

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
57 (4), p. 97-106, 2013

Some Interests of Saint Basil the Great in the Old Testament

Viorel Cristian Popa

Viorel Cristian Popa

University of Oradea

E-mail: vios@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study presents the concerns of St. Basil the Great in the study area of the Old Testament. After a summary of some data in the life of St. Basil the Great, the study focuses on homilies of the author to the Hexaemeron and to Psalms.

In homilies on Hexaemeron, Basil make an admirable picture to the world creation by God. The Homilies on creating the world have always fascinated me, which led me to write a few appreciative words about the wonderful homilies.

No less interesting are the homilies to the Psalms. For romanian people, and I think for the Christian people in general, the book of psalms is the most popular of the canonical books of Holy Scripture. Therefore comments on psalms of the Holy Fathers are normative.

Because the psalms include a perfect theology, "which is useful of all", the Church constantly encouraged recitation of the Psalms, the study and meditation on them too.

All the homilies of Saint Basil the Great surprise us in a very pleasant manner, through their refined exegetic approach and through the practical aspects they outline. That is why we should honor him and be glad that we are the inheritors of such a spiritual treasure.

Keywords

Saint Basil the Great, homilies, Hexaemeron, Psalms, creation, Creator, world

Saint Basil the Great wrote a lot during his short lifetime. His works, of tremendous significance for faith, are prescriptive for the Orthodox teachings. They can be classified into several categories: dogmatic, ascetic, homilies and discourses, pedagogic, liturgical, canonic, and epistolary. Among his homilies, of great importance are those tackling the text of the Old Testament:

1. Homilies on the Hexaameron;
2. Homilies on Psalms.

1. Homilies on the Hexaameron

Saint Basil the Great delivered the nine homilies on the Hexaameron when he was a priest, before 370¹, during a week within the Lent period. On some days, he used to preach twice, in the morning and in the evening. These homilies represent commentaries on the 6 days of creation (thus the title Hexaameron), namely on the verses 1-26 of the first chapter of Genesis. In his last homily, he promised the believers that he would also speak about the creation of man. It seems that in the end, he did not deliver such a homily. Saint Ambrose mentions only Saint Basil the Great's nine homilies on the Hexaameron².

The homilies encompass wonderful descriptions both of the creative power of God and of the beauty of the creation itself³. Although made up of material substance, the world is good and full of beauty; the Creator Himself admired His work and thought it was "good". On the other hand, the beauty and the outward harmony of the world manifest themselves not

¹ Some scholars claim that Saint Basil the Great would have delivered these homilies in 378, from Monday, the 12th of March, to Friday, the 16th of March. G. Bernardi, *La date de l'Hexaéméron de saint Basile*, in *Studia Patristica*, III, Berlin, 1961, p. 165-169.

² Saint Basil the Great, *Homily on Psalm 1*, in J.P. Migne, PG, 29, 212, see also Sfantul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilia I la Hexaameron* in col. „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” (PSB), vol. 17, traducere, introducere, note și indice de pr. Dumitru Fecioru, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1986, p. 35.

³ Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, Pr. prof. dr. Nicu Dumitrascu, *Patrologie, manual pentru seminariile teologice*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004, p. 158.

Some Interests of Saint Basil the Great in the Old Testament

only in the awe-inspiring and impressive creatures, but also in the small and apparently, unimportant ones, thus showing us that each creature is beautiful in itself and, at the same time, brings its contribution to the accomplishment of universal beauty.⁴

When one reads the wonderful commentary on the days of creation, one does not know what to admire most: Saint Basil's extensive and manifold knowledge which covers the entire philosophy of the antiquity, with its theories on world genesis, the well-grounded scriptural and rational arguments on the basis of which he deconstructs these theories and builds up the Christian view on creation, or his love for the Creator who is praised for the beauties He created on earth. Saint Basil conjugates the beauty of the creation with the beauty of his thinking and words. The homilies of the Hexaemeron impressed his contemporaries. Saint Ambrose imitates Saint Basil in his Hexaemeron, and Saint Gregory Nazianzen, Saint Basil's friend, claims full of awe: "Whenever I handle his Hexaemeron, and take its words on my lips, I am brought into the presence of the Creator, and understand the words of creation, and admire the Creator more than before."⁵

Saint Basil expresses his teachings in the nine homilies on the Hexaemeron, explaining the creation of the world and all the phenomena related to the act of creation⁶. He admits, even from the first homilies, the simultaneous creation of the elements of matter and its organization during the six days of world genesis. While interpreting each of these six days, Saint Basil summarizes all the knowledge of his day⁷.

Saint Basil opposes the Hellenistic views (Ionian and atomist), according to which, in the beginning there were irrational elements⁸, and he

⁴ Saint Basil the Great, *Homily IV on the Hexaemeron*, in J. P. Migne, PG, 29, 77; PSB, vol. 17, p. 110-118; Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, *Studii de teologie patristică*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004, p. 181.

⁵ Saint Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration 43*, in J.P. Migne, 493-608, translated into Romanian by priest professor Nicolae Donos, *Sfântul Grigorie de Nazianz, Apologia sau cuvântarea în care arată motivele care l-au îndemnat să fugă de preoție și Elogiul Sfântului Vasile*, Huși, 1931, p. 118-204.

⁶ Pr. prof. I. G. Coman, *Patrologie*, București, 1956, p. 165.

⁷ B. Mangelot, "Hexaemeron", in *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, tome VI, 2, Paris, 1925, row. 2336.

⁸ "These philosophers, who were too ignorant to rise to a knowledge of a God, could not allow that an intelligent cause presided at the birth of the Universe; a primary error

follows the Biblical teachings, i.e. the world was created by God, stating that this world was created out of nothing, showing the impossibility of a matter preexisting creation and being co-eternal with God. The world is not timeless; it was created in time, and it has always been under the vigilant and sacred eye of the divine wisdom. Since it has a beginning, the world will also have an end⁹.

In the nine homilies, the author insists more on the creation of the visible world, but he also lingers, in a suggestive image, on the angels' invisible world. The author claims that before the visible world, which can be contemplated with our mind, there was something else, which is not mentioned in history, "but of which we can say nothing, because it is too lofty a subject for men who are but beginners and are still babes in knowledge". There was a condition of things "outstripping the limits of time, eternal and infinite". "The Creator and Demiurge of the universe perfected His works in it, spiritual light for the happiness of all who love the Lord, intellectual and invisible natures, all the orderly arrangement of pure intelligences who are beyond the reach of our mind and of whom we cannot even discover the names. They fill the essence of this invisible world, as Paul teaches us: "For by him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether they are kings, lords, rulers, or powers" (Colossians 1: 16), or virtues or hosts of angels or the dignities of archangels¹⁰. Saint Basil talks about the creation, the nature, the mission, the characteristics, or the hierarchy of angels. He speaks both about good angels and demons¹¹.

He said that Moses' cosmogony was the only true one, since it was of divine origin¹² and this revealed cosmogony is the one we must believe

that involved them in sad consequences. Some had recourse to material principles and attributed the origin of the Universe to the elements of the world. Others imagined that atoms, and indivisible bodies, molecules and ducts, form, by their union, the nature of the visible world. Atoms reuniting or separating, produce births and deaths and the most durable bodies only owe their consistency to the strength of their mutual adhesion: a true spider's web woven by these writers who give to heaven, to earth, and to sea so weak an origin and so little consistency!" Sfantul Vasile cel Mare - *Omilia I la Hexaimeron*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 73.

⁹ Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, Pr. prof. dr. Nicu Dumitrascu, *Patrologie*, p. 159.

¹⁰ Sfantul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilia I la Hexaimeron*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 75.

¹¹ Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, Pr. prof. dr. Nicu Dumitrascu, *Patrologie*, p. 159.

¹² Talking about Moses, Saint Basil the Great uses laudatory words. He says that Moses saw God as no other man could have done it. God himself states it: "Listen to my words: "When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I

Some Interests of Saint Basil the Great in the Old Testament

in¹³. Like angels, Moses was given the right to see God face to face. Thus, he tells on what he hears directly from God. Saint Basil advises us to listen to the words of truth, because “my message and my preaching were not accompanied by clever, wise words, but by a display of the Spirit's power, so that your faith would not be based on human wisdom but on God's power”¹⁴ (Corinthians 1: 2); and these words of truth are not meant to bring praise to those who listen to them, but the salvation of those who heed them¹⁵.

However, when he cannot explain part of the cosmogony, the author considers that “at all events we ought to prefer the simplicity of faith to the demonstrations of reason”¹⁶. On the other hand, Saint Basil tries to rationally construe the cosmogony, and this is to be seen in his statement according to which the wonder stirred by great things does not decrease at all when we discover how these things were created¹⁷. Faith stays above science, but does not exclude science and does not treat science with distrust. Besides the clarity of expression and the artistry of his biblical and logical argumentation, one has to notice Saint Basil's rich philosophical culture (especially when it comes to the theories on world's genesis), that he uses in order to uphold the Christian teachings¹⁸.

When interpreting the biblical text, Saint Basil takes the middle way, between the literal and the allegorical sense; he makes use of allegory only when it comes to the construction of the soul, whereas for polemical and scientific presentations he sticks with the literal and historical sense. His reaction against the allegorical interpretation of the Genesis is widely known, because he states: “For me grass is grass; plant, fish, wild beast, domestic animal, I take all in the literal sense.”¹⁹

... speak to him in dreams./But this is not true of my servant Moses;/he is faithful in all my house./With him I speak face to face,/clearly and not in riddles;/he sees the form of the Lord.” (Numbers 12, 6-8); Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilia I la Hexaimeron*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 72.

¹³ Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, *Studii de teologie patristică*, p. 181.

¹⁴ Here, by quoting the Apostle Paul, the author hints at the philosophical theories of his time, theories related to the creation of the universe that belong exclusively to human wisdom.

¹⁵ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilia I la Hexaimeron*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, Pr. prof. dr. Nicu Dumitrascu, *Patrologie*, p. 159.

¹⁹ Saint Basil the Great, *Homily IX on the Hexaemeron*, în J.P. Migne, PG, 29, 212; see also Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilia a IX-a la Hexaimeron*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 170.

In his commentary on the Hexaemeron, Saint Basil compares the world to an orderly city which, by drawing our attention and admiration, makes us imagine the beauty and the greatness of our first heavenly city, from where we chased away on account of the sin, but where we have to go back by defeating the sin.

The nine homilies on the Hexaemeron represent precious gems of the homiletic literature of the 4th century, which generated feelings of admiration from contemporaries of Saint Basil the Great²⁰.

2. Homilies on Psalms

It is well known that out of the writings of the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms is undoubtedly the most popular one. It has stayed what it was since the beginning: a book for the souls of the believers. The Savior Himself spoke about it as if it is were a significant book. When talking to the Apostles, after Resurrection, He reminded them that it was appropriate to fulfill everything it was written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24: 44). As mentioned in this context by the Savior, the Psalms represent the third group of books from the Hebrew Bible, Hagiographa or the Ketuvim (i.e. the other writings that do not pertain to the Torah (the teachings) or Nevi'im (the Prophets)). Since the Psalms are the best known, they are often referred to as if they were the epitome of the Hebrew Bible.

Never have these writings stopped representing a core fascination for those who wanted to repent and to be saved. The interest raised came from the richness and, to an equal extent, the beauty of the contents. And, we can find with Saint Basil Great such appreciations of the Psalms, as we cannot find with any other Holy Father of the Church. Saint Basil the Great emphasizes these extraordinary qualities of the Book of Psalms when writing in his commentary on the psalms the following:

“Now, the prophets teach one thing, historians another, the law something else, and the form of advice found in the proverbs something different still. But, the Book of Psalms has taken over what is profitable from all. It foretells coming events; it recalls history; it frames laws for life; it suggests what must be done;

²⁰ Arhid. prof. dr. Constantin Voicu, Pr. prof. dr. Nicu Dumitrascu, *Patrologie*, p. 159.

Some Interests of Saint Basil the Great in the Old Testament

and, in general, it is the common treasury of good doctrine, carefully finding what is suitable for each one. The old wounds of souls it cures completely, and to the recently wounded it brings speedy improvement; the diseased it treats, and the unharmed it preserves. On the whole, it effaces, as far as it is possible, the passions, which subtly exercise dominion over souls during the lifetime of a man, and it does this with a certain orderly persuasion and sweetness which produces sound thoughts.”²¹

Somewhere else, the same Holy Father gives us some other interesting considerations on the psalms, by writing:

“What in fact can you not learn from the psalms? Can you not learn the grandeur of courage? The exactness of justice? The nobility of self-control? The perfection of prudence? A manner of penance? The measure of patience? And whatever other good things you might mention? Therein is perfect theology, a prediction of the coming of Christ in the flesh, a threat of judgment, a hope of resurrection, a fear of punishment, promises of glory, an unveiling of mysteries; all things, as if in some great public treasury, are stored up in the Book of Psalms.”²²

For all these, the Church constantly encouraged people to recite the psalms, as well as to study and meditate upon them. Religious education began, in the Church and in the family, with readings from the psalms and, as progress was made in the spiritual life, they learnt the psalms by heart. Thus, Saint Basil the Great states that the psalm is beginning for beginners, advancement for those who progress on the way of virtue and support for those who take the path of perfection. No wonder than that Christians in the first centuries carried the psalms not only in their mind, but also on their lips, reciting them permanently while doing the daily chores.

More precisely, Saint Basil the Great delivered homilies on 13 out of the 150 Psalms: 1, 7, 14, 28, 29, 32, 44, 45, 48, 59, 61 and 114.

In the *Homily on Psalm 1*, Saint Basil the Great sees the psalm in general as balm for body and soul, as a harmonizing element for the relationships between people and for the amelioration of social relations:

²¹ Saint Basil the Great, *Homily on Psalm 1*, în J.P. Migne, PG, 29, 212; Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omitie la Psalmul 1*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 36, 183.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

“A psalm implies serenity of soul; it is the author of peace, which calms bewildering and seething thoughts. For, it softens the wrath of the soul, and what it unbridled it chastens. A psalm forms friendships, unites those separated, conciliates those at enmity. Who, indeed, can still consider as an enemy him with whom he has uttered the same prayer to God? So that psalmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond as it were, toward unity, and joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessings, charity. A psalm is a city of refuge from the demons; a means of inducing help from angels, a weapon in fears by night, a rest from toils by day, a safeguard for infants, an adornment for those at the height of their vigor, a consolation for the elders, a most fitting ornament for women.”²³

The Holy Father dedicates two homilies to Psalm 14: in the first homily he interprets the verses 1-4, and in the second he talks only about verse 5: “*Thou shalt not lend at interest to thy brother, and to thy neighbor.*” This homily is titled “*A Psalm of David against Usurers (On Psalm 14)*”.

On several occasions in the Holy Scripture, the sin of lending at interest is banned. Prophet Ezechiel, for instance, places it among the greatest of evils to take interest or any profit (22: 12, see also Jeremiah 9: 4-5; Psalm 54: 9-11), and the law expressly forbids it: “Thou shalt not lend at interest to thy brother, and to thy neighbor” (Deuteronomy 23: 20).

The author says that the loan with interest causes great damages both for the lender and the borrower; for one when it comes to his money, for the other when it comes to his soul. Whereas people cannot pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles (Matthew 7: 16), human love cannot be picked from usury loans²⁴.

With respect to loans, Saint Basil the Great repeats the words of Saint Matthew the Evangelist:

“And from him who would borrow of thee, do not turn away” and concludes by saying: “[...] and do not give your money at interest, in order that, having been taught, what is good from the Old and New Testament, you may depart to the Lord with good hope, receiving there the interest from your good deeds,

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

²⁴ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilie la Psalmul XIV*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 221.

Some Interests of Saint Basil the Great in the Old Testament

in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power forever. Amen.”²⁵

Saint Basil the Great gives a suggestive image to the design of the human body in his homilies on two of the psalms. Metaphorically speaking, he states that:

“The physical structure of the body is, speaking figuratively, a harp and an instrument harmoniously adapted for the hymns of our God; and the actions of the body, which are referred to the glory of God are a psalm, whenever in an appropriate measure we perform nothing out of tune in our actions.”²⁶

Maybe the mind, searching for higher things, is called harp, because the manner in which this musical instrument is made has the power of its sounds above. The actions of the body praise God here, but the mysteries that call on the mind have their source high above, because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The one who obeys the commandments and transforms them into a concert and a symphony, praises God with a harp with 10 strings (Psalm 91: 3), because the general commandments are ten.²⁷

To conclude, Saint Basil the Great wishes to say that, harmoniously, body and mind have to²⁸ obey God.

How could one characterize Saint Basil the Great in a more beautiful and just manner than by saying that he had the spirit of a leader, doubled by the obedience of monk, a fierce will doubled by the perfect, wise understanding of people and situations?²⁹

As a bishop, Saint Basil the Great fought with his action, his word and his writings; by theological treatises and letters addressed to eastern and western bishops who were called to action in order to stop the schisms and the heresies of his epoch, visiting some, sending messengers to others, calling others to visit him, giving advice, reprimanding, praying, threatening, scolding, fighting for peoples, cities or even for individuals, coming up with different salvation ways, healing wherever he went, he was a new Veseleil, the architect of the witnessing tent, using plenty of materials and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁶ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilie la Psalmul XXIX*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 236.

²⁷ Idem, *Omilie la Psalmul XXXII*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 248.

²⁸ According to the doctrine of free will, this “have to” has the sense of moral imperative, the equivalent of the verb “sollen” in German, and not that of an imperative.

²⁹ Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, *Note introductive*, PSB, vol. 17, p. 18.

crafts in order to reach his purpose and arranging everything for the beauty and harmony of his work.³⁰ Although he was seriously ill³¹, his desire to guide the believers was so great that he would walk among them and deliver sermons.

All the homilies of Saint Basil the Great surprise us in a very pleasant manner, through their refined exegetic approach and through the practical aspects they outline. That is why we should honor him and be glad that we are the inheritors of such a spiritual treasure.

³⁰ Pr. prof. Nicolae Donos, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

³¹ That is why he died when he was only 49 (330-379).