THE EARLY CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF 'HEAVEN AND EARTH' IN GENESIS 1,1

In the title of this article one element asks for a more precise definition, namely 'early Christian'. It is used here for the time from the second half of the second century onwards, i.e., the time in which Christian writers, who themselves have been educated in Greek philosophy, seek a confrontation of their belief with that philosophy. This confrontation reflects itself most clearly in the exegesis of the Bible. The reason for this lies in the view which these thinkers had on the relation between the Bible and philosophy.

The early Christian thinkers did not consider the Bible as a book in opposition to philosophy. On the contrary, they saw it as belonging to the realm of philosophy itself. Moreover, insofar as they believed that philosophy was handed down through the ages (i.e. had come to men by tradition and not by personal inspiration), they thought of the Bible as its source and fount. In our modern ears this may sound as a misuse of the term philosophy. In that period, however, there was nothing strange in this notion, at least from a certain philosophical standpoint, viz., that which had a high esteem of 'the wisdom of the Ancients' and considered it as the ultimate source of philosophy. This opinion was handed down from the time of Hellenism, the time in which, through the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greece had come in close contact with the ancient peoples and their wisdom. Posidonius of Apamea (ca. 135–51 B.C.), a thinker belonging to the philosophy of Hellenism, i.e., Stoicism, had given a theoretical expression to this idea in his doctrine of the 'old logos', which is found in the wisdom of the ancients and is the ultimate source of all philosophy. Also in the second century A.D. another philosopher from Apamea, Numenius, was defending the same theory. Christian thinkers could, of course, easily adapt this theory by substituting the Bible as that source. In other words, for them the so-called ancient wisdom was to be found in the scriptures of one ancient people, the Jews, and thus the Bible was the philosophical work par excellence.

In actual fact, those Christian thinkers, having been educated in Greek philosophy, were, for the most part, admirers of all the best
in their Greek schooling. It was natural, therefore, that they believed its valuable tenets must necessarily be found in the Bible, which, after all, was its fount and inspiration. It was from this premise that their comments began. The modern interpreter, somewhat startled from time to time by what he reads in their works, must always bear this in mind. He has to appreciate from the outset that for those commentators it was not a question of making a comparison between sacred scripture and philosophy. Both of them belonged to the same realm. Using their training in the Greek schools they set out to interpret the Bible, the philosophical book.

One of the most fundamental of all problems for the Greek philosopher was that of the origin of things. The Christian, therefore, immediately turned his attention to the book of Genesis and to the creation narrative in particular, which was a subject for many commentators. Their treatises were frequently called In Hexaëmeron, i.e., 'On the work of the six days'; hence the general term Hexaëmeral literature. It is in this literature that one discovers a very clear manifestation of that vital factor in western history, namely the meeting point of Christian faith and Greek thought. The following pages attempt to illustrate this point of contact through a survey of the interpretations of the words heaven and earth as found in Genesis chapter one, verse one. The first phrase "In the beginning" has already been subjected to a similar inquiry by myself.1 What has been said above, in fact, has been more extensively treated there.

Two preliminary remarks may suffice here: in the first place the interpretation of the words "God created" in Genesis 1,1 immediately brought the Christian thinkers in diametric opposition to all their Greek colleagues, for whom creation ex nihilo was unknown and incomprehensible. Yet one of the first Christian thinkers, Justin Martyr, seems to understand these words as a creation from that which already was namely 'formless matter'.2 This view was

---

1 In 'Frühchristliche Bibellexegese. Der Anfang', = the first article in this volume.