

# Science et exégèse. Les interprétations antiques et médiévales du récit biblique de la création des éléments (Genèse 1, 1–8) edited by Béatrice Bakhouché

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*Science et exégèse. Les interprétations antiques et médiévales du récit biblique de la création des éléments (Genèse 1, 1–8)* edited by Béatrice Bakhouché

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Biblical exegetes from Antiquity and the Middle Ages continuously confronted the cosmogonic narrative offered in Genesis with the scientific cosmological theories of their times. Besides addressing theological questions raised by the text, most exegetes of the past were occupied with harmonizing the biblical cosmogony with current scientific knowledge or dealing with their manifest discrepancies. As noted by Anastasios Brenner in the closing chapter of the present volume, a chapter which proposes a reflexive look at our contemporary scholarly attitude toward such exegeses, we generally adopt a post-Kantian position on the issue of religion and science. We tend to think that the Bible belongs to the domain of belief and that the attempt at its harmonization with scientific knowledge is nothing but naive and dogmatic. Nevertheless, the proliferation of studies and congresses dedicated to the exegesis of the opening verses of Genesis could be seen as a symptom of our continuous fascination with a text that contributed, along with the scientific disciplines of physics and metaphysics, to shaping the Western worldview. To mention only French-speaking academia—the volume gathers contributions in French only, except for one in Italian—at least three volumes of proceedings of congresses on the subject have appeared in the last decades, as recalled by the editor, Béatrice Bakhouché:

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This volume is the proceeding of a congress, which took place in Montpellier in 2013, dedicated specifically to the place of scientific considerations regarding the creation of the physical elements in the interpretation of Gen 1:1–8. It stands out by the number of contributions (22) and the length of the period covered, from the Antiquity (actually the very redaction of the cosmogonic narrative of Genesis) to the late Middle Ages. The main stress though is put on the Antiquity, treated in three of the four parts of the volume. [5: cf. [CERL 1973](#); [Vannier 2011](#) and [2014](#)]

The first section, “Founding texts”, gathers contributions on the Hebrew text of the Bible (Dany Nocquet, Jan Joosten), its Greek translation (Gilles Doriaval), and its rabbinic interpretation (Ron Naiweld). The section “Receptions in the Hellenistic world” includes contributions on Philo (Jérôme Moreau), Gregory of Nissa (Claudio Moreschini), Origen (Christophe Leblanc), gnostic literature (Chiara Ombretta Tommasi), Ephrem and Narsai (Colette Pasquet), and Cosmas Indicopleustes and John Philoponus (Marie-Hélène Congourdeau). The section “Receptions in the Roman world” deals with Roman Patristics (Paul Mattei), Augustine of Hippo (Jérôme Labgouanère), and Jerome (Cécile Biasi). The fourth section is dedicated to a selection of “Medieval readings”: Bede (Alessandra Di Pilla), a series of Carolingian commentators (Raffaele Savigni), Bernward Doors (Isabelle Marchesin), 12th-century monastic exegetes (Annie Noblesse-Rocher), Meister Eckhart (Marie-Anne Vannier), and a selection of representative 13th- and 14th-century exegetes (Gilbert Dahan).

The impressive variety of authors and texts that are treated makes a detailed discussion of each contribution impossible. But the vast period encompassed by the volume allows one to track the constitution of an exegetical tradition that is articulated around central questions. What emerges in the course of reading is recognition of a long-lived inquiry about whether the biblical cosmogony is to be read literally or allegorically and, more precisely, where the dividing line between history and allegory should be put. Two names emerge as cornerstones of this tradition. Augustine of Hippo, notably with his *De Genesi ad litteram*, set a theoretical framework of long-lasting influence, according to which scripture and science were two ways to access the truth that should be harmonized, and thus required that verses should be interpreted figuratively if their literal meaning contradicts scientific knowledge. As noted by Jérôme Lagouanère, this model was still invoked by Galileo in his defense against his religious persecutors [188]. The second figure of the Christian exegetical tradition is Origen, who continued Philo of Alexandria’s method of biblical allegorical interpretation in the Christian tradition.

But the issue of the harmonization of Bible and science is not dependent on the choice of one of these hermeneutical methods. For example, the Cappadocian Fathers address the exegetical problem of whether the firmament separating the lower and the upper waters on the second day of creation is to be taken as a physical body or as a metaphor of the border between the world of ideas and intellects and the material world. The former position was notably defended by Basil of Caesarea; the latter, by Gregory of Nyssa, whose views are analyzed by Claudio Moreschini. According to both, a confrontation with science is involved: physics alone for the former, physics and metaphysics and their respective boundaries for the latter. The precise extension and definition of “science” are at stake in this confrontation with the biblical text. The scientific disciplines of physics and metaphysics, and even theology (viewed as a science at least after Aquinas) and ontology (in the case of Meister Eckhart, as Marie-Anne Vannier’s contribution shows) are not only *used* in order to understand the biblical text, but also partly *built* through this confrontation with scriptures.

Besides major authors, the volume highlights less expected literary corpora such as that of gnostic exegesis (in a chapter by Chiara Ombretta Tommasi), which constituted a type of interpretation to be excluded and which, therefore, had a negative but still important role in the formation of the exegetical tradition. Colette Pasquet’s chapter on the question of what was created *ex nihilo* and what *ex aliquo* in the Syriac texts of Ephrem and Narsai elucidates a Syriac terminology (*men medem* for *ex aliquo*, *men lo medem* for *ex nihilo*) that probably influenced the terms used later in Arabic (*min shai* and *min lā shai/lā min shai*) and Hebrew (*mi-davar* and *min lo davar / lo mi-davar*) theological discussions of this issue [see [Wolfson 1948](#)].

The transmission of ancient exegetical material to the Middle Ages and the process by which the basic constituents of medieval Christian exegesis in the West were selected are illuminated in interesting contributions on the exegetical genres that flourished in Late Antiquity. In this period, various literary tools were used to spread the biblical cosmogony and worldview. The example of the poetical *Hexameron* of Dracontius, studied by Paul-Augustin Deproost, is shown both to introduce exegetical elements taken from Augustine and to recast biblical discourse in a way accommodating the scientific ideas of the intellectual elite of the fifth century. Such poetry can, therefore, be understood as a tool in the process of the Christianization of the Roman world in that period. The same is true of the genre of the poetical *epos* that developed in the fifth and sixth centuries, the subject of the chapter by Michele Cutino. These versified rewritings of biblical texts

were specifically addressed to the *rudes*, those who were not acquainted with the Bible but who were very cultivated and thus sensible to poetical forms [246]. In these chapters, the reader comes to sense how such transitional and didactical genres were associated with the specific exegesis of Bede in the seventh century (studied by Alessandra di Pilla), and such exegetes in the Carolingian period (presented by Raffaele Savigni) as Raban Maur and Remigius of Auxerre, in the process of crystallizing a standard exegesis that led to the redaction of the *Glossa ordinaria*. The *Glossa* itself, though, would have deserved a chapter of its own given the important role that it played in the medieval reading of the Bible.

The question of the channels by which biblical exegeses were transmitted is also addressed in a contribution on the Bernward Doors, the 11th-century monumental bronze doors of the Hildesheim cathedral. According to Isabelle Marchesin, they call for a reconsideration of the role of the plastic arts in the diffusion of knowledge among the illiterate masses.

Several contributions go beyond the limits of the topic announced by the title of the volume, i.e., the confrontation of the Bible and science regarding the creation of the elements. This is clear in Jan Joosten's discussion of the Hebrew text of Genesis. He argues that the specific feature of this biblical text among the cosmogonies of the Levant is that it presents a God who creates a world, and more specifically a human being, because he seeks a partner with whom to associate. Moreover, in several contributions, the issue of science and exegesis thus meets existential and spiritual considerations. Christophe Leblanc claims that, in the case of Origen, their confrontation led him to understand the world as a text to be read rather than to view the Bible as a certain representation of the world. In her chapter on 12th-century monastic exegesis, Annie Noblesse-Rocher adopts a conception of intertextuality that is fruitfully conceptualized in the works of Gérard Genette, and shows that such intertextuality, as generated by reading the Bible mainly through Augustine's commentary, brought the monks to a process of "impersonation" in which they identify with biblical characters and actually "live" the biblical text.

Despite the variety of corpora treated, the volume is almost exclusively dedicated to Christian exegesis. The chapters dedicated to the Hebrew Bible or the Rabbinic tradition, which feature a section entitled "Sources", reflect the Christian-oriented perspective of the volume: for example, Céline Biasi's chapter on Jerome, which refers to the Hebrews as witnesses of historical meaning of the text [192]. The question of the confrontation of the biblical narrative of creation with scientific knowledge in the Jewish exegetical tradition as such would certainly have enriched the volume. In his contribution

on classical rabbinic literature (Talmud and Midrash), Ron Naiweld shows that, by assigning to the Torah the role played by *Logos* in a Neoplatonic and Stoic topos of the time, the rabbis oriented the Jewish exegetical tradition in an existential-juridical direction and manifested precisely their lack of interest in harmonizing the Bible with scientific knowledge. Indeed, a chapter on medieval Jewish exegesis could have shown how this endeavor became central among Jewish rationalist thinkers, such as Saadya Gaon (10th century) and, even more so, Maimonides (12th century) and his disciples. With his repeated affirmation that “the *Account of the Beginning* is identical with natural science” [Pines 1963, 6 *et passim*], Maimonides really introduced in the West the interpretation of biblical cosmogony as an allegory of Aristotelian physics. Chapter 2:30 of his *Guide of the Perplexed* offers a continuous reading of Gen 1:1–8 in line with Aristotelian elemental physics. Maimonides’ introduction of Aristotelianism in biblical exegesis later influenced such Christian authors as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas and, at least indirectly, those exegetes of the 13th and 14th centuries whose interpretations of the two narratives of creation in the first chapters of Genesis (from Robert Grosseteste to Nicholas de Lyre) are here studied by Gilbert Dahan.

Through its numerous contributions, this volume introduces new perspectives on the constitution of the Western exegetical tradition and reflects the dynamism and variety of research in France and Italy concerning the history of science and biblical exegesis.

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