terre] était et restera une évidence jusqu'à la Renaissance" (ed., *Philocalie*, 46); Cumont, writing of Babylonian astrology, says: "The influence which the stars exerted upon our world seemed undeniable. Did not the rising and setting of the sun every day bring heat and cold, as well as light and darkness? Did not the changes of the seasons correspond to a certain state of the sky? What wonder, therefore, that by induction men arrived at the conclusion that even the lesser stars and their conjunctions had a certain connection with the phenomena of nature and the events of human life" (*Astrology*, 17-18).

can be predicted accurately by the careful observance of them,⁷ and if these bodies affect life on earth, then it is possible that other events, even human ones, can also be predicted through the study of the stars. This line of reasoning is recorded by Cicero:

Since through the procession and retrogression of the stars the great variety and change of the seasons and of temperature take place, and since the power of the sun produces such results as are before our eyes, [astrologers] believe that it is not merely probable, but certain, that just as the temperature of the air is regulated by this celestial force, so also children at their birth are influenced in soul and body and by this force their minds, manners, disposition, physical condition, career in life and destinies are determined. (*De diu.*, II, 42, 89)⁸

Astrology became very popular in the Greco-Roman world, as people sought to discover their futures through horoscopes, and it brought it with it a popularized version of fatalism.⁹ Certainly Stoic fatalism fits with astrological fatalism,¹⁰ but the popularized astrological fatalism is not the fatalism of the Stoics per se, which draws its conclusions on the basis of reasoning about the law of nature, but an astrological quasi-fatalism that views the stars as good and evil forces exercising control over human destinies. Ordinary people (including Christians, according to Origen) seek escape from destiny, not through the reasoned argument of the Stoics who try

⁷ Most impressive was their ability to predict eclipses (see *ibid.*, 11).

⁸ *etenim cum tempore anni tempestatumque caeli conuersiones commutationesque tantae fiant accessu stellarum et recessu, cumque ea ui solis efficiantur quae uidemus, non ueri simile solum sed etiam uerum esse consent perinde, utcumque temperatus sit aër, ita pueros orientis animari atque formari, ex eoque ingenia, mores, animum, corpus, actionem uitae, casus cuiusque euentusque fingi.*

Cicero, *De diuinatione*, edited by Arthur Stanley Pease (NY: Arno Press, 1979).

Quoted in English in Frederik H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1954), 19.

⁹ See Amand, *Fatalisme*, 14-16.

¹⁰ Cf. Cramer: "The rise of Stoicism in the Greek world greatly facilitated the growth of Hellenistic faith in the science of fatalist astrology" (*Astrology*, 13). Strict fatalism, after the Stoic fashion, appeals to the more "scientific-minded" astrologers, while the general masses prefer a viewpoint that offers them the ability to "outsmart" their fate (*ibid.*, 19).

(whether successfully or not) to demonstrate some kind of compatibility between fatalism and free will, but through religious practices, such as prayers and sacrifices. If destiny is the law of nature, though, then such practices are futile, as Origen observes (*ibid.*, XXIII, 2).¹¹

It must be said right at the outset that what we now call astrology (*ἀστρολογία*, the study of the stars) and astronomy (*ἀστρονομία*, the law of the stars),¹² prior to the modern, scientific era, were synonymous in the ancient world.¹³ Lindberg offers a helpful distinction

between (1) astrology as a set of beliefs about physical influence within the cosmos and (2) astrology as the art of casting horoscopes, determining propitious moments, and the like. The former was a respectable branch of natural philosophy, the conclusions of which were rarely called into question. The latter, by contrast, was vulnerable to a variety of objections (empirical, philosophical, and theological).¹⁴

As shall become clear, this distinction partially fits Origen's argumentation (except for the word *influence*), and I refer to it as the difference between (1) astrological theory and (2) astrological practice. Origen is versed in astrology insofar as it is the discipline of natural philosophy that studies the celestial bodies, and he lists it among the handmaids to philosophy in his letter to

¹¹ See *ibid.*, *Fatalisme*, 22-28. Cf. Cramer: "There was obviously a logical contradiction between the one type of astrology [i.e., fatalistic] and the other [which he calls 'catarchic']. For either the stars and constellations exercised an immutable, or merely an avoidable, influence on earthly affairs. To the ancients, however, this distinction was by no means clearly apparent" (*Astrology*, 3). For "catarchic" astrology, see A. Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie Grecque* (Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963), 458-86.

¹² Cramer mentions an alternate etymology, according to which *ἀστρονομία* comes from *νέμειν*, "to assign," meaning that "an astronomer thus would be a meteorologist who 'assigned' (from the Greek *νέμω*) either individual stars or entire constellations their 'weather-making' roles, presumably of course on the basis of accumulated observational data" (*ibid.*).

¹³ See *Lexicon*, s.v., "*ἀστρονομία*" and "*ἀστρολογία*." Cf. Scott: "Astronomy and astrology are of course sharply distinguished in modern thought, but in antiquity the two were used interchangeably. Most experts in one tended also to be experts in the other—Ptolemy is the classic example" (*Life of the Stars*, 119). In this chapter, for the sake of simplicity, I shall always write *astrology* rather than *astronomy*.

¹⁴ Lindberg, *Beginnings*, 271.

Gregory (*Phil.*, XIII, 1). Alan Scott rightly states, largely on the basis of Origen's anti-astrological passage, that Origen possesses a sophisticated level of knowledge of astrology that is almost unparalleled among Christians.¹⁵ Yet Origen is not an astronomer or astrologer himself, and, in fact, he opposes the casting of horoscopes, seeing in it that dangerous side of secular culture and learning that has led some astray: "Neither the love of secular literature nor the false conclusions of philosophers nor the deceptions of astrologers and the feigned directions of the stars nor the contrived predictions by the surreptitious trick of the demons nor any love wholly of foreknowledge sought after by illicit means 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:39)" (*In libr. Iud. hom.*, II, 3).¹⁶ Origen uses his knowledge of astrology to attacks some aspects of it.

Origen is not alone in his criticisms. While fatalism was held by a certain school of philosophers (i.e., the Stoics), it was also widely disputed by other philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus, and Carneades.¹⁷ Likewise, astrology had not been immune from

¹⁵ Scott, *Life of the Stars*, 118.

¹⁶ *neque saecularis litteraturae amor neque philosophorum sophismata neque mathematicorum deceptiones et astrorum simulatae cursus neque diuinationes subreptiua daemonum fallacia commentatae neque ullus omnino praescientiae amor per ea quae non licet inquisitae poterit nos separare a caritate dei quae est in Christo Iesu.*

Partially quoted in Utto Riedinger, OSB, *Die heilige Schrift im Kampf der griechischen Kirche gegen die Astrologie, von Origenes bis Johannes von Damaskos: Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und zur Geschichte der Astrologie* (Innsbruck: Universitäts Wagner, 1956), 29.

Origen, *Homélies sur les Juges*, edited by Pierre Messié, Louis Neyrand, and Marcel Borret, SC 389 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993).

———, *Homilies on Judges*, translated by Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro, FOTC 119 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

¹⁷ See Amand, *Fatalisme*, 31-33, 33-37, 37-39, and 62-68, respectively.

philosophical criticism. In opposing astrology because it denies free will, Origen draws upon the anti-astrological tradition of some pagan philosophers. As Amand puts it, “Il répète simplement, comme tant d’autres l’ont fait avant lui, des *τόποι* scolaires, des lieux communs appartenant au patrimoine intellectuel de tout homme éclairé, auquel la conscience du libre arbitre imposait une mentalité antifataliste.”¹⁸ In my analysis I shall point out some comparisons that scholars have made between Origen’s arguments and those of certain philosophers, without conducting a complete source-critical study. Origen’s use of anti-fatalistic arguments made by ancient philosophers again illustrates how philosophy is useful to Christian theologians, as the arguments of some philosophers can be used to argue against fatalism and popular astrological practices in the defense of Christian doctrine.¹⁹

Fatalism

Before he begins his treatment of the specifics of astrology, Origen first attacks a Gnostic version of astrological fatalism.²⁰ The Gnostics attribute the creation of the stars and their controlling influence to the so-called Artisan (*δημιουργός*), who is merely just,²¹ as opposed to the good God. Origen argues that either their own doctrine of astrological fatalism and

¹⁸ Ibid., *Fatalisme*, 324.

¹⁹ Origen cites the existence of free will and moral responsibility and judgment as part of the apostolic teaching in *De princ.*, pref., 5. These are the doctrines that must be defended.

²⁰ This seems to be evidence that Origen has Gnosticism specifically in mind in this commentary. As Heine says: “It would appear that the overall agenda of the commentary was set by heterodox concerns in Alexandria” (*Origen*, 106). For why else would he include an anti-Gnostic argument at the beginning of his treatment of a much broader problem? His four-part analysis that follows has nothing to do with Gnosticism in particular but deals with astrology and fatalism in general, as they might be understood by anybody. Still, Origen’s argument is relevant because the Gnostics use fatalism to blame evil on the Artisan (see Junod, ed., *Philocalie*, 138-39n2).

²¹ Origen argues that their Artisan is not really just since he made the stars such that they cause us to sin.

theological dualism must itself be the result of destiny – i.e., they are compelled by the stars to believe it – or “they are outside of the laws of the Artisan administered by the stars” (ibid., XXIII, 2).²² The latter is absurd: Origen says that the Gnostics are unable to provide any argument establishing that the minds of some are “subjected to birth stars and destiny”²³ while other minds are not (ibid.). It must be the former, then. But in this case their doctrine is “an unproved assertion” (*ἀπόφασις ἀναπόδεικτος*), since it proceeds not from reason but from necessity (ibid.).²⁴ Origen adds that fatalism makes prayer unnecessary, since whatever will happen to us in life is predetermined, not by God who hears our prayers, but by the stars (i.e., destiny). This objection is designed for religious people like the Gnostics, who will not want to say that prayer is superfluous. Astrological fatalism is the destruction of both morality and religion.

Before moving to his main arguments, Origen briefly summarizes his entire argument. He begins with fatalism, and explains how scriptural prophecy does not imply it (ibid., XXIII, 3). He exposes, by means of a simple analogy, the specious reasoning that leads some to think that a person (or book, such as the Old Testament) that foretells the future thereby causes that future,

²² ἔξω τυγχάνουσι τῶν νόμων τοῦ δημιουργοῦ τῶν κατὰ τοὺς ἀστέρας.

²³ ὑποκειμένου γενέσκει καὶ εἰμαρμένη.

This is an allusion to the Gnostic belief that some people are by born spiritual while others are born animal or carnal. See Junod, ed., *Philocalie*, 138-39n2.

²⁴ But perhaps human thought can be both rational and destined at the same time? It seems to me that Origen’s argument here is the same as C. S. Lewis’s argument against naturalistic materialism (which is a form of fatalism since matter does not possess free will). Lewis argues that the belief that the human mind is merely material (i.e., the brain) is self-contradicting since that belief itself would then be the result of purely mechanistic, and therefore *irrational*, processes. “If thought is the undesigned and irrelevant product of cerebral motions, what reason have we to trust it?” (C. S. Lewis, “Evil and God,” in *God and the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, edited by Walter Hooper [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 21).

which is fatalism. The analogy is communication: person A tells person B about something that happened to person C; yet clearly that does not mean that person A therefore caused what happened to person C (ibid.). This is information about the past, not the future, but Origen insists that the principle is the same: communicating information, whether about the past or future, does not imply that the messenger is the cause of whatever is reported. This discussion leads him into a somewhat lengthy scriptural demonstration (though he says that “it is obvious from the notion of God itself, even apart from Scripture,” ibid., XXIII, 4)²⁵ that God has total foreknowledge of the future (ibid., XXIII, 4-5).

The first of four problems Origen proposes to examine is how free will is compatible with God’s foreknowledge. His fundamental reasoning here is the same as what he already said in the introduction about prophecy not being fatalistic. He even reuses the example of Judas’s foretold betrayal of Jesus (ibid., XXIII, 8-9). Here Origen counters the argument of “many Greeks” (*πολλοί τινες τῶν Ἑλλήνων*, my translation), i.e., philosophers, who have denied God’s foreknowledge in order to preserve human free will.²⁶ Their argument is easy to understand: “If God has known from eternity that a certain man would be unjust and would do such unjust things, and if God’s foreknowledge is infallible, the man foreseen to be such will be unjust in any case and could not possibly be other than unjust” (ibid., XXIII, 7).²⁷ This viewpoint

²⁵ *καὶ χωρὶς μὲν γραφῆς αὐτόθεν ἐκ τῆς ἐννοίας τῆς περὶ θεοῦ δῆλον.*

²⁶ “Il n’est guère possible d’identifier absolument les tenants de cette doctrine, car nous n’en trouvons aucune trace dans les traités connus sur le destin” (Junod, ed., *Philocalie*, 152-53n1). However, Hendrik Benjamins thinks that it is “sehr wahrscheinlich” that these are contemporary Middle Platonists, who, like Alexander of Aphrodisias, do not believe that God’s foreknowledge is all-encompassing (*Eingeordnete Freiheit: Freiheit und Vorsehung bei Origenes* [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 82n63, cited by Trigg, trans., “Commentary on Genesis,” 92n7).

²⁷ *εἰ ἐξ αἰῶνος ἔγνω ὁ θεὸς τόνδε τινὰ ἀδικήσῃν καὶ τότε ποιήσῃν τὰ ἀδικήματα, ἀψευδὴς δὲ ἡ γνώσις τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πάντως ἔσται ἄδικος ποιήσων τότε τὰ ἀδικήματα ὁ τοιοῦτος εἶναι προεωραμένος καὶ ἀμήχανον μὴ ἀδικήσῃν αὐτόν.*

eliminates both free will and moral responsibility (ibid.), as Origen already observes of fatalism in section 1.

Origen's refutation of this logic is equally clear and not substantially different from what he says in section 3, where he gives the analogy of communication. Here, however, he offers a closer analogy involving human foreknowledge. If someone sees someone else, say, "walking with reckless abandon on a slippery path,"²⁸ he foreknows that that person will fall, even before it happens (ibid., XXIII, 8). Nevertheless, that person clearly does not cause him or her to fall. God's foreknowledge is such. When he created the world, he foresaw "everything that was going to happen, because, when one thing happened, something else was the result, a result that brought on another consequence, which, in turn, caused something else to happen" (ibid.).²⁹ God knows the future because he knows every cause—not because he is the cause himself. Thus the truth is, "paradoxical as it may seem . . . that the future event is itself the cause of such foreknowledge. It does not happen because it was known, but it was known because it is going to happen" (ibid.).³⁰ God's foreknowledge is not exactly the same as when someone foreknows that another person walking recklessly on a slippery path is going to fall, for the latter foreknowledge is based not on the factuality of the future event but on past knowledge about slipperiness. Nevertheless, Origen's logic is sound and his analogy valid: one gains knowledge of an event by perceiving it, yet that perception and subsequent knowledge of the event is clearly not the cause

²⁸ *διὰ δὲ τὴν προπετείαν ἀλογίστως ἐπιβαίνοντα ὁδοῦ ὀλισθηρᾶς.*

²⁹ *ἕκαστον τῶν ἐσομένων, ὁρῶν ὅτι ἐπεὶ τότε γέγονε τότε ἔπεται, ἐὰν δὲ γένηται τότε τὸ ἐπόμενον τότε ἀκολουθεῖ, οὐ ὑποστάντος τότε ἔσται.*

³⁰ *ἀλλὰ παραδοξότερον μὲν ἀληθές δὲ ἐροῦμεν, τὸ ἐσόμενον αἴτιον τοῦ τοιάνδε εἶναι τὴν περὶ αὐτοῦ πρόγνωσιν. οὐ γὰρ ἐπεὶ ἔγνωσται γίνεται, ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ ἔμελλεν γίνεσθαι ἔγνωσται.*

of the event. Were a human being somehow to observe someone falling in the future, he or she would, by that observation, know that the person will fall. Nevertheless, the cause of the fall would still be the slipperiness, not the act of precognition. So it is with God, who is so great that he knows all events before any of them occurs.

This insight leads to an important semantic clarification, which I think goes a long way toward explaining why people tend to associate foreknowledge with fatalism. Since God infallibly knows the future, one can logically say of anything that will happen that “it will happen *in any event*” (πάντως ἔσται, *ibid.*). However, Origen argues, this does *not* mean that “what is foreknown will *necessarily* happen” (*ibid.*).³¹ He proves this by appealing to a prophecy of Judas’s betrayal (Ps 109:12, 16-17) that imputes blame to him; but blame cannot be imputed where necessity is involved. Anyone who grants that human beings deserve to be praised and blamed for their actions will accept this, even apart from scriptural authority. Thus what “it will happen in any event” really means, Origen argues, is that “these things will happen, but it would be possible for them to happen otherwise” (*ibid.*).³² In other words, one should not say of things that are foreknown that they *must* happen but only that they *will* happen. God knows how all events will actually turn out, but the events could be otherwise, because they depend on free, human choice; God simply knows in advance, because of his omniscience, which choices will be made. “It is possible, concerning things that could happen or not happen, for him to think that

³¹ ἀνάγκην εἶναι γενέσθαι τὸ προεγνωσμένον.

³² ἔσται μὲν τάδε τινὰ ἐνεδέχeto δὲ καὶ ἐτέρως γενέσθαι.

they happen and that they do not happen.”³³ Trigg glosses this statement as: “God knows what will happen in the future, but he knows contingent events as contingent.”³⁴ For the sake of clarity, Origen illustrates his argument with the example of Judas again in section 9. Origen is correct, in my opinion. It is an abuse of words to say of a foreknown event that it *must* happen or that it will *necessarily* happen. What one should say is that it *will* happen, and to say that all events that will happen, will happen is merely a truism with no fatalistic implications.

Basil and Gregory Naz. insert into the Genesis fragment here a passage from *Contra Celsum* (II, 20) because it is on the same topic of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will. Celsus’s argument is that God himself is to blame for Judas’s betrayal, because God made Judas into a traitor by prophesying in Scripture that he would be such. Origen’s reasoning in responding to this objection is the same as we have already seen, and he even makes two of the same points almost verbatim, namely that the prophesied event is itself the cause of the prophecy and not vice versa, and that to say that what is prophesied *must* happen does not mean that it happens *πάντως* (“in any event”), which is fatalism, but only that it *will* happen, though it has the potential not to happen. A useful illustration is provided, which Origen says is called the “idle” (*ἀργός*) argument and is a fallacy. If fatalism is true, one might well say to a man: “If it is fated that you beget a child, whether you have sexual intercourse with a woman or whether you do not, you will beget a child; [likewise the contrary;] therefore it is futile to have intercourse

³³ ἐνδέχεται δὲ περὶ τῶν ἐνδεχομένων γενέσθαι καὶ μὴ γενέσθαι φρονῆσαι τὸ γενέσθαι αὐτὰ καὶ τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι.

³⁴ Trigg, trans., “Commentary on Genesis,” 94n8.

with a woman” (*C. Cels.*, II, 20 = *Phil.*, XXIII, 13).³⁵ Obviously this is absurd. Though the idle argument does not prove the existence of free will (since causes themselves, such as sexual intercourse or seeing a doctor, can also be fated),³⁶ it does demonstrate that things, even if foreknown, do not happen “in any event,” as if human actions do not matter.

The editors of both *Contra Celsum* and the *Philocalia* point out that the idle argument was previously used by Cicero and Pseudo-Plutarch against Stoic fatalism in their treatises *De fato* (12, 28, and 11, 574E, respectively). Origen again demonstrates the usefulness of philosophy, which must be used critically. One philosophical argument may be used to overturn another, all in the service of Christianity. This is consistent with what Gregory says about how Origen taught his students to examine the writings of all the philosophers (except the atheists). Discernment is necessary.

Astrology

Having established how God’s foreknowledge does not remove free will, Origen can move to the issue of astrology proper. The discussion about divine foreknowledge was necessary because he argues that the stars may be, for those able to read them, a manifestation of God’s foreknowledge, which is not fatalistic. What he must now refute is the belief that the stars actually *cause* events (this would be fatalism), which they, in his opinion, perhaps *signify*. He does not assert with certitude that the stars are signs of the future, but twice adds the qualifier *perhaps* (*εἰ ἄρα*, *Phil.*, XXIII, 15, 16). This is a tentative exegesis of Gen 1:2b, which he reads in

³⁵ Origen offers this example after the example of a man being fated to recover from an illness whether or not he sees a doctor. The procreation example is clearer since it is impossible to conceive a child without having sex, whereas it is possible to get better without seeing a doctor.

³⁶ As Seneca well knew (*Nat. quæst.*, II, 38.4, quoted in Junod, ed., *Philocalie*, 171n2).

the light of astrological theory. He cautiously accepts the theory because of its philosophical credentials (after all, as I said earlier, celestial movements were known to be predictable and to affect life on earth), but is not completely committed to it since it is not proven. Origen never specifies how much of the future is recorded in the sky, presumably because he has no way of knowing.

Junod draws attention to five similarities between Origen's arguments in this section and those of his philosophical contemporary, Plotinus (*Enn.*, III, 1.5-6). This is not a case of direct, literary dependence, for each author deploys the arguments for a different purpose and in a different form.³⁷ Moreover, there are no specific verbal identities between the two, only generic ones natural to the argument itself, words like *stars* (ἀστέρων or ἄστρον), *cause* (ποιεῖν), and *signify* (σημαίνειν). Both Plotinus and Origen probably draw upon an anti-astrological tradition among philosophers (extant only in them). Junod speculates that they may have become familiar with this tradition through Plotinus's teacher, Ammonius Saccas.³⁸ This hypothesis, however, is complicated by the strong possibility that Origen did not know Ammonius Saccas.³⁹ I shall mention each similarity as it presents itself in Origen's argument.

³⁷ See Junod, ed., *Philocalie*, 56-57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

³⁹ Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.*, VI, 19), following Porphyry (*Vit. Plot.*, 3, 14, 20), says that Origen was a disciple of Ammonius Saccas. However, Porphyry's description of Origen is so at variance with what we know of him (e.g., that he was raised a pagan [ap. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 19.7] and wrote a book called *De daemonibus* [Περὶ τῶν δαιμόνων], *Vit. Plot.*, 3, 20) that the simpler explanation may be to postulate that this was someone else named Origen (and perhaps even another Ammonius!) whom Porphyry (and thus Eusebius) wrongly assume is Origen the theologian. It is a matter of interpretation, and it seems to me that scholars who are more inclined to see Origen as a philosopher are also more inclined to believe that he studied under Ammonius Saccas, while those more inclined to see Origen as a theologian and biblical scholar (such as myself) tend to postulate a second Origen. Any conclusion that assumes that Origen did study under Ammonius Saccas is tentative. For secondary literature on the debate, see Junod, *ibid.*, 57-58n2.

Origen has two arguments to prove that the stars and planets do not cause future events. First, effects cannot precede their causes: “Anything that produces an effect must be earlier than the effect produced” (ibid., XXIII, 14).⁴⁰ Yet astrologers claim to learn from a person’s horoscope even past events,⁴¹ such as “what sort of person the father was, rich or poor [etc. . . .], and the same things concerning the mother and any older brothers [or sisters] there may chance to be” (ibid.).⁴² Since backwards causality is impossible, it should be conceded by astrologers, he argues, that the stars are merely signs and not causes of past events. But if this is true of past events, why not say the same of future events? What is the difference? “If they cannot supply

Plotinus, *Opera*, edited by Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, 1977, 1982).

———, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

⁴⁰ πᾶν γὰρ τὸ ποιοῦν πρεσβύτερον τοῦ πεποιημένου.

Yet he said earlier that, though it is a paradox, God’s foreknowledge of future events is actually caused by the events themselves. It might seem that Origen contradicts himself. However, the prefix “fore,” indicating prior time, is a misleading result of the insufficiency of human language when it comes to theology. God’s knowledge is *foreknowledge* only from a human perspective, that is, from a perspective “under time” (ὕπὸ χρόνον); God, however, in Origen’s view, transcends time (see P. Tzamalikos, *The Concept of Time in Origen* [Bern: Peter Lang, 1991], 16-18). “The points where he [Origen] seems to speak as if God had foreknowledge, not timeless knowledge, are only loose and inaccurate expressions used inevitably, yet consciously, because of the limited potential of language to express what is beyond language” (ibid., 18).

⁴¹ A horoscope is the positions of the planets and of the stars in whichever constellation of the Zodiac is visible at the moment of someone’s birth. According to Cramer, historians have often thought that the practice of casting horoscopes for *ordinary* individuals (as opposed to, say, kings) was practiced thousands of years ago by the Mesopotamians, but in fact the practice probably originates in Greek civilization around the years 300-150 B.C. (*Astrology*, 27-28).

⁴² περὶ πατρός, ποταπὸς ὢν τυγχάνει, πλούσιος ἢ πένης [κτλ. . . .]· τὰ δ’ αὐτὰ καὶ περὶ τῆς μητρός, καὶ περὶ πρεσβυτέρων ἀδελφῶν, ἐὰν τύχωσιν ὄντες.

Trigg adds “or sisters,” which I have put in brackets.

this difference, they ought reasonably to assent that nothing takes place in human affairs because of the stars, but, as we have already said, they are, perhaps, signified” (ibid., XXIII, 15).⁴³

Plotinus shares Origen’s belief that the stars are merely signs, not causes (*Enn.*, III, 1.5). Moreover, he uses the same argument about parents: “How is it possible to make out the stars to be causes of a condition which existed in the father and mother previously to that star pattern on which the prediction is based?” (*Enn.*, III, 1.5)⁴⁴ Origen returns to this point again when he questions the consistency of augers, who, he says, believe that “auguries from birds and sacrifices, even auguries from shooting stars, do not contain the efficient cause but signify (*σημαίνειν*) only, while making horoscopes a special case” (*Phil.*, XXIII, 16).⁴⁵ So also Plotinus: “If seers believe that the future is caused by the stars because they declare everyone’s future by looking at their configuration, then in the same way even the birds, and everything they look at to make their predictions, should be the causes of what they signify” (*Enn.*, III, 1.5, my translation).⁴⁶

⁴³ *μη ἔχοντες δὲ δοῦναι τὴν διαφορὰν εὐγνωμόνως συγκαταθήσονται τῷ μηδὲν τῶν κατὰ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἀπὸ τῶν ἀστέρων γίνεσθαι, ἀλλ’ ὡς προειρήκαμεν, εἰ ἄρα, σημαίνεσθαι.*

⁴⁴ *πῶς ἐνὶ ποιεῖσθαι λέγειν ταῦτα, ἃ προὑπάρχει περὶ τοὺς γονεῖς πρὶν τὴν σχέσιν γενέσθαι ταύτην τῶν ἀστρῶν ἀφ’ ἧς προλέγουσι;*

⁴⁵ *ἐπὶ τὸ τὴν μὲν οἰωνιστικὴν καὶ τὴν θυτικὴν μὴ λέγειν περιέχειν τὸ ποιοῦν αἷτιον, ἀλλὰ σημαίνειν μόνον, καὶ τὴν ἀστεροσκοπικὴν, οὐκ ἔτι δὲ τὴν γενεθλιαλογικὴν.*

Trigg here translates *σημαίνειν* as “are indications,” but I use “signify” for consistency.

⁴⁶ *εἰ δ’ ὅτι εἰς τὴν τῶν ἀστρῶν σχέσιν ὁρῶντες περὶ ἐκάστων λέγουσιν τὰ γινόμενα, παρ’ ἐκείνων ποιεῖσθαι τεκμαίρονται, ὁμοίως ἂν καὶ οἱ ὀρνεῖς ποιητικοὶ ὧν σημαίνουσιν εἶεν καὶ πάντα, εἰς ἃ βλέποντες οἱ μάντιες προλέγουσιν.*

Origen compares the sky to a book, quoting a passage from an unknown apocryphal book he calls the “Prayer of Joseph” (ibid., XXIII, 15).⁴⁷ Besides Gen 1:14, he also finds scriptural support for this idea in Isa 34:4a (“Heaven shall roll up like a scroll”) and Jer 10:2b (“Do not be afraid of the signs of the sky”). Origen later speaks of “heavenly letters” (*τὰ οὐράνια γράμματα*, *Phil.*, XXIII, 20). Similarly, Plotinus says that the stars are like letters to those that can read them: “They furnish the incidental service of being letters on which the augur, acquainted with that alphabet, may look and read the future from their pattern” (*Enn.*, III, 1.6).⁴⁸ However, Plotinus does not limit this activity to spiritual beings the way Origen does; he speaks of humor augurs. He shares Origen’s goal of attacking fatalism but not his goal of denying the practice of astrology.

Origen’s second argument is that, if stars are causes, then many different configurations of stars must be the cause of a single event, since many events affect many people. For example, if a man is to be murdered by robbers, this will be caused by both his horoscope and “those of his father, mother, wife, children, servants, and friends, and likewise from those of the murderers themselves” (*Phil.*, XXIII, 16).⁴⁹ This is absurd because an event can have only one “efficient cause” (*τὸ ποιοῦν αἴτιον*; he uses this Aristotelian terminology only a few lines later, ibid.). The alternative would be to say that only the victim’s horoscope causes the murder, and that the rest only signify it, but then one is right back at Origen’s previous argument: if some horoscopes

⁴⁷ *τῇ προσευχῇ τοῦ Ἰωσηφ.*

⁴⁸ *παρέχεται δὲ καὶ ἄλλην χρεῖαν τὴν τοῦ εἰς αὐτὰ ὥσπερ γράμματα βλέποντας τοὺς τὴν τοιαύτην γραμματικὴν εἰδότας ἀναγινώσκειν τὰ μέλλοντα ἐκ τῶν σχημάτων.*

⁴⁹ *τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τὴν τῆς μητρὸς καὶ τὴν τῆς γαμετῆς καὶ τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν οἰκετῶν καὶ τῶν φιλάτων, τάχα δὲ καὶ αὐτῶν τῶν ἀναιρούντων.*

merely signify, why not simply concede that all merely signify (ibid.)? So also Plotinus: “In the lot of one brother they are foretelling the death of another” (*Enn.*, III, 1.5).⁵⁰

In addition, Origen asks, how can astrologers possibly explain how the horoscope of every single person of a given culture happens to cause him or her to undergo whatever is customary for that culture, such as circumcision for Jewish boys on the eighth day (*Phil.*, XXIII, 16)? This argument is not paralleled in Plotinus but is a philosophical topos that Amand labels *νόμιμα βαρβάρικα* (“foreign customs”) and traces back to the philosopher Carneades, who like Socrates left behind no written works.⁵¹ Origen does not rely directly on any particular philosopher here, but this is further proof that his whole argument against astrology is conducted in a philosophical milieu. He need not innovate new arguments where old ones have already proved their points.

Having removed all fatalistic implications from astrology by denying that stars cause either future or past events, Origen delivers a more devastating criticism of astrology: it is impracticable. His argument is threefold, so that even if one part may somehow be in error, the others will nevertheless stand. Origen bases himself on what astrologers themselves say: “Those who concern themselves with these things say . . .” (ibid., XXIII, 17).⁵² “They say” appears five

⁵⁰ λέγουσι καὶ ἐξ ἀδελφῶν ἀδελφῶν θανάτους.

⁵¹ For this argument, see Amand, *Fatalisme*, 55-60. For Carneades, see ibid., 41-43. Amand handily summarizes the argument as follows: “Il est tiré, d’une part, de l’identité des dispositions physiques et psychiques, de la constance des lois et des mœurs chez les individus faisant partie d’un peuple déterminé ou d’une tribu donné et, d’autre part, de l’incroyable diversité qui règne, de peuple à peuple, de tribu à tribu, entre leurs habitudes physiques, intellectuelles et morales et entre leurs us et coutumes. Cette constatation démontre que la vie de l’homme n’est point régentée et produite par l’influence fatale d’une constellation, mais qu’elle est au contraire grandement conditionnée par l’arbitraire des institutions humaines” (ibid., 55-56).

⁵² Φασὶ τοίνυν οἱ περὶ ταῦτα δεινοὶ . . .

times (*φασί[ν]* four times and one parenthetical *φασίν*) in XXIII, 17-18, in addition to one instance of “they themselves concede . . .” (*αὐτοὶ ὁμολογήσουσιν*, *ibid.*, XXIII, 18, my translation). Origen probably draws upon some astrological work that he has read, though perhaps he has acquired this information only indirectly through an anti-astrological, philosophical work that itself included the direct statements of astrologers.⁵³

Origen’s first argument is technical: the precision required in noting the exact position of the stars of the sign of the Zodiac⁵⁴ as well as of the planets⁵⁵ exceeds the technical ability of astrologers. It is not enough merely to note under which sign of the Zodiac someone is born (i.e., which constellation is visible at that time of the year), which is trivial.⁵⁶ One must also note the exact degree, minute (i.e., 1/60 of one degree), and, for the “more rigorous astronomers,” second (i.e., 1/3600 of one degree) of the position of each of the stars of that constellation, as well as of the planets. This is, in fact, why twins can have different destinies even if they are born only minutes apart (*ibid.*). Once again, Origen draws upon an existing tradition of criticism (though not a particular written work). Similar arguments about the impracticability of astrology can be

⁵³ Cf. Scott: “It is true that most of his [Origen’s] information [about astrology] probably comes from philosophical (especially Academic [e.g., Carneades]) attacks on astrology” (*Life of the Stars*, 119).

⁵⁴ Cumont defines *Zodiac* thus: “A geometrical division of the circle in which the planets move, into twelve equal parts, each subdivided into three portions or decans, equivalent to ten of our degrees” (*Astrology*, 12). Each part of the zodiac is defined by a particular constellation of stars visible within it (Leo, Taurus, etc.). “In the age of Democritus and Anaxagoras, Mesopotamian scholars established the fixed arrangement of constellations which we call the zodiac, whose earliest known appearance occurred in a cuneiform text of 419 B.C.” (Cramer, *Astrology*, 8).

⁵⁵ According to Cramer, a small number of astrologers also examined the positions of other stars (called *paranattellonta*) that rose at the same time as the signs of the zodiac (*Astrology*, 25).

⁵⁶ This is in fact popular astrology, which I discuss below while dealing with Basil’s attack on it.

found in Sextus Empiricus (*Adu. astr.* [= *Adu. math.*, V], 50-88).⁵⁷ He gives many more reasons than Origen does for why it is impossible to measure accurately the positions of the stars and planets at the moment of birth. One of these resembles Origen's, namely the simple fact that the sky revolves too quickly to be measured thoroughly in a single instant: "While the latter [the astrologer] is gazing upward and looking round to discover in which of the Signs the Moon lies and each of the other stars, the 'disposition' of the stars changes, as the Universe in its motion revolves at an incredible speed, before he had described after observation the things seen in the heavens at the child's natural hour" (*ibid.*, 70).⁵⁸ At best, the astrologer may note the correct position of a single body, such as the moon, but will not be able to observe all of the relevant bodies before they move. Like Origen, he also mentions the differing destinies of people born at the same time (Origen mentions twins specifically, *Phil.*, XXIII, 17) as an example of how little time needs to elapse for a person's horoscope to be radically altered (*Adu. astr.*, 88). This argument does not touch upon astrological theory, but only practice.

A. Bouché-Leclercq gives two interesting criticisms of this kind of argument.⁵⁹ First, it presupposes that the astrologers have to make all the various measurements on the spot. But this is mistaken, since astrologers could rely on past measurements – "leurs Tables et canons de toute

⁵⁷ Cited in Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie*, 589n1. Amand also describes such an argument in Carneades, though its exact details are unknown since it has not been preserved (*Fatalisme*, 49-51, 314n2).

⁵⁸ ἐν ᾧ οὗτος ἀναβλέπει καὶ περισκοπῶν ἐξετάζει τὸ ἐν τίνι τῶν ζωδίων ἐστὶν ἡ σελήνη καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ἀστέρων ἕκαστος, φθάνει ἄλλοιον γενέσθαι τὸ περὶ τοὺς ἀστέρας διάθεμα, τῆς τοῦ κόσμου κινήσεως ἀλήπτῳ τάχει περιφερομένης, πρὶν τηρητικῶς παραπλάσασθαι τῇ τοῦ γεννηθέντος ἄρα τὰ κατ' οὐρανὸν βλεπόμενα.

Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*, vol. 4 of *Sextus Empiricus*, translated by R. G. Bury, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

⁵⁹ Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie*, 591-92.

espèce” – to calculate, from the observation of a single star, the positions of the other stars and planets.⁶⁰ Apparently both Sextus Empiricus and Origen are unaware that any astrologers possess such information, which would indeed be a serious shortcoming in their argumentation. Yves Courtonne, however, argues against Bouché-Leclercq that even the time required to take the one necessary measurement would prevent a measurement of that star’s position to the exact second.⁶¹ Second, according to Bouché-Leclercq, it is unfair to criticize ancient astrologers for their inaccuracy, since even modern astronomers (and indeed all scientists) must accept some imperfections in accuracy. In my opinion, this is like the problem of the ancient critique of natural philosophy, criticized (e.g., by Basil) for being divided by insoluble disputes. Should they have simply given up (as Basil seems to urge), or should modern people admire them for at least working at the problems, even when they could not reach answers? I would say that, if the inaccuracy of astrological measurements was sufficient to produce many mistaken results – and it was, by the astrologers’ own admission, as the twins argument makes clear – then an ancient person would have been ill advised to take into consideration a horoscopic prediction, since there would be a rather significant chance it was in error. Granted, a certain amount of error must always be tolerated, as is still true of medical, diagnostic tests, but does not, at a certain point, the margin of error become too high for the test to be useful? The goal of the critique, at least as Origen puts it, seems to me to be to discourage people from trusting in horoscopes, and his grounds for doing so are logically solid: horoscopes are at best unreliable and at worst harmful,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 591.

⁶¹ Yves Courtonne, *Saint Basile et l’Hellenisme : Etude sur la rencontre de la pensee chretienne avec la sagesse antique dans l’hexaemeron de Basile le grand* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1934), 193.

since people may make bad decisions based on false information. To say that the astrologers were trying their best (“s’evertuaient aussi de leur mieux”), as Bouché-Leclercq does, does not change this.⁶² It would be anachronistic, I think, to imagine the ancient astrologers attempting, like modern scientists, to perfect their reputed science through careful, empirical observation, checking their predictions against what actually happens to their subjects, with the goal of ever increasing accuracy.

Origen’s second argument is that, even if it were possible to measure the positions of the stars and planets with such accuracy, the precession of the equinoxes makes it impossible to know what he calls the “theoretical concept” (τοῦ νοητοῦ) of the sign of the zodiac (ibid., XXIII, 18). As Origen relates it, the circle of the Zodiac is rotating eastward by approximately one degree every century (ibid.). Origen again proves his knowledge of natural philosophy and astrology in particular,⁶³ for he accurately relates the conclusion of the ancient astronomer Hipparchus, who “determined that the tropical and equinoctial points move at least $1/100^\circ$ a year backward through the signs of the ecliptic.”⁶⁴ Perhaps he studied Hipparchus, either directly or indirectly, in his astrological studies. It is possible, though, that he learned this fact from the same astrological work he seems to be drawing upon, since he says that the astrologers themselves “say that the results for human destiny are discovered not from the form [i.e., the

⁶² Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie*, 591.

⁶³ “Some of Origen’s astronomical knowledge is fairly sophisticated. For example, he is familiar with Hipparchus’ theory” (Scott, *Life of the Stars*, 118).

⁶⁴ Charles Coulston Gillispie, ed., *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, vol. 15 (Supplement I), s.v. “Hipparchus” (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1978), 218.

actual position], but from the theoretical concept of the sign of the zodiac” (ibid.).⁶⁵ I do not know why astrologers considered this important, since the controlling influence should come, I would think, from the stars themselves and not from positions in space that they once occupied. Indeed, in the next paragraph Origen grants this as a hypothetical solution to the difficulty. It seems as if the “theoretical concept” represents some kind of ideal state, the precession being seen as a deviation or aberration. On the other hand, if they rely on charts to judge the positions from a single measurement, and these charts do not accurately account for the precession, then they will indeed be inaccurate. However, Origen shows no knowledge of such charts. In any case, if the “theoretical concept” is what is desired, accuracy will be impossible for astrologers unless they can calculate the exact rate at which the precession occurs, which Origen says they cannot. Once again, this is a technical limitation.

Finally, even if it were possible either to compensate for or simply disregard the precession of the equinoxes, astrology is rendered impracticable because the stars affect each other and can cancel out one another’s influences.

Thus a demonstrably bad star can be impaired by its aspect with another star, because that star is in an aspect that might or might not be important with yet another star that is good. By the same token, the impairment of a bad star that would have happened because it is in aspect with a good star is prevented because yet another star, with bad indications, occupies a certain position in the configuration. (Ibid.)⁶⁶

⁶⁵ τὰ δὲ ἀποτελέσματα φασιν εὑρίσκεισθαι οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ μορφώματος, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ νοητοῦ ζωδίου.

⁶⁶ ἀμαυρουμένου τοῦ δηλουμένου φέρε εἶπεῖν χείρονος ἀπὸ τοῦδε, διὰ τὸ ἐπιβλέπεσθαι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τοῦδε τοῦ κρείττονος, καὶ ἐπὶ τοσόνδε ἢ τοσόνδε ἀμαυρουμένου· πολλάκις πάλιν τῆς ἀμαυρώσεως τῆς τοῦ χείρονος ὑπὸ τῆς ἐπιβλέψεως τῆς τοῦ κρείττονος ἐμποδιζομένης, ἐκ τοῦ ἑτερον οὕτως ἐσχηματίζεσθαι, χειρόνων ὄντα σηματικόν.

Once again Origen draws his argument directly from the astrologers themselves, who “admit that it is impossible to account adequately for what they call the ‘combination’ of stars in such configurations” (ibid).⁶⁷ Since Origen has drawn all three of his arguments directly from astrologers themselves, his only contribution to the field is to point out what should already have been apparent: that the practice of astrology is humanly impossible. The theory behind it may be valid, so long as stars are taken as signs and not causes, but it is simply impossible for human astrologers, within the limits of ancient technology, to achieve the necessary level of accuracy. Whereas the astrologers were, I assume, trying to offer an explanation for why their predictions often fail, Origen draws the saner conclusion: that they should give up the practice entirely as hopeless. He reinforces this conclusion by quoting Isa 47:13 (“Let the astrologers of heaven / stand up and save you / . . . let them declare to you / what is about to come upon you”), a sarcastic admonition to seek salvation from astrologers.

After having given his arguments, Origen responds to a potential objection that Jacob, according to the aforementioned apocryphal work, was able to read the stars (ibid., XXIII, 19).⁶⁸ Origen replies that Jacob was no ordinary human being but that, like Paul, had “heard ineffable things” (2 Cor 12:4), and thus learned from the Holy Spirit the art of astrology. A reference in the Wisdom of Solomon to “the alterations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, / the

⁶⁷ τήν γε σύγκρασιν παρ’ αὐτοῖς καλουμένην τῶν ἐν τοῖσδε τοῖς σχηματισμοῖς τυγχανόντων καὶ αὐτοὶ ὁμολογήσουσιν οὐχ οἳ τε σῶσαι κατ’ ἀξίαν.

For this aspect of astrology, see Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie*, 158-255.

⁶⁸ It is strange that Origen gives such credence to this apocryphal work, even to the point that he quotes it as proof that the angels can read the stars like a book (*Phil.*, XXIII, 15). However, the reference here to “the Scripture” (τῆς γραφῆς) may be taken as the words of the hypothetical interlocutor and not Origen’s own view, for surely he did not believe that this work is Scripture. He identifies it as an apocryphal work in *In Io. comm.*, II, 188-90 (cited by Trigg, trans., “Commentary on Genesis,” 101n16).

cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars” (7:18b-19) is interpreted in the same way.

This explanation paves the way for his final point.

Origen concludes with two possible reasons why God may have made the stars this way and given the power to read them like a book (recall *Phil.*, XXIII, 15) to angels as well as to certain “holy souls” (τῶν ἁγίων ψυχῶν) like Jacob (*ibid.*, XXIII, 20-21). If he was cautious about the very idea of the stars being signs, he is even more cautious about offering a reason *why* God made them as signs. His answers are speculative: “I conjecture” (στοχάζομαι, *ibid.*, XXIII, 20), “it is possible” (ἐνδέχεται, *ibid.*), “it is probable” (εἰκός, *ibid.*, XXIII, 21). First, he says that the fact that the stars serve as signs of the future is a demonstration of the power of God. I think that he means that the stars, being able to predict the future, prove that the mind of God eternally knows future events, even the most trivial (*ibid.*, XXIII, 20). In fact, Origen says that the uncreated and supernatural quality of the divine mind implies that God knows not just some future events but absolutely all things,⁶⁹ though he says that this belief cannot be proven (and surely astrologers do not claim to be able to predict absolutely everything that will ever happen). Second, it may be that the stars are for “the powers that manage human affairs”⁷⁰ what the Bible is for human beings (*ibid.*). They not only contain information “concerning Creation and certain other mysteries”⁷¹ but also commands to be carried out (*ibid.*, XXIII, 20-21). These speculations conclude his anti-astrological argument.

⁶⁹ “God’s mind is uncreated (ἀγενήτω) and surpasses all nature” (τῷ ἀγενήτῳ νῷ καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν φύσιν τυγχάνοντι). Trigg translates ἀγενήτω as “ingenerate.”

⁷⁰ ταῖς τὰ ἀνθρώπινα οἰκονομούσαις δυνάμεσιν.

⁷¹ περὶ κοσμοποιίας καὶ εἴτινα ἄλλα μυστηρία.

The Magi

I think that it is worth mentioning that, in a passage from *Contra Celsum* (I, 58-60), Origen deals with the nativity story of the magi (Matt 2:1-12), a passage in Scripture that may seem to imply that human beings can predict future events through astrology. It may seem surprising that he does not mention this story in his Genesis commentary, but the reason is that he distinguishes sharply between astrologers (“Chaldeans,” *Χαλδαίους*) and the magi (*C. Cels.*, I, 58). In fact, he rebukes Celsus for equating them.⁷² The magi are not astrologers; rather they are “in communion with daemons and by their formulas they invoke them for the ends which they desire” (ibid., I, 60).⁷³ In other words, they are wizards, which is indeed a possible meaning of the Greek word *Μάγος*.⁷⁴ Moreover, Origen believes that the “star” that they saw was actually “a new star and not like any of the ordinary ones . . . [It] is to be classed with the comets which occasionally occur” (ibid., I, 58).⁷⁵ Origen says that comets can presage both bad events (per usual) and good ones, and cites a Stoic philosopher named Chaeremon to support this belief (ibid., I, 59).⁷⁶ The reason the magi noticed this comet was that they were trying to figure out why they could no longer work their magic. Origen tentatively subscribes (“it is probable,” *εἰκότως*)

⁷² Yet it was a logical conclusion to make, given their observation of the star and the very use of the word *Μάγος*. Cf. Cumont: “The word *Χαλδαίος*, *Chaldaeus*, bore amongst the ancients very different meanings from time to time. . . . At the period of the Achaemenid kings, in the official processions of Babylon, there walked first the *magi*” (*Astrology*, 26).

⁷³ *μάγοι δαίμοσιν ὁμιλούντες καὶ τούτους ἐφ’ ᾧ μεμαθήκασι καὶ βούλονται καλοῦντες ποιοῦσι μὲν τὸ τοιοῦτον.*

⁷⁴ See *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v., *Μάγος*.

⁷⁵ *καινὸν ἀστέρα εἶναι νομίζομεν καὶ μηδενὶ τῶν συνήθων παραπλήσιον . . . ἀλλὰ τῷ γένει τοιοῦτον γεγονέναι ὁποῖοι κατὰ καιρὸν γινόμενοι κομῶται.*

⁷⁶ His works do not survive, but fragments are collected in *Chairemon*, edited by Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1932), cited in Chadwick, trans., *Contra Celsum*, 54n1.

to the notion common among early Christians that at the coming of Jesus magic was abolished: “the daemons lost their strength and became weak; their sorcery was confuted and their power overthrown” (ibid., I, 60).⁷⁷ They began to find their answer, he says, by reading Num 24:17: “A star shall dawn out of Jacob, / and a person shall rise up out of Israel.” This led them to look for the “star,” which they followed to Jesus. Thus, in Origen’s account, the magi’s statement, “We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage” (Matt 1:2), refers not to astrology but to a comet predicted by Old Testament prophecy. Since this interpretation divests the story of any astrological significance, Origen has no reason to mention it in his treatment of astrology, though by omitting it he leaves the door open to criticism of his assertion that astrology is impracticable by human beings.

Conclusion

At this point one may ask why, after so thoroughly discrediting astrology, Origen does not simply discard it altogether. Instead he offers a theory that finds its only proof in an apocryphal book and some passing scriptural references to astrology. I think that the reason he does this is similar in some ways to what we saw with Aristotle’s theory of hylomorphism. Origen could have rejected hylomorphism in order to defend *creatio ex nihilo*. However, he does not wish to go beyond bounds in criticizing natural philosophy; he limits himself to rejecting the

⁷⁷ οἱ δαίμονες ἡτάνησαν καὶ ἐξησθένησαν, ἐλεγχθείσης αὐτῶν τῆς γοητείας καὶ καταλυθείσης τῆς ἐνεργείας.

Cf. St. Ignatius: “A star shone forth in heaven brighter than all the stars. . . . There was perplexity as to the origin of this novelty, so unlike the others. Thus all magic was dissolved” (ἀστὴρ ἐν οὐρανῷ ἔλαμψεν ὑπὲρ πάντας τοὺς ἀστέρας. . . . παραχὴ τε ἦν, πόθεν ἢ καινότης ἢ ἀνόμοιος αὐτοῖς, ὅθεν ἐλύετο πᾶσα μαγεία, *Ad Ephes.*, 19.2-3).

Franz Xaver von Funk, ed., *Opera patrum apostolicorum*, 2 vols. (Tubingen: H. Laupp, 1881).

Ignatius, *Ignatius of Antioch*, translated by Robert M. Grant (Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1966).

idea of uncreated matter. Likewise, his attack on a fatalistic understanding of astrology, in which stars cause events, is necessary to defend belief in free will, without which Christian faith and hope in the judgment of God is impossible. But to overthrow the entire theory of astrology as such is unnecessary. We may wish that he had done so because educated people today, with our modern, scientific understanding of the stars and universe, know that the idea that the stars indicate future, human events is baseless, but Origen does not have access to modern, scientific astronomy. To him, astrology is, at least partially, a legitimate part of what we now call astronomy, though it also contains false, and even blasphemous, ideas. It would be an affront to philosophy's role as handmaid to deny in toto a legitimate theory simply because some aspects of it are incompatible with Christianity, just as it would have been an affront to deny hylomorphism. Where Origen does criticize astrological practice in his Genesis commentary, he does not seem to be motivated by theological or religious reasons.⁷⁸ He does not say that to consult an astrologer is a sin, nor does he cite Scripture in his three arguments for why it is impracticable. Rather, he opposes it on purely rational grounds. He follows in the footsteps of past philosophers who criticized both its fatalistic implications and its impracticability. The basic theory of a terrestrial-celestial correspondence he cannot disprove on rational grounds, though he explains how it should be understood in a way compatible with human free will. I think that this is the real reason why he accepts astrological theory. It is not because of a Jewish apocryphal work or some obscure references to astrology in Scripture.

⁷⁸ But elsewhere, when preaching to a popular audience, he associates it with demons (*In libr. Iud. hom.*, II, 3, quoted above).

BASIL

Basil's critique of astrology comes in *Hom. in hex.*, VI, 5-7. It occurs in the same context as Origen's: the interpretation of Gen 1:14b ("Let them be for signs"). This fact, combined with close similarities in content, some word-for-word correspondence, and the fact that Basil was one of the compliers of the *Philocalia*, makes it certain that he draws directly on Origen's anti-astrological arguments in developing his own.⁷⁹ That is not to say, of course, that there is nothing original in Basil's treatment. Moreover, the rhetorical form is quite different: whereas Origen offers a commentarial treatment structured around four specific questions, Basil's argument is in fact a diatribe, full of sarcasm and mockery, meant to entertain as well as inform his listeners.⁸⁰ It is also worth noting what Basil does not say: he is silent about astrological theory, neither affirming it as Origen does for angels and a few exceptional, spiritual men, nor denying it.⁸¹ This reticence, compared to Origen's frankness, is, I think, the result of two interrelated factors: Basil's position as bishop and the rhetorical context. Basil is conscious of his duty as bishop and preacher to guard his flock against hostile pagan and heretical forces. It would be, arguably, dangerous to leave a foothold or "loophole" for astrology by allowing it any legitimacy. Moreover, it would be out of place to craft such fine, scholarly distinctions here as Origen does.

⁷⁹ Cf. Amand: "Une seule chose me semble probable, c'est que l'element chretien, tout adventice, inséré dans une démonstration exclusivement philosophique, a grande chance d'avoir été inspiré par Origène" (*Fatalisme*, 399).

⁸⁰ I agree with the description Amand gives it: "Cet 'excursus' . . . n'est autre qu'une violente sortie contre les 'Chaldéens,' une diatribe débitée sur un ton persifleur, une vive semonce corsée de mordantes plaisanteries" (*Fatalisme*, 393). Cf. Riedinger: "[Basileios] weist dann mit überlegener Ironie die verstiegenen Ansprüche der Sterndeuter zurück" (*Heilige Schrift*, 47).

⁸¹ Cf. Amand: "En dehors de cette *sixième homélie de l'Hexaéméron*, Basile n'attaque pas explicitement l'astrologie [i.e., astrological theory]," (*Fatalisme*, 398n1).

Basil does not treat astrological theory because he does not wish to give any occasion, especially in a homily, for someone to promote astrology.

Basil's attack on astrology should be seen in the light of his view of *παιδεία*, for he lists astrology (*ἀστρονομία*) along with such subjects as geometry, arithmetic, and solids as "laborious vanity" (*ἡ πολυάσχολος ματαιότης*, *Hom. in hex.*, I, 3).⁸² It is not that these subjects are useless per se, but what good are they, he asks rhetorically, if their practitioners fail to grasp that this universe they study will one day come to an end? They should have realized this, he argues, from the fact that every part of the universe is corruptible (*ibid.*).⁸³ The purpose of *παιδεία* should be to promote and defend Christianity, not heretical concepts like an eternal universe. Here he speaks of astrology in general, circumscribing it within the same limits as all secular disciplines, without offering the particular critique of astrological practice and astrological fatalism that is yet to come.

Before looking at his anti-astrological comments, we should briefly consider the positive exegesis Basil gives to Gen 1:14b (*ibid.*, VI, 4). The situation is comparable to what we have seen with his reading of Gen 1:2b and 1:6-7: he does not immediately attack the mistaken interpretation, but first explains what the text, properly interpreted, means. In this case, the meaning is not astrological but meteorological:

⁸² Quoted in Riedinger, *Heilige Schrift*, 48n6.

⁸³ Basil assumes that the stars are corruptible and not eternal, which was not a proven fact in the ancient world. In fact, the opposite was the assumption. Cumont writes: "From their main discovery, that of the invariability of astronomical laws, the Chaldeans had deduced another important conclusion, namely, the eternity of the world. . . . The stars, in fact, perform their revolutions according to ever invariable cycles of years, which, as experience proves, succeed each other to infinity" (*Astrology*, 30). Yet Basil is right to challenge this way of thinking since the consistency of the future is in fact *not* proven by the consistency of the past, and modern science has proven that his inference that the stars, like everything else in the universe, are not eternal is factually correct, though he offers no proof, nor could he have.

If anyone will investigate with ordinary care their [the luminaries'] signs, he will find that the observations derived through long experience with them are useful. Much information can be obtained about the heavy rains, much about droughts and the blowing of the winds, either of particular winds or winds in general, of violent or gentle ones. (Ibid.)⁸⁴

A reference to Matt 16:3 (“In the evening you say, ‘Tomorrow will be fair, for the sky is red’; and, in the morning, ‘Today will be stormy, for the sky is red and threatening’”) supports this with scriptural proof. Then he moves on to give examples of meteorological forecasting of a natural-philosophical nature, mixed in also with more everyday examples, such as with sailors and farmers. This is a straightforward example of how Basil puts philosophy to use in the hexaemeron. Philosophical learning, selectively used, offers his audience tidbits of information about the natural world that God has made. Here there is nothing polemical or controversial. Basil concludes his explanation of Gen 1:14b with an eschatological reference (a conflation of Joel 2:31 and Matt 24:29) about how solar and lunar signs will forecast the end of the world.

One might be tempted to see in Basil’s meteorological treatment of the verse, with its subsequent criticism of astrology, an important philosophical point: that the observable significance of celestial bodies on the earth is limited in scope and does not extend to human events (“our lot in life,” *ibid.*, VI, 5),⁸⁵ such as births, deaths, etc. That would indeed be significant, and it is possible that that is what he means. However, Basil says nothing explicit, affirmative or negative, about whether the celestial bodies also signify, besides the weather, human affairs. He denies only that human astrologers are capable of obtaining such information.

⁸⁴ *ἐάν μή τις πέρα τοῦ μέτρου τὰ ἀπ’ αὐτῶν σημεῖα περιεργάζεται, χρησίμους αὐτῶν τὰς ἐκ τῆς μακρᾶς ἐμπειρίας παρατηρήσεις εὐρήσει. πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ περὶ ἐπομβρίας ἐστὶ μαθεῖν, πολλὰ δὲ περὶ αὐχμῶν καὶ πνευμάτων κινήσεως ἢ μερικῶν ἢ καθόλου, βιαίων ἢ ἀνειμένων.*

⁸⁵ *τῆς τῶν βίων ἀποκληρώσεως*

Origen, as we saw, in his anti-astrological argument upheld the predictive power of celestial movement vis-à-vis life on earth, and Basil draws directly upon Origen's anti-astrological argument in his own. Thus I am inclined to think that Basil probably also accepts the notion that the stars signify the future. Consequently, I doubt that his meteorological interpretation of the signifying power of the stars implies the complete exclusion of astrological theory. After all, if Basil wished thus to limit their predictive power, he could have said so explicitly.

Basil's anti-astrological argument has four parts: 1) an explanation of astrological practice, coupled with its rejection (ibid.), 2) an attack on the connection astrology attempts to make between human beings and the animals of the Zodiac (ibid., VI, 6), 3) the moral blasphemy implicit in astrology (i.e., fatalism, ibid., VI, 7), and 4) an argument from the hereditary succession of kings (ibid.). The first and third arguments correspond closely to Origen, whereas the second and fourth have no parallel with him. Basil uses Origen's argument but not exclusively.

Basil begins by explaining what astrology is and, in so doing, reveals his dependence upon Origen. Astrologers say, he reports, "that the combination of these moving stars with the stars lying in the Zodiac, when they come together in a certain shape, forecasts certain fortunes" (ibid., VI, 5, adapted from Way's translation).⁸⁶ He has taken part of this definition straight from Origen, who writes that astrologers say "that everything that occurs on the earth . . . is due to the combination of the stars called planets with those in the Zodiac" (*Phil.*, XXIII, 1).⁸⁷ The phrase

⁸⁶ ὅτι τῶνδε μὲν τῶν κινουμένων ἀστρων ἡ ἐπιπλοκὴ πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῷ ζῳδιακῷ κειμένους ἀστέρας κατὰ τοιόνδε σχῆμα συνελθόντων ἀλλήλοις, τὰς τοιάσδε γενέσεις ἀποτελεῖ.

⁸⁷ εἰς τὸν περὶ τῆς εἰμαρμένης τόπον, τῇ τῶν πλανωμένων ἀστέρων ἐπιπλοκῇ πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῷ ζῳδιακῷ πάντων αὐτοῖς νομιζομένων συμβαίνειν τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. . . .

“the combination of the stars with those in the Zodiac” is verbatim the same.⁸⁸ Basil goes into some detail explaining how astrology works, with an emphasis on the exacting detail of measurement involved. Like Origen, he says that he will use their own words against them (*Hom. in hex.*, VI, 5).

In fact, he again uses, not theirs, but Origen’s words when explaining how the astrologers measure the positions of celestial bodies. Basil says:

The star which is in the ascendant must be found, and not only in which twelfth it is [i.e., sign of the Zodiac], but also in what portion of the twelfth [i.e., degree], and in which sixtieth [i.e., minute] into which we have said the portion was divided, or, to secure absolute precision, in which sixtieth subdivided from the first sixtieths [i.e., second]. Further, this minute and unfathomable investigation of time, they say, must be made for each of the planets, so that which position it had with respect to the fixed stars and what figure they formed with each other at the moment of the birth of the child may be ascertained. (*Ibid.*, adapted from Way’s translation)⁸⁹

Here is how Origen explains the same thing:

Those who concern themselves with these things say that someone who intends to understand accurately the science of horoscopes must know, not only in which twelfth [i.e., sign of the Zodiac] the star in question is found, but also in what portion of the twelfth [i.e., degree] and in which sixtieth [i.e., minute]. More precise astronomers would specify in which sixtieth of the sixtieth [i.e., second] as well. And they say that it is necessary to do this for each of the planets, examining its position with respect to the fixed stars. (*Phil.*, XXIII, 17, adapted from Trigg’s translation)⁹⁰

⁸⁸ τῶν ἀστρων ἡ ἐπιπλοκὴ πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῷ ζῳδιακῷ (Basil) = τῇ τῶν ἀστέρων ἐπιπλοκῇ πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῷ ζῳδιακῷ (Origen)

⁸⁹ ἀνάγκη γὰρ εὐρεθῆναι τὸν ὥροσκοποῦντα ἀστέρα οὐ μόνον κατὰ πόστου δωδεκατημορίου ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ ποίας μοίρας τοῦ δωδεκατημορίου, καὶ ἐν πόστῳ ἐξηκοστῷ, εἰς ᾧ ἔφαμεν διαιρεῖσθαι τὴν μοῖραν, ἥ, ἵνα τὸ ἀκριβές εὐρεθῇ, ἐν πόστῳ ἐξηκοστῷ τῶν ὑποδιηρημένων ἀπὸ τῶν πρώτων ἐξηκοστῶν. καὶ ταύτην τὴν οὕτω λεπτὴν καὶ ἀκατάληπτον εὑρεσιν τοῦ χρόνου ἐφ’ ἐκάστου τῶν πλανητῶν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι ποιεῖσθαι λέγουσιν, ὥστε εὐρεθῆναι ποταπὴν εἶχον σχέσιν πρὸς τοὺς ἀπλανεῖς, καὶ ποταπὸν ἦν τὸ σχῆμα αὐτῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐν τῇ τότε γενέσει τοῦ τικτομένου.

⁹⁰ φασι τοῖνον οἱ περὶ ταῦτα δεινοὶ τὸν μέλλοντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν γενεθλιαλογίαν ἀκριβῶς καταλαμβάνειν <δεῖν> εἰδέναι οὐ μόνον τὸ κατὰ πόστου δωδεκατημορίου ἐστίν ὁ καλούμενος ἀστήρ, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ ποίας μοίρας τοῦ

Obviously Basil has taken his explanation, mostly verbatim, from Origen's explanation. This is the most dramatic illustration in Basil's corpus, at the verbal level, of how he follows in the footsteps of Origen.

However, he does not rely on Origen exclusively. His arguments about the impossibility of obtaining accurate measurements more closely resemble those of Sextus Empiricus than they do those of Origen. For instance, Basil does not mention twins specifically (as Origen does), but rather one person born a king and another born, only a moment later, a beggar, which comes close to how Sextus Empiricus puts it (*Adu. astr.*, 88). Moreover, his account of the "swarm of seconds" (ἐξηκοστῶν σμῆνος) that elapse between the birth of the child and the announcement of that birth to the astrologer outside is paralleled in Sextus Empiricus but not in Origen (*ibid.*, 27-28, 68-71, though Sextus Empiricus imagines a pair of astrologers working in concert where Basil has a midwife and an astrologer). Likewise, Basil comments that the astral observations must be made even during the day (*ibid.*, 71), another point lacking in Origen. He, like Origen, is ignorant of the star-charts upon which some astrologers can rely in lieu of taking on-the-spot measurements.⁹¹ There is no indication that Basil draws directly upon Sextus Empiricus's work, or any particular philosophical work, but, like Origen, he speaks from within the philosophical tradition against astrology, which in this case is well represented by Sextus Empiricus.⁹²

δωδεκατημορίου καὶ κατὰ ποίου ἐξηκοστοῦ· οἱ δὲ ἀκριβέστεροι καὶ κατὰ ποίου ἐξηκοστοῦ τοῦ ἐξηκοστοῦ. καὶ τοῦτό φασι δεῖν ποιεῖν ἐφ' ἑκάστου τῶν πλανωμένων, ἐξετάζοντα τὴν σχέσιν τὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἀπλανεῖς.

⁹¹ Cf. Amand: "Il n'argumente pas contre les doctes généthliographes des observatoires, qui, pour saisir le secret des astres, étudiaient longuement des tables complexes et spendieuses" (*Fatalisme*, 393).

⁹² Basil's editors provide ample citations to other works in the tradition.

Basil also draws upon an astrological primary source, which Amand de Mendieta calls a *ζωδιολόγιον*, i.e., “un manuel d’astrologie populaire . . . qui indiquait le tempérament, les mœurs et le caractère des individus nés sous les divers signes zodiacaux.”⁹³ Basil uses this source so that he can specify, not the method, but “the results” (*τὰ ἀποτελεσματικά*, *Hom. in hex.*, VI, 6) of astrological predictions. People are said to have characteristics resembling those of the animal under whose sign they are born. For example, “That one, they say, will have curly hair and bright eyes, for he has the sign of the Ram,” and so forth (*ibid.*).⁹⁴ In this viewpoint, the true causes of human lives are not the stars, Basil says, but humble animals, with the result that the sky is actually made subject to “the beasts of the field” (*τῶν βοσκημάτων*, *ibid.*). To place lowly animals above the sky in importance is, Basil argues, laughable. This type of popular astrology, relying only on the twelve signs of the Zodiac (like that found in modern newspapers), stands in contrast to the kind previously derided for requiring an impossible level of precision. Regarding this type of popular astrology, Bouché-Leclercq says: “Les pronostics fondés exclusivement sur les propriétés des signes ne représentent en astrologie que les rudiments de l’art.”⁹⁵ It is logical, I think, for Basil first to attack the more sophisticated kind of astrology that strives for precision, by arguing that such precision is impossible, and then to attack the more rudimentary form that dispenses with the need for precision by substituting a simple correspondence between the

⁹³ Amand, *Fatalisme*, 396. See also *ibid.*, 396n1; *ibid.*, “Préparation,” 366; *ibid.* and Rudgberg, eds., *Hexaameron*, 98. He says that the extant *ζωδιολόγιον* closest to Basil’s statements is found in Mstislav Antonini F. Sangin, ed., *Codicis Rossicos*, vol. 12 of *Catalogus codicum astrologorum graecorum* (Bruxelles: Lamertin, 1936), 173-91.

⁹⁴ *ὁ δεῖνα οὐλος, φησί, τὴν τρίχα, καὶ καρωπός. κριῶ γὰρ ἔχει τὴν ὥραν.*

⁹⁵ Bouché-Leclercq, *L’Astrologie*, 440.

constellations, animals, and human personalities. The latter notion is simply “ridiculous” (καταγέλαστον), in Basil’s eyes, and he derides it with wordplay (what they say about the Ram are “bleatings,” τῶν βληχημάτων) and sarcasm (their arguments are “wise sayings,” τὰ σοφά). There is no parallel for this in Origen, whose treatment focuses exclusively on the more sophisticated, philosophical astrology.⁹⁶ Basil’s resourcefulness in using this primary source strengthens his argument both in content and in derisive, entertaining rhetoric.

Basil also touches on the topic at the center of Origen’s argument, namely how astrology transfers moral acts from human will to the movements of the cosmos and thus, ultimately, to God the creator. “In such words, certainly, the folly is great, but the impiety many times greater” (ibid., VI, 7).⁹⁷ Basil explains how astrologers speak blasphemously of the good and evil influences of stars in certain positions, just as Origen does (*Phil.*, XXIII, 17), but Basil’s phrasing is, in this case, independent of Origen’s. Actually, Basil says he is “constrained to borrow their [the astrologers’] own expression” (*Hom. in hex.*, VI, 7).⁹⁸ In the midst of his moral argument, he inserts another argument against astrology, not found in Origen: kings are often made through hereditary succession, even though each successor is born at a different time. Again, he mocks the astrologers: “Surely, each of the kings does not carefully fit the birth of his own son to the royal figure of the stars, does he?” (*Hom. in hex.*, VI, 7)⁹⁹ This is a specific

⁹⁶ But there is in Sextus Empiricus, *Adu. astr.*, 95-102, cited in Amand, *Fatalisme*, 396n2.

⁹⁷ Ἐν δὴ τοῖς τοιούτοις λόγοις πολὺ μὲν τὸ ἀνόητον, πολλαπλάσιον δὲ τὸ ἀσεβές.

⁹⁸ τοῖς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐκείνων [τῶν Χαλδαίων] συγχρημασθαι ῥήμασιν ἀναγκάζομαι.

⁹⁹ οὐ δὴπου γὰρ ἕκαστος τῶν βασιλέων παρατετηρημένως εἰς τὸ βασιλικὸν τῶν ἀστέρων σχῆμα τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ τὴν γένεσιν ἐναρμόζει.

variant (apparently unique to Basil) of the traditional argument, which goes back to Carneades, that people born at different times sometimes have a common destiny.¹⁰⁰ Then Basil returns to the moral argument and echoes Origen: “But the great hopes of us Christians will vanish completely since neither justice will be honored nor sin condemned because nothing is done by men through their free will” (ibid.).¹⁰¹ Origen says, “If things are as they say, the judgment of God that is preached vanishes” (*Phil.*, XXIII, 1, my translation).¹⁰² The shared word *vanish* (*οἰχήσονται / οἴκεται*) is not enough to establish direct dependence, but the meaning of their words is still the same. In attacking astrology, Basil begins with Origen and ends with Origen.

INTERPRETATION

Both Origen and Basil reject the practice of astrology because it implies fatalism, which contradicts the interrelated Christian doctrines of free will, moral responsibility, and the judgment of God. This rejection once again pits them against some elements of secular thought (*παιδεία*), which had found a place for both fatalism and astrology. Such ideas, at odds with Christian teaching, must be rejected since *παιδεία* is subordinate to Christianity. Of course, neither fatalism nor astrology was by any means uncontested even among educated pagans. On the contrary, both fatalism and astrology were criticized by various philosophers (e.g., Carneades, Sextus Empiricus). Thus, while in one respect *παιδεία* is shown to be inferior to

Such a legend exists about the birth of Alexander the Great (Cramer, *Astrology*, 9-10n52).

¹⁰⁰ See Amand, *Fatalisme*, 53-55, 397n5. 54n contains numerous quotations that exemplify this argument, broadly construed.

¹⁰¹ αἱ δὲ μέγαλαι τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐλπίδες φροῦδαι ἡμῖν οἰχήσονται οὔτε δικαιοσύνης τιμωμένης οὔτε κατακρινομένης τῆς ἀμαρτίας, διὰ τὸ μηδὲν κατὰ προαίρεσιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπιτελεῖσθαι.

¹⁰² ἄπερ εἰ οὕτως ἔχει, τὰ τῆς κεκηρυγμένης τοῦ θεοῦ κρίσεως οἴκεται.

Christianity in that it must give up some of its ideas, in another respect *παιδεία* shows its usefulness to Christianity. Basil and Origen appropriate to the service of the Gospel arguments advanced by pagan philosophers against those ideas.

Thus a synthesis between *παιδεία* as subordinate and *παιδεία* as useful is achieved through discernment or selectivity. Not all philosophical ideas are of equal value, and the Christian theologian must exercise discernment when reading them, selecting what is serviceable and discarding the rest. In fact, it may even be necessary to use what can be used precisely in order to explode what is useless or actually harmful. The Stoics were not useless as philosophers, but they also advocated for fatalism and had to be opposed on that point, which could be achieved by means of other philosophical arguments (e.g., the idle argument). Likewise, Ptolemy (for example) – remembered even today for his achievements in what we now call astronomy – wrote a work of what is now called astrology, and in this respect he should also be subject to criticism.

How does the Christian identify what is of use, what is useless, and what is actually harmful? Of course, there is no easy answer, and thus Basil and Origen are at odds over how to interpret the super-heavenly water in the light of philosophical cosmology. The primary criterion is catholic doctrine, in this case the doctrines of free will, morality, and judgment. On this point Basil and Origen agree, and, in fact, Basil draws much directly from Origen, though he also has access to other sources, including even an astrological primary source.

The theologian must discern, not just between one idea and another (e.g., fatalism vs. free will), but between different aspects of a single idea or theory. Thus Origen treats astrology carefully, for it is a mixed bag. It would be easier to attack it with full force, as a pagan

superstition, but then one would also tear down ideas, built on astronomical observation, that do not directly contradict Christian teaching. There is no good reason for Origen to deny the theory of correspondence between the sky and life on earth, and certainly he could not deny their regular and predictable motion. The theory that the stars predict the future even seems to be supported by a passage in Scripture (“Let them be for signs”). Origen is able to integrate this verse into a preexisting philosophical treatment of astrology (witnessed by Plotinus) and arrive at a nonfatalistic version of astrological theory.

Still, we may ask why Origen also denies the practicability of the discipline. I think the answer to this is twofold: first and foremost, he knows and accepts the arguments of anti-astrological philosophers that demonstrate its grave imprecision. In addition, the pagan practice is forbidden by Christianity, though Origen notes that many Christians are nevertheless enmeshed in it. Granted, Origen says nothing of this sort in his commentary, but there is a hint of it in his homily on Judges, where he identifies astrological predictions with demons. Note how different he sounds preaching than commentating.

Basil is silent on astrological theory, which prevents me from drawing any firm conclusions about how he and Origen may have differed on that point. Since he selected Origen’s argument for preservation in the *Philocalia*, and even draws upon it himself, I think that he probably agrees with it (as I explained above). On the other hand, Basil denies that Gen 1:14b has anything to do with astrology, thus contradicting Origen at least on that point. In any case, his silence about astrological theory may be deliberate and, like other differences in Basil’s and Origen’s treatments, may reflect the differing rhetorical forms of those treatments. Even if Basil accepts, or at a minimum thinks possible, that the stars in some way signify the future and can be

interpreted by angels or exceptional, spiritual people, he may nevertheless regard it as dangerous to include such information in his homily. We have already seen him consciously avoid allegorical readings in order to accommodate his audience. A concession that astrology actually is possible, albeit not for pagan astrologers, could be misconceived as a kind of “loophole,” which could leave some of his more superstitious listeners in its grip. After all, perhaps if they received a horoscope from someone who they felt possessed extraordinary spiritual knowledge, they might think that this is one of those rare people who really can read the stars, and thus they would still be in the grip of pagan astrology.

In addition, one could say more neutrally that it would be out of place to make such fine distinctions within his homily, distinctions better suited to a scholarly commentary. Basil's goal in this part of the homily is to demolish astrology and make its practitioners appear ridiculous, thus also serving the other aim of rhetoric: to amuse. This is quite different from Origen's goal, which is to give a systematic, theological treatment of the four problems that astrology raises for Christian theology. Basil meets his own goals effectively, in my opinion, and I think it is safe to say the force of his diatribe would be somewhat blunted if he afterwards added that, actually, astrological theory, properly understood, is sound! Even Origen, when mentioning astrology in a sermon (*In libr. Iud. hom.*, II, 3, quoted above), contents himself with denouncing astrological predictions as coming from demons. The difference is not so much between Basil and Origen as between a commentary and a homily.

CHAPTER 6

Basil and the Legacy of Origen

Origen's metaphor of philosophy as a handmaid to theology is like a lens through which I have viewed how he and Basil use philosophical knowledge when interpreting Genesis 1. I have showed that it implies a dialectical tension between a servant as someone who *helps* and as someone who is *subordinate*. Thus, seen from this vantage point, the relationship between philosophy and biblical interpretation is one marked by a certain ambivalence.

On the one hand, the subordinate character of philosophy is apparent when Basil and Origen discuss, and indeed reject, the Aristotelian hypothesis of eternal, uncreated matter. In spite of the coherence of this hypothesis with its broader framework (i.e., hylomorphism, which both Origen and Basil accept) and its wide acceptance by philosophers of different schools, both theologians unambiguously reject it because it contradicts the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Matter, if uncreated, would stand alongside God rather than under God, they argue. Likewise, in the discussion of astrology, both Basil and Origen reject astrological determinism as incompatible with Christian doctrine, which teaches that human beings are free, morally responsible, and subject to divine judgment.

On the other hand, the useful character of philosophy is demonstrated whenever either theologian brings in some insight from philosophy to help interpret Scripture. It is often uncontroversial (for my purposes, at least), as, for example, when Basil relies on zoological information to discuss the animals God creates in Genesis 1 (*Hom. in hex.*, VII-IX). At other times, however, it is closely connected to areas in which theology shows its dominance. This has

been most apparent when both Basil and Origen adopt a hylomorphic understanding of matter. They maintain the hylomorphic theory in spite of its close connection to belief in the uncreated nature of matter, which they forcefully reject. Basil even uses the theory to make a point about the unknowability of God's substance, which he likens to primary matter. In a similar way, Origen maintains some of the basic theory behind astrology while rejecting its deterministic implications. Thus we see that in these areas of conflict between theology and philosophy, Basil and Origen make careful distinctions, so that only the precise philosophical ideas that conflict with Christian doctrine are opposed (e.g., uncreated matter, determinism), while related ideas (e.g., hylomorphism, astrological theory) are maintained. Neither theologian seeks to attack or discredit philosophical learning as such, for it is useful, but only those ideas that seem to them incompatible with Christian belief.

The question arises how a Christian theologian is to determine exactly which philosophical ideas must be opposed. While Basil and Origen have much in common, they disagree about how to interpret the super-heavenly water of Genesis 1 in the light of philosophical cosmology. On the one hand, this cosmology, and in particular the Aristotelian theory of the natural positions of the four elements, helps Origen to understand the super-heavenly water by ruling out the possibility of interpreting it literally. That is, the philosophical theory says that there cannot be water resting above the sky, since water's natural resting place is above the earth, so a nonliteral meaning must be sought, which Origen does by means of intertextuality. On the other hand, Basil opposes philosophers for denying that water can be above the sky. For Basil, belief in super-heavenly water is justified because the scriptural

cosmography, being written as it was by the servant of God Moses, must be accepted at face value. Thus on this point the Christian theologian must oppose the philosophers, just as he must oppose them about their hypothesis that matter is uncreated. This difference between Origen and Basil is so striking that Basil even criticizes Origen's figurative interpretation of the super-heavenly water.

I think that this disagreement illustrates a hermeneutical difference between Basil and Origen. Basil, unlike Origen, does not think that philosophy should be allowed to tell interpreters of Scripture what is and is not plausible. This is logical: after all, if they are wrong in saying that matter is uncreated, why can they not also be wrong about the super-heavenly water? Allowing philosophy to rule out certain scriptural ideas could be seen to reverse their roles and make theology subordinate. One must then ask why Origen disallows the notion of super-heavenly water and yet does not also disallow the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. The answer to this, I think, is that *creatio ex nihilo* is for Origen more than just something found in a passage of Scripture. As he himself says, it is part of the apostolic teaching (*De princ.*, I, pref., 4). As such, its legitimacy is beyond question. If the super-heavenly water were also part of the apostolic teaching, I believe that Origen would defend it, just as he defends *creatio ex nihilo*. It is not, however, and thus Origen does not feel compelled to argue for it. This, too, is logical: after all, according to Origen's hermeneutics, Scripture is full of metaphors and allegories, so why should one insist on a literal reading of the water when such a concept would seem to be absurd? Always to insist on a literal reading of Scripture is the mistake of the "simple" Christians as well as the Jews (*ibid.*, IV, 2.1).

I have noted other differences between Basil's and Origen's treatments, such as, for example, Basil's silence on astrological theory or his heavy dependence upon the genetic argument in discrediting Aristotle's notion of uncreated matter. These differences are not hermeneutical, nor do they result from differing attitudes about philosophical cosmology. Rather, they often stem from differences of literary form. Basil's thoughts on cosmology have been preserved only in homilies, whereas much of what Origen has to say is extant in the form of scholarly commentary on Genesis. These differing literary forms necessitate differences of content, even within the same author.

BASIL AND THE ANTI-ORIGENIST MOVEMENT

Perhaps some light can be shed on Basil's pointed opposition to Origen with respect to the super-heavenly water by situating it within the larger historical context of the anti-Origenist movement that began in the late fourth century.¹ That controversy does not break out fully until the 390s,² and Basil dies no later than 379,³ but Epiphanius already attacks Origen in the 370s while Basil is still alive.⁴ Basil engages, at least in passing, three points of the later controversy. First, I already showed how his opposition to Origen's interpretation of the super-heavenly water was shared by both Jerome and Epiphanius. Second, there is the fact that Basil's only explicit reference to Origen in his entire corpus criticizes his master, albeit somewhat mildly, for calling

¹ For which, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

² Ibid., 13.

³ The traditional date is January 1, 379 (Fedwick, "Chronology," 19); see also Rousseau, *Basil*, 360-62, regarding the dating of Basil's death.

⁴ See Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 85-86.

the Holy Spirit a creature (*De Sp. s.*, XXIX, 73). This, too, is consistent with the related reproach that Origen called the Son a creature (Epiphanius, *Pan.*, II, *haer.* LXIV, 4-5).⁵ Theophilus of Alexandria adds that Origen called the Holy Spirit a creature (fr. 4).⁶

Third, to these critiques can be added Basil's explicit rejection of the theory that the stars are alive. Basil writes: "[The stars] possess only inanimate and material bodies that are clearly discernible, but in which nowhere there is a mind, no voluntary motions, no free will" (*Hom. in Ps.* 48, 8 [PG 28, 449c]).⁷ Basil deliberately contrasts the stars with human beings, arguing that human beings, because they have been "created in the image of the Creator,"⁸ are superior to the stars (*ibid.*). This rejection of the notion that the stars are alive is even more forceful in his critique of astrology. Refuting the idea that the stars can cause evil events, he says: "If [the stars] make evil themselves, they are animals endowed with the power of choice, whose acts will be free and voluntary. Is it not the height of folly (*μανίας ἐπέκεινα*) to tell these lies about beings

⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, 90n34.

⁶ Marcel Richard, "Nouveaux Fragments de Théophilus d'Alexandrie," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* 2 (1975): 57-65. Cited in Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 118n258.

Cf. Jerome, *Apol. c. Ruf.*, II, 12. Cited in Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 143.

Jerome, *Apologie contre Rufin*, edited by Pierre Lardet, SC 303 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983).

⁷ ἄψυχα μὲν καὶ ὕλικά, διαφανῆ δὲ μόνον τὰ σώματα κεκτημένοι, ἐν οἷς οὐδαμοῦ διάνοια, οὐ προαιρετικαὶ κινήσεις, οὐκ αὐτεξουσιότητος ἐλευθερία.

⁸ δεδημιουργῆσθαι κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος.

without souls?” (*Hom. in hex.*, VI, 7)⁹ Though he does not mention Origen, Basil knows *De principiis*, in which Origen argues forcefully that the stars are alive, as follows:

We think, therefore, that [the sun, moon, and stars] may be called living beings from the fact that they are said to receive commands from God. . . . No movement can take place in any body which does not possess life, nor can living beings exist at any time without movement. And since the stars move with such majestic order and plan that never have we seen their course deflected in the slightest degree, is it not the height of stupidity (*ultra omnem stoliditatem*) to say that such order, such exact observance of rule and plan, is accomplished by things without reason. (*De princ.*, I, 7.3)¹⁰

Origen admits that he is being “somewhat daring” (*audaciae cuiusdam*, *ibid.*) in discussing the life of the stars, since the apostolic teaching “does not clearly say whether the sun, moon, and stars are living beings or without life” (*ibid.*, I, pref., 10).¹¹ Basil directly contradicts Origen and says about the belief that the stars are alive exactly what Origen says about the belief that they are *not* alive, namely that it is utterly foolish. It is unfortunate that we lack the original Greek words that Rufinus translates as *ultra omnem stoliditatem*; they may well have been *μανίας ἐπέκεινα*! Even if those were not the exact words, Basil deliberately reverses and contradicts Origen’s opinion, even in the midst of deliberating borrowing, word for word, some of his astrological polemic.

⁹ εἰ δὲ προαιρέσει κακύνονται, πρῶτον μὲν ἔσται ζῶα προαιρετικά, λελυμέναις καὶ αὐτοκρατορικαῖς ταῖς ὁρμαῖς κεχρημένα· ὁ μανίας ἐστὶν ἐπέκεινα καταψεύδεσθαι τῶν ἀψύχων.

¹⁰ Putamus ergo posse ea per hoc animantia designari, quod et mandata dicuntur accipere a deo. . . . neque motus ullius corporis sine anima effici potest, neque quae animantia sunt possunt aliquando esse sine motu. stellae uero cum tanto ordine ac tanta ratione moueantur, ut in nullo prorsus aliquando cursus earum uisus sit impeditus, quomodo non ultra omnem stoliditatem est tantum ordinem tantamque disciplinae ac rationis obseruantiam dicere ab irrationalibus exigere uel expleri?

¹¹ de sole autem et luna et stellis, utrum animantia sint an sine anima manifeste non traditur.

Basil's attack on Origen's assertion that the stars are alive can also be situated, albeit only loosely, in the context of the anti-Origenist movement: Theophilus claims that Origen said that Christ's foreknowledge was based in astrology (ap. Jerome, *Ep.* II, 2).¹² Clearly this is not the same criticism, but both fall within the realm of astrology and show that Origen's writings about stars were considered suspect. The specific issue of the life of the stars does recur in the sixth century when the Emperor Justinian condemns Origenism, including the proposition that the stars are living, rational beings.¹³

In addition to these three specific examples of Basil contradicting Origen's theology, there is an argument from silence: the *Philocalia* does not contain any objectionable theology. Thus Gribomont writes: "Dans tout le livre, pas un mot des problèmes trinitaires; rien non plus de la cosmologie, de la chute des anges, de la nature de l'âme. . . ."¹⁴ Basil does not attack Origen by omitting such things, but he does keep his distance from his more controversial ideas.

In spite of these three points of conflict with Origen, all of which can be correlated in some way to the criticisms of the anti-Origenist movement, I do not think that Basil should be considered part of that movement or even a precursor of it. For starters, in only one instance does he name Origen. More important to consider is his goal: Basil does not at all participate in a general campaign to discredit Origen, as later authors like Jerome and Epiphanius do. Rather the reverse is true: by compiling the *Philocalia* and continuing to draw upon Origen in his own

¹² Cited in Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 109n181.

¹³ Eduard Schwartz and Johannes Straub, eds., *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1925-1984), 3:213; 4:248. Cited in Scott, *Life of the Stars*, 150n1.

¹⁴ Gribomont, "L'Origenisme," 283.

preaching, Basil continues his legacy. Even where he criticizes Origen most strikingly he leaves his name unmentioned, which to me is evidence of his ongoing respect for his master.

Nevertheless, Basil is aware of some serious problems in Origen's theology. In these areas he has no desire to follow Origen, nor even to overlook the problems. He knows and respects the bounds of (fourth-century) orthodoxy and also how to distinguish between what is valuable in Origen and what is not. In a sense Basil preempts the anti-Origenist controversy. Perhaps he even senses that the winds of theology will soon blow against Origen. He dies before the controversy breaks out in full force and thus is never forced into the position of a Jerome or a Rufinus, having to choose whether to defend or renounce Origen. We cannot be sure how he would react to that situation, had he survived longer. I do not think that he would defend Origen as Rufinus does, for Basil knows full well Origen's mistakes. It is not impossible that he would act as Jerome and renounce the man he formerly admired. Still, even such a renunciation, had it occurred, would not have erased the mark that Origen made upon Basil's theology.

MODERN SCIENCE AS HANDMAID

Through this study I have come to believe that Origen and Basil's metaphor, or model, of philosophy as a handmaid to theology is of abiding value for the modern faith-science dialogue. On the one hand, this model carries with it all the positive value of science as a helper, a discipline with the potential to advance the theological understanding of the created universe.¹⁵ Under this heading one might include all manner of interdisciplinary work that looks at

¹⁵ In this respect, I think that the handmaid model is comparable to Ian Barbour's "integration" model, in which science can both support theological ideas and "affect the reformulation of certain doctrines" (*Religion and Science*, 98ff).

theological questions in the light of science. A specific example of physical science helping theology is how some theologians and scientists have seen quantum mechanics, because it is non-deterministic, as a possible medium through which God can act in this universe.¹⁶ In a very similar way, quantum mechanics is used by Stephen Barr to justify how the spiritual soul could affect, through the faculty of free will, the material world.¹⁷

On the other hand, this model also implies that modern scientific theories may be rejected by Christians if they conflict with established Christian doctrine.¹⁸ There are a number of scientific theories today that could be construed as conflicting with Christian teaching. For instance, James Wiseman in his *Theology and Modern Science: Quest for Coherence*, covers four “real or apparent discrepancies between scientific findings and the traditional tenets of Christian faith.”¹⁹ These Christian doctrines are creation, providence, the soul, and eschatology. It would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore these issues in depth here, let alone to expand the list to be more comprehensive. However, even a cursory understanding of these four problems reveals how Christian doctrine about creation and eschatology seems to lie at odds with what modern cosmology says about the beginning and end of the universe. Likewise it is apparent that the traditional doctrines of God’s providence and of the spiritual soul are difficult

¹⁶ See Wiseman, *Theology*, 118-120, who cites (119n18) in particular George Ellis and Nancey Murphy, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), and Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 187-88, who discusses William Pollard, *Chance and Providence* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958).

¹⁷ Barr, *Modern Physics*, 178-84. Cf. Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 187, who rejects this line of thinking because he rejects “mind/body dualism.”

¹⁸ In this respect, the handmaid model is like Barbour’s “conflict” model (*Religion and Science*, 77-84).

¹⁹ Wiseman, *Theology*, 9.

to reconcile with evolutionary theory. In this model, it is permissible for one to reject certain aspects of modern physics and biology that contradict these Christian doctrines.

However, if the example of Basil and Origen is to be followed, such a rejection must be carried out with great precision. It would thus not be acceptable to jettison evolutionary theory wholesale, but only those specific ideas and hypotheses judged to be in conflict with Christian doctrine regarding the human soul and divine providence. It is well known that very many Christians today, whom Basil and Origen might call “simple,” do in fact reject evolution and modern cosmology because of their apparent conflict with traditional Christian teaching. However, I would argue that few of these Christians do so with the kind of careful precision that Basil and Origen exhibit. To reject a scientific idea on the grounds of faith is not the exclusive purview of the uneducated or of Christian fundamentalists.²⁰ The physicist Stephen Barr, for instance, points out that it is Catholic doctrine that God created the universe *ab initio temporis* (from the beginning of time),²¹ an assertion at odds with several modern cosmological hypotheses that posit an eternal universe. He seems to imply that this doctrine ought to be maintained by Catholics regardless of such hypotheses, and defends this position by arguing that it seems theoretically impossible for science to disprove the assertion that time had a beginning due to the apparent impossibility of determining what, if anything, happened prior to the Big

²⁰ Though Barbour’s treatment of the “conflict” model seems to imply this (*Religion and Science*, 82-84).

²¹ Barr, *Modern Physics*, 34. This doctrine was defined by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (DS 800) and repeated by the First Vatican Council in 1870 (DS 3002). Both are cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 293n137.

Bang.²² Similarly, Pius XII expressed great reserve about any theory of evolution that posits more than one original pair of *homo sapiens* (“polygenism”) because such a theory would seem to be irreconcilable with the Catholic doctrine of the Fall and original sin.²³

While rejecting certain elements of a scientific hypothesis or theory is possible within this model, it is by no means the only possible response to difficulties. The positive side of the model—science as helper—is at least as important as the negative. Consider how Origen accepts Aristotle’s theory of elements and their natural places in the universe even though it seems to conflict with Genesis 1 or how he accepts a non-fatalistic version of astrological theory, even though the practice of astrology is forbidden by the Church. Had the concept of water above the sky seemed plausible and unproblematic to Origen, he would have accepted the literal reading (in addition, of course, to the psychic and spiritual readings). But he did not, in fact, accept a literal reading precisely because his interpretation was affected by his understanding of philosophical cosmology. He rejected a literal interpretation in order to avoid a conclusion that he and natural philosophers would consider absurd. Following his example, Christian interpretations of the Bible (and even the formulation of doctrines, I would suggest) should also be influenced by modern cosmology and evolutionary theory, at least sometimes, in order to avoid unscientific or improbable conclusions. For example, Wiseman proposes a non-traditional

²² That he supports the Catholic doctrine that time had a beginning over against modern hypotheses comes across more clearly in a lecture he gave (“Modern Physics, the Beginning and Creation,” lecture, Washington Theological Union, Washington, D.C., November 12, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/35972542> [accessed December 28, 2012]) than in what he says in *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*.

²³ Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, Vatican Web site, August 12, 1950, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html, no. 37 (accessed December 28, 2012).

understanding of God's providence in the light of evolution.²⁴ Any theological work that seeks to re-examine or re-interpret a theological idea in the light of modern science uses science as a handmaid.

Of course, not all theologians will agree with all interpretations conducted in the light of modern science, just as Basil and Origen disagreed about the super-heavenly water. The handmaid model does not automatically lead to a resolution of all problems. The theologian must ask, and argue about, when a scientific idea must be opposed on the basis of Christian faith, and when it can be accommodated by re-examining the theological idea or passage of Scripture that seems to contradict science. During this process of argumentation, I think that one must consider what is at stake theologically in any apparent conflict with science. For Origen, the point of reference was "the apostolic teaching" and not individual verses of Scripture, such as Genesis 1:6-7. The doctrine of the Church was also a touchstone for Basil, and I would thus suggest that a similar standard of defined doctrine be used today.²⁵ However, Basil also took the literal sense of Scripture, including Genesis 1:6-7, as authoritative in judging natural philosophy. This is not to say that Basil was incapable of interpreting Scripture nonliterally, but his decision, for example, to interpret anthropomorphic passages nonliterally had more to do with the Christian doctrine that God is spiritual than with philosophical concerns about reasonableness.²⁶

²⁴ Wiseman, *Theology*, 68-71.

²⁵ Naturally, this suggestion raises all the problems that Christians today experience in trying to establish the boundaries of orthodoxy. Obviously, it would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to address these problems, though they will in fact need to be addressed by theologians dealing with points of conflict with science.

²⁶ In his homily on the circumcision of Abraham, Origen says that the belief that God has a body, which he associates with Judaism and the simple Christians, "is foreign to the Church's faith" (*alienum hoc est ab ecclesiae fide*, *In Gen. hom.*, III, 2).

Not only must the theologian consider what is at stake theologically; he or she must also consider what is at stake scientifically. While Basil's adherence to the literal meaning of Genesis against natural philosophy could be seen as a template for maintaining a literal reading of Genesis today against modern scientific theories, in my opinion theologians must also consider the difference between the kind of ancient, philosophical theory Basil was opposing and modern scientific theories. Basil, as I showed, specifically criticized the natural philosophers for their inconsistency, inconclusiveness, and sectarianism. Yet these are criticisms that can scarcely be leveled against the modern scientific community. The empirical character of modern science must be taken into account, for it is a much safer thing to maintain a religious belief against a speculative, unproven hypothesis (e.g., that the Big Bang was preceded by an infinite cycle of universes) than against a theory substantiated by considerable empirical evidence (e.g., evolution). While one could loosely speak of "evidence" in support of Aristotle's theory of eternal matter in the sense that his theory was coherent, consistent with what was known of the universe, and plausible, it could not have been supported in the same way that modern scientific theories are supported by rigorously-obtained evidence. For this reason, there is a definite limit to the strength of the analogy that one can make between ancient natural philosophy and modern science. For this reason I would argue that theologians today who wish to adopt the handmaid model will need to be less bold in questioning a theory (and perhaps even a speculative hypothesis) than Origen and Basil were when confronted with the notion of the eternity of matter.

The handmaid model is not the only way to conceive of faith and science. One can imagine different metaphors for their relationship: for instance, that of colleagues or partners, in which neither is subordinate to the other.²⁷ This metaphor gives both disciplines autonomy. The possibility for conflict, of course, would remain, as scientists might insist on one thing while theologians insisted on another. With neither field being given a superior position, there would be no mechanism for resolving disputed questions, other than ongoing dialogue and continued research and thought, which may or may not eventually lead to some kind of reconciliation. The disadvantage of this approach, then, is that a believer can be left in a state of perplexity and indecision on issues where science and faith seem to be at odds. The main advantage of this model, to my mind, is that it prevents theologians and ordinary believers from opposing scientific theories that may eventually be supported by a mountain of evidence. The classic case of such an occurrence is, as everyone knows, the Holy See's opposition to Galileo Galilei's promotion of heliocentrism in the seventeenth century.²⁸ This model seems to be the one adopted by Wiseman, for example, who specifically cites the Galileo affair as a disastrous moment for Christianity, the harm of which is still felt half a millennium later.²⁹ If one feels uneasy about opposing a scientific idea on the basis of faith, it is because the specter of Galileo looms large.

Another possibility for imagining the relationship between faith and science is to separate the two completely, as in Stephen Jay Gould's famous idea that science and religion are

²⁷ Thus Barbour's "Dialogue" model (*Religion and Science*, 90-98).

²⁸ A handy summary of this case can be found in Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 13-15, who also provides references to additional secondary literature (15n17).

²⁹ Wiseman, *Theology*, 103-04.

“nonoverlapping magisteria.”³⁰ The problem here is that, as we have seen, Christianity has traditionally made claims that *do* overlap with the domain of science, as, for instance, with the Catholic doctrine that the universe had a temporal beginning. Such a doctrine would have to be abandoned in order to keep the two domains separate, even if an infinite universe remains only one scientific idea among others. More importantly, a Christian might even feel compelled to be at least *prepared* to abandon (if not *actually* abandon) his or her belief in free will, divine intervention, and the human soul, should a deterministic physics return to dominance. Thus the separation-model simply becomes, in my opinion, de facto a model in which theology is subordinate to science. Now a model in which science dominates will appeal to many people, if for no other reason than that scientific claims can be supported by quantifiable evidence, which is not true of theology. However, it is hard for me to imagine how a Christian could accept a viewpoint that might lead to the abandonment of his or her most cherished beliefs and still remain a Christian.

In addition, such a model of scientific dominance, in my opinion, runs a risk of running roughshod over theological beliefs by ignoring the progressive nature of science as a discipline in which theories are continually improved upon. If science is judged superior to theology, then a religious claim might have to be abandoned in the light of contemporary science, only for a later, better scientific theory to call into doubt the necessity of having abandoned the conflicting religious claim in the first place. Nor is it sufficient to withhold judgment temporarily or to wait

³⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106 (1997): 16-22, http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html (accessed December 28, 2012). Barbour calls this the “independence” model (*Religion and Science*, 84-89).

until a scientific idea is firmly established before jettisoning old, religious ideas, for a scientific idea could remain the dominant one for hundreds or even thousands of years before being replaced. It took about two hundred years for Newtonian physics, which can tend toward fatalism, to give way to the entirely unexpected physics of quantum theory.³¹ It took even longer for the age-old view that the universe is eternal to be challenged by the astronomical observations of Edwin Hubble, which vindicated George Lemaître's Big Bang theory. It is clear, then, that a religious belief that may seem hard to reconcile with well established, venerable scientific theories may be easier to reconcile with future scientific theories. (Of course, new theories can also make difficulties more acute, or give rise to entirely new difficulties—we simply do not know.) For these reasons, I think that either the handmaid model or the colleague model is preferable to a model of separation.

The utility of Origen's handmaid model, to me, is that it simultaneously both affirms science and upholds the integrity of Christian teaching. Even for those who do not wish ever to rule out scientific theories because of religious doctrine (i.e., those who follow the colleague/dialogue model), the examples of Basil and Origen are valuable for how they attempt to harmonize, as best they could from their perspectives, the philosophical cosmology and other natural philosophy of their time with their understanding of the Bible and Christian faith.

³¹ This and what follows comes from Barr, *Modern Physics*, passim.

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