

KAROLINA KOCHAŃCZYK-BONIŃSKA
UKSW Warszawa

THE CONCEPT OF THE COSMOS ACCORDING TO BASIL THE GREAT'S *ON THE HEXAEMERON*

Basil the Great was not only one of the most important Christian authors of the 4th century; he was also a thinker very well educated in classical philosophy, who used his knowledge to better understand and explain the mysteries of faith. In my paper I will analyze *On the Hexaemeron*, the work which is divided into nine homilies which, in turn, are commentaries to six days of creation¹. This text, omitted by contemporary researchers and modern theological tradition, was one of the most appreciated, or even the most admired of Basil's works in early ages². Gregory of Nyssa praises his brother's homilies as equally admirable as Moses' holy texts³. Saint Ambrose imitated his *Hexaemeron*⁴. From among Basil's works Jerome names only the *Hexaemeron*, the *De Spiritu Sancto*, and the treatise

¹ Titles of the homilies are as follows: In the Beginning God made the Heaven and the Earth; The Earth was Invisible and Unfinished; On the Firmament; Upon the gathering together of the waters; The Germination of the Earth; The creation of luminous bodies; The creation of moving creatures; The creation of fowl and water animals; The creation of terrestrial animals.

² S. Giet, *Introduction in: Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron*, ed. S. Giet, Sources Chrétienes, Paris 1949, 70-71; P. Schaff, *Introduction to Hexaemeron in: Letters and Select Works, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff (Ed.), Grand Rapids 1996, 251.

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexaemeron*, ed. J.P. Migne's, *Patrologia Graeca* 44, 61, Paris 1858; idem, *Hexaemeron*, ed. R. McCambly, 1995, http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/hex.html#N_1_, [dostęp, 10.02.2016]: "Furthermore, we have access to that divinely inspired study by our father [Basil the Great] whose exposition everyone treasures as not being inferior to what Moses had taught. I am quite certain that these people are correct because he who has this faculty resembles a grain from an ear of corn; although [Basil] was not this ear, he had the power to change into something great and beautiful and be endowed with a form with many facets. Should anyone maintain that the great Moses' voice can be explained through the distinguished Basil?"

⁴ Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, ed. J. P. Migne's, *Patrologia Latina* 14, 123-274, Paris 1845; idem, *Hexaemeron in: Paradise, and Cain and Able*, ed. J.J. Savage, New York 1961.

*Contra Eunomium*⁵. The Latin translation was the inspiration for Augustin⁶ and was quoted by such writers as Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, and Thomas of Aquinas⁷.

What kind of text is it? It is a biblical commentary to the beginning of the Book of Genesis. Such literary form is deeply rooted in the religious tradition of biblical commentaries, such as those of Philo of Alexandria and Origen of Alexandria. They have its continuation in the works of Gregory of Nyssa⁸. Simultaneously, this text should be placed in the pagan tradition of works devoted to the origin and structure of the cosmos. The presented homilies are a good example of reflection which simultaneously belongs to both traditions⁹. Usually homilies, being dedicated to the entire Christian community, are simple texts, without complicated theological and philosophical speculations. On the contrary, these homilies are characterized by a sophisticated style and should be considered as a profound work which reveals Basil's concept of divine mysteries¹⁰. The main aim is, of course, spiritual teaching based on the biblical text, and Basil uses allegorical exegesis in there¹¹. But at the same time we can find in these sermons many other topics, such as cosmology, meteorology, astronomy which also occur in the subsequent homilies¹².

In my article I will concentrate on selected problems, such as eternity of the world, preexistence of matter, the aim of the created world, and the contemplation of beings. I will omit all detailed descriptions and remarks on the construction of heaven, astronomy, world's composition of four elements etc. Homilies present current in those days knowledge of medicine, astronomy and nature. Basil describes the movement of the stars, the behavior of land, water and air animals. These are common motifs for classical writers. Of course, the influence of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and the Stoics could be found as a natural consequence of comprehensive education. In the critical edition we find a long list of authors with whom cohe-

⁵ Hieronim, *De Viris Illustribus* in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers; Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, & Rufinus: Historical Writings*, ed. P. Schaff, Grand Rapids 1996, 947: "Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, the city formerly called Mazaca, composed admirable carefully written books Against Eunomius, a volume On the Holy Spirit, and nine homilies On the six days of creation, also a work On asceticism and short treatises on various subjects. He died in the reign of Gratianus".

⁶ S. Giet, op. cit., p. 70.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 71.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexaemeron*, ed. J.P. Migne's, *Patrologia Graeca* 44, 61-124, Paris 1858; idem, *Hexaemeron*, ed. R. McCambly...

⁹ S. Giet, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 46.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 25-26.

¹² Ibidem, p. 7.

rence has been discovered¹³. However Basil is careful and points out those situations where the common antique tradition is in discord with the fundamentals of faith (astronomy¹⁴, Fatum, Manicheism¹⁵).

THE ETERNITY OR FINITENESS OF THE WORLD

Basil starts his homilies with the thesis that the world is not eternal. To prove these statements, he presents the following argumentation. Contrary to pagan philosophers we should find a rational cause for the beginning of the world, as the beginning was not only an accidental conjunction of elements¹⁶. Then he presents a biblical approach.

“In the beginning God created. What a glorious order! He first establishes a beginning, so that it might not be supposed that the world never had a beginning. Then he adds “Created” to show that which was made was a very small part of the power of the Creator (δημιουργός)¹⁷. And then he continues: „if then the world has a beginning, and if it has been created, enquire who gave it this beginning, and who was the Creator (ποιητής)¹⁸”. That is certainly the theological aspect of the sermon. But then Basil presents the view of a marvelous life at the beginnings¹⁹. This description should remind us of Plato’s *Timeous*²⁰.

To prove that the world had a beginning he argues that the simultaneous and unlimited existence of the world coexisting with the Creator is impossible because of the difference in nature (incomprehensible and invisible) and glory²¹. The world

¹³ Basil the Great, *Homélie sur l’Hexaéméron*, ed. S. Giet, Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1949, 534-538: The most frequently mentioned authors: Aristotle, Cicero, Clement of Alexandria, Diogenes Laertius, Lucretius, Origen, Philo of Alexandria, Plutarch, Posidonius, Seneca.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 357-364.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 158-160.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 86-88.

¹⁷ *Idem*, *The Hexaéméron*, in: *Letters and Select Works, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, Grand Rapids 1996, 254-255.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 255.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 254: “What a glorious order!”.

²⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, R.D. Archer – Hind (Ed), London 1888, 28b-30, 86-90.

²¹ Basil the Great, *The Hexaéméron...*, 256: “Of what use then are geometry – the calculations of arithmetic – the study of solids and far-famed astronomy, this laborious vanity, if those who pursue them imagine that this visible world is co-eternal with the Creator of all things, with God Himself; if they attribute to this limited world, which has a material body, the same glory as to the incomprehensible and invisible nature; if they cannot conceive that a whole, of which the parts are subject to corruption and change, must of necessity end by itself submitting to the fate of its parts?”

not only has a beginning, but will also have its end²². And it is completely opposite to God Himself without beginning or end, and the cause of the particular arrangement of all things²³.

Now we can pass to the next question: Was the world created from *preexisting matter or from nothing*. Basil's reflection is based on the words from Genesis 1,2: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was invisible and unformed, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters". It is the crucial biblical account for those who would like to reject creation *ex nihilo* in favor of some eternal, formless matter. In his argumentation, Basil tries to defend the orthodox doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*²⁴.

First of all, he tries to explain what are possible interpretations of this fragment. The key to the problematic expression "unformed" is the sentence: "The complete formation of the earth in its abundance"²⁵. But since the earth did not yet have any vegetation "the Scripture reasonably spoke of it as unformed"²⁶. The term "invisible" is explained as "unseen". According to Basil, the earth was invisible because there was nobody who could see it yet²⁷.

Simultaneously, he shows why Christians cannot accept the concept of any primordial matter. The first argument is based on glory and honor. If matter was eternal, it would be equal with God in it, and as a consequence it either makes matter equal to God in power or blasphemes God's creation²⁸. Finally, such an idea arose from a false analogy between human craftsmen and God²⁹.

"In the beginning", he says "God created". He does not say "God worked", "God formed", but "God created". Among those who have imagined that the world co-existed with God from all eternity, many have denied that it was created by God, but say that it exists spontaneously, as the shadow of this power"³⁰.

Basil presents created world as *a living organism*. In his last homily he quotes: *Let the earth bring forth the living creature* (Gen 1, 24) and then continues to present the earth in a stoic way, pointing out, for example, that "there are others

²² Aristotle, *De caelo*, ed. P. Moraux, Paris 1965, I. 5; Basil the Great, *Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron...*, 98; idem, *The Hexaéméron...*, 255: "That which was begun in time is condemned to come to an end in time. If there has been a beginning do not doubt of the end".

²³ Ibidem, 256.

²⁴ A. Rasmussen, *Basil of Caesarea on Creatio ex Nihilo*, 2014, p. 7 https://www.academia.edu/6144323/Basil_of_Caesarea_on_Creatio_ex_Nihilo [dostęp, 10.02.2016].

²⁵ Basil the Great, *The Hexaéméron...*, 265.

²⁶ Ibidem, 265-266; A. Rasmussen, op. cit., p. 3.

²⁷ Basil the Great, *The Hexaéméron...*, 265-268.

²⁸ A. Rasmussen, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁹ A. Rasmussen, op. cit., p. 4.

³⁰ Basil the Great, *The Hexaéméron...*, 259; idem, *Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron...*, 114.

(animals) that even today we see born from the earth itself³¹. Simultaneously, he rejects the concept of eternal return: “who say that the universe is being consumed by fire, and that from the seeds which remain in the ashes of the burnt world all is being brought to life again. Hence in the world there is destruction and palingenesis to infinity. All, equally far from the truth, find each on their side by ways which lead them to error”³².

The most obvious similarity with Plato's *Timaeus*³³ also cannot be used without conditions. For Basil the cosmos is not only a living organism, but first of all the image of God and should lead us to Him.

But to fulfill this aim contemplation is necessary. Although Basil carefully describes the material world, it is not the final aim of his speeches. His teaching should lead us to know ourselves and admire God³⁴.

“May God who, after having made such great things, put such weak words in my mouth, grant you the intelligence of His truth, so that you may raise yourselves from visible things to the invisible Being, and that the grandeur and beauty of creatures may give you a just idea of the Creator. For the visible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, and His power and divinity are eternal”³⁵.

All created beings are necessary and planned, in the created world harmony could be found³⁶. In the creation the Creator can be seen and admired³⁷. The cosmos is considered the sign of God³⁸.

³¹ Idem, *The Hexaemeron...*, 346.

³² Idem, *Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron...*, 234; idem, *The Hexaemeron...*, 288.

³³ Plato, op. cit., 30 B-C.

³⁴ Basil the Great, *Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron...*, 328; idem, *The Hexaemeron...*, 309: “If we are penetrated by these truths, we shall know ourselves, we shall know God, we shall adore our Creator, we shall serve our Master, we shall glorify our Father, we shall love our Sustainer, we shall bless our Benefactor, we shall not cease to honour the Prince of present and future life, Who, by the riches that He showers upon us in this world, makes us believe in His promises and uses present good things to strengthen our expectation of the future”.

³⁵ Ibidem, 289-290.

³⁶ Ibidem, 301.

³⁷ Ibidem, 341: “During the day, also, how easy it is for you to admire the Creator everywhere!”; Ibidem, 279: “And certainly, God's immaterial nature had no need of the material language of voice, since His very thoughts could be transmitted to His fellow worker. What need then of speech, for those Who by thought alone could communicate their counsels to each other? Voice was made for hearing, and hearing for voice. Where there is neither air, nor tongue, nor ear, nor that winding canal which carries sounds to the seat of sensation in the head, there is no need for words: thoughts of the soul are sufficient to transmit the will. As I said then, this language is only a wise and ingenious contrivance to set our minds seeking the Person to whom the words are addressed”.

³⁸ Ibidem, 282.

“May He Who has given us intelligence to recognize in the smallest objects of creation the great wisdom of the Contriver make us find in great bodies a still higher idea of their Creator. However, compared with their Author, the sun and moon are but a fly and an ant. The whole universe cannot give us a right idea of the greatness of God; and it is only by signs, weak and slight in themselves, often by the help of the smallest insects and of the least plants, that we raise ourselves to Him”³⁹.

Basil also mentions that the world was created to let the souls exercise themselves⁴⁰. The human souls should be well prepared to find God. “How pure it should be from carnal affections, how unclouded by worldly disquietudes, how active and ardent in its researches, how eager to find in its surroundings an idea of God which may be worthy of Him!”⁴¹ Such souls are compared to Moses who was purified to receive the contemplation (θεωρία τῶν ὄντων)⁴² and who became equal to angels⁴³ because his knowledge was not human but spiritual.

THE COMPARISON WITH TIMEAUS

Although, as I have already mentioned, the influence of different philosophical schools can be recognized, the similarities between Basil’s *Homilies on Hexaemeron* and Plato’s *Timaeus* are the most significant. They have a common starting point. The order of *Timaeus* is from the beginning of the cosmos to the nature of man⁴⁴; it is the same with Basil, but it is also the natural order of the *Book of Genesis*. For both authors the material world is just the first step to the spiritual world. For Basil it is important that the contemplation of creation can lead his audience to recognize the Creator. For Plato it is much more important to reveal that the sensible world is a representation of the intelligible one⁴⁵. Plato somehow encourages us to “look through” the sensible world. “There is something of the tension between such an attitude to the cosmos and the attitude which *Timaeus*’ words

³⁹ Ibidem, 322.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 258: “You will finally discover that the world was not conceived by chance and without reason, but for an useful end and for the great advantage of all beings, since it is really the school where reasonable souls exercise themselves, the training ground where they learn to know God; since by the sight of visible and sensible things the mind is led, as by a hand, to the contemplation of invisible things”.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 253.

⁴² Idem, *Homélie sur l’Hexaéméron...*, 90, J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris 1944, p. 158-160, Grégoire de Nysse, *Contemplation sur le vie de Moïse*, ed. J. Daniélou, Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1941, p. 106-107.

⁴³ Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron...*, 266-267.

⁴⁴ Plato, op. cit., 27A, 28B.

⁴⁵ S. Broadie, *Nature and Divinity in Plato’s Timaeus*, Cambridge 2012, p. 64.

seem meant to encourage: that we admire and love this cosmos for its beauty, and venerate it as a god. It might be said that Timaeus also encourages us to love and venerate this cosmos as an expression of the genius and benevolence of its author⁴⁶. Such interpretation of Sarah Broadie let us treat those two texts as similar in the deepest motivations and intentions of their authors.

Stanislas Giet pointed out that Basil used similar or even identical terms, but in fact they bring totally new ideas⁴⁷. These terms are for example the Creator (ποιητής)⁴⁸, such as the Maker of the Universe (δημιουργός)⁴⁹, Goodness without measure (ἄφθονος ἀγαθότης)⁵⁰.

“Being good, He made it an useful work. Being wise, He made it everything that was most beautiful. Being powerful He made it very great”⁵¹.

And in Plato:

“He was good, and in none that is good can there arise jealousy of aught at any time. So being far aloof from this, he desired that all things should be as like unto himself as possible”⁵².

Although for obvious reasons they understand Demiurgos in completely different way their focus on the contemplation and intellectual reality is common. As well as the affirmation of beauty and goodness of the created world.

References

Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, ed. J.P. Migne's, *Patrologia Latina* 14, 123-274. Paris, 1845.

Ambrose, *Hexaemeron in: Paradise, and Cain and Able*, ed. J.J. Savage, New York, 1961.

Aristotle, *De caelo*, P. Moraux (Ed), Paris 1965.

Basil the Great, *Homélies sur l'Hexaéméron*, ed. S. Giet, Sources Chrétienes, Paris 1949.

Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron*, in: *Letters and Select Works, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, Grand Rapids 1996.

Broadie S., *Nature and Divinity in Plato's Timaeus*, Cambridge 2012.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 64.

⁴⁷ S. Giet, op. cit., p. 58.

⁴⁸ Plato, op. cit., 28C, Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron...*, 266: The form of the world is due to the wisdom of the supreme Artificer; matter came to the Creator from without; and thus the world results from a double origin.

⁴⁹ Plato, op. cit., 29A; Basil the Great, *Homélies sur l'Hexaéméron...*, 104.

⁵⁰ Plato, op. cit., 29A; Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron...*, 254.

⁵¹ Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron...*, 259.

⁵² Plato, op. cit., 29E; Basil the Great, *Homélies sur l'Hexaéméron*, 91: Ἀγαθὸς ἦν, ἀγαθῷ δὲ οὐδεὶς περὶ οὐδενὸς οὐδέποτε ἐγγίγνεται φθόνος, τούτου δ' ἐκτὸς ὧν πάντα ὅτι μάλιστα γενέσθαι ἐβουλήθη παραπλήσια ἑαυτῷ.

Daniélou J., *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*. Paris 1944.

Giet S., *Introduction in: Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron*, Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1949, 5-84.

Grégoire de Nysse, *Contemplation sur le vie de Moïse*, ed. J. Daniélou, Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1941

Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexaemeron*, ed. J.P. Migne's, Patrologia Graeca 44, 61-124, Paris 1858.

Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexaemeron*, ed. R. McCambly, 1995 <http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/thaum.html> [dostęp, 10.02.2016].

Hieronim, *De Viris Illustribus*, ed. J.P. Migne's, Patrologia Latina PL 23, 181-206B. Paris 1845.

Hieronim, *De Viris Illustribus* in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*; Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, & Rufinus: Historical Writings. ed. P. Schaff, Grand Rapids 1996.

Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. R.D. Archer – Hind, London 1888.

Rasmussen A., Basil of Caesarea on Creatio ex Nihilo, 2014 https://www.academia.edu/6144323/Basil_of_Caesarea_on_Creatio_ex_Nihilo [dostęp, 10.02.2016].

Schaff P., *Introduction to Hexaemeron* in: *Letters and Select Works, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, Grand Rapids 1996, 251–252.

Streszczenie

Pojęcie kosmosu w dziele „Heksaemeron” Bazylego Wielkiego

Homilie do Hexaemeronu były w starożytności uznawane za jedno z najważniejszych dzieł Bazylego Wielkiego. W dziele tym możemy dostrzec podobny porządek jak w komentowanej *Księdze Rodzaju* (autor zaczyna analizę od stworzenia świata, a kończy na rozważaniach o naturze ludzkiej). W niniejszym artykule analizie poddane zostały następujące zagadnienia: Czy świat został stworzony w czasie, czy też istniał wiecznie? Czy u początku istnienia leży jakaś pierwotna materia, czy też świat został stworzony z niczego? Dalej podjęte zostało pytanie o cel stworzenia świata materialnego, jakim jest, według Bazylego, przygotowanie człowieka i kontemplacja Boga. Ostatnim z podejmowanych problemów są liczne podobieństwa, ale i fundamentalne różnice, jakie możemy odnaleźć między *Homiliami do Hexaemeronu* a *Timajosem* Platona.

Analizowane *Homilie* są próbą opisanie i wyjaśnienia świata stworzonego językiem filozofii z wykorzystaniem całej antycznej tradycji, jednak cel, jakim kieruje się autor, jest teologiczny i soteriologiczny.

Słowa kluczowe: *Bazyli Wielki, Heksaemeron, Kosmologia, stworzenie ex nihilo, Timajos*

Summary

Basil's *Homilies on Hexaemeron* are a good example of a reflection that belongs simultaneously to both traditions: theological and philosophical. However, the unity of Basil's ideas is not based on philosophy but on theology⁵³. In his homilies we can observe the order of creation present in Genesis – from the beginning of the cosmos to the nature of man. The key themes of his homilies are: the eternity and the finiteness of the world, the spiritual realm, the immortality of souls, the role of *demiourgos*, the harmony in the world and the problem of the motion. We can find many references to the classical authors such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Neoplatonists. Although in the usage of the general terms Basil is close to Plato, their fundamental preconceptions are totally different. Basil underlines the *ex nihilo* creation of the world. The world which he describes in details was created to praise the Lord in the harmony of creation. Basil wishes to lead his listeners to the spiritual contemplation.

The concept of the cosmos present in the homilies is an attempt to describe the world created by God using the language of philosophy. However, Basil's preaching has got a deep theological and soteriological meaning.

Keywords: *Basil the Great, Hexaemeron, cosmology, creatio ex nihilo, Timeaus*

⁵³ S. Giet, op. cit., p. 31.