CHAPTER FIVE

ENTERING “THIS SUBLIME AND BLESSED AMPHITHEATRE”: CONTEMPLATION OF NATURE AND INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN THE PATRISTIC PERIOD

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In his *Homilies on the Hexaemeron*, Basil of Caesarea summons his congregation to enter the grand stadium or amphitheatre (*theatron*) of creation and to explore with him there the profundities of nature. It is not enough, says Basil, for Christians to remain mere spectators. Rather they must become athletes or fellow contestants (*synagônistai*) pledged to the investigation (*exetasis*) and contemplation (*theôria*) of the mysteries of the cosmos and to the discovery (*heurêsis*) of the truth: “You [too] can fill up this sublime and blessed amphitheatre.”

Basil’s striking metaphor here for contemplating the natural world indicates that, by the fourth century, what was becoming an important spiritual exercise within monastic communities was also being encouraged devotionally and liturgically among the faithful in the church. He recommends that the contemplation of nature, like the interpretation of scripture, necessitates existential and ascetical discipline on the part of all Christians. As Basil would have it, Christians are to engross themselves in creation as though they were in the middle of a grand contest or drama still unfolding in time and space. Wonder or admiration will not suffice. They must be players, engaged participants, in solidarity not only with Basil himself, their guide, but with the Creator who intends every intricate detail of the world—like every detail in the scriptural text—to reveal his gracious and providential purposes. The universe, this “ancient city” as Basil calls it, will ultimately yield its own evidence of the tragedy of the fall, the salutary design of humanity’s

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1 Response to Part 1.
2 Basil of Caesarea 2006, 324–6 (Hom. in hex. 6.1). Cf. ibid., 245 (Hom. in hex. 4.1), where Basil speaks on the opposite hand of the “theatre abounding in impure spectacles” that captivates those who are infatuated simply with the pleasurable aspects of the world. (Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.)
true nature and vocation, and the foretastes of eternal beauty. And yet the true starting point of this exploration and contemplation will not be the tenets of human wisdom about the cosmos but the creation narratives in Genesis—“what God taught his servant [Moses] when he spoke with him in person, without enigmas.”

Although writing in the fourth century, Basil’s perspective signals much about the interface between the contemplation of nature and the interpretation of the Bible in the broader patristic age. This chapter will focus on four concurrent themes that elucidate that interrelation in some representative early Christian thinkers: (1) the epistemic, interpretive, and ascetical conditions of reading Scripture and nature in the mode of spiritual contemplation (\textit{theòria}); (2) the articulation of the analogy of the “two books”—Bible and creation—in patristic hermeneutics; (3) the mutual insinuation of the \textit{logoi} of cosmos and Scripture in eliciting a common metanarrative of creation and redemption; and (4) the assumption of natural-philosophical issues and considerations into the essentially contemplative reading of scriptural creation texts.

Basil’s claim, noted above, that the first principles (\textit{archai}) for exploring creation lie in God’s revelation to the prophet Moses, not in worldly wisdom (i.e., metaphysics or natural philosophy), is of more than passing significance. Looking back to the text sometimes called the premier Christian treatise of physics, Origen’s \textit{De principiis} (\textit{Peri Archôn}, ca. 225), a work certainly known by Basil, much debate has surrounded the identification of the \textit{archai}. Did Origen understand the \textit{archai} according to the Middle Platonism of his time, as the agreed-upon ontological foundations of the cosmos? Numerous scholars have argued so, since Origen’s treatise takes the form (in Books I–III) of a progressive analysis of rudimentary truths concerning God, spiritual and material creation, the embodiment of souls, providence and free will, the destiny of the universe, and so on. Brian Daley has cogently argued, however, that such is a premature explanation of the \textit{archai} in the \textit{De principiis}, a work that culminates in a tour de force on the interpretation of the Bible (Book 4). According to Daley, Origen looks to develop an integrated body of Christian doctrine wherein the accepted philosophical axioms concerning God and creation are actually preliminary to the \textit{archai} of biblical revelation, which are not interpretive methods per se but principles concerning the intrinsic economy of Scripture and its overall

\footnote{Ibid., 324–6 (\textit{Hom. in hex.} 6.1).}