

ADAM RASMUSSEN, *Genesis and Cosmos: Basil and Origen on Genesis 1 and Cosmology* (The Bible in Ancient Christianity 14; Leiden: Brill, 2019). Pp. vii + 210. Hardback. €121.00/US\$146.00.

The host series declares its reception focus thus: “*The Bible in Ancient Christianity* series examines how the Scriptures were interpreted in ancient Christianity, particularly as Scripture functioned in liturgy, in exposition, homilies, in art, in spirituality, and in social issues” (<https://brill.com/view/serial/BAC>). Rasmussen’s volume shares with an earlier entry in the series, Stephen Presley’s *The Intertextual Reception of Genesis 1–3 in Irenaeus of Lyons* (2015), the feel of a freshened-up doctoral dissertation, and indeed Rasmussen’s 2013 doctoral dissertation may be found online (<https://cuislandora.wrlc.org/islandora/object/etd%3A345/datastream/PDF/view>). Nonetheless, Rasmussen’s book reads very clearly with transparent structure and logic and editing superior to the Presley volume.

Rasmussen begins by declaring his interest in “the question of the relationship between the Bible and science” (1), wishing to bring the cosmological opinions of church fathers Origen (d. 253 CE) and Basil (the Great, d. 378/9 CE) to bear on this durable contemporary issue in relation to Genesis 1. Besides leaving behind interpretations of Genesis 1, notably in Basil’s great sermon series of 378 CE (the *Hexaemeron*), both were well-educated, and Basil consciously and critically utilized Origen’s teaching. Both men had in some sense turned away from the world and adopted the ascetic or “philosophic” life (30). This does *not* mean, Rasmussen notes, that they “renounced all secular learning” (42); each made careful and qualified use of it. Rasmussen then aptly reconsiders the appropriateness of the label “allegory” for Origen’s hermeneutic, although he finds the term difficult to dispense with altogether in describing patristic exegesis. Thus, he proves himself alert to current theorising on patristic hermeneutics.

Three featured interpretive issues occupy Chapters 3–5 respectively. First is what Gen 1:2 has to say on the question of hylomorphism, the relationship of matter to forms, and whether pre-existent matter may be admitted or whether the Christian thinker must instead insist on creation *ex nihilo*. Here Origen proves to be quite orthodox, defending *ex nihilo* creation, as does Basil in conscious if not explicit dependence on Origen, while employing his own distinctive rhetorical tools.

Second is the question of the nature of the “firmament” and accompanying upper and lower waters according to Gen 1:6–8. Here Origen and Basil part ways, and Rasmussen finds that for Origen the upper waters finally designate populations of spiritual beings who ascend to a sublime contemplation of God and are to be imitated, while the lower waters indicate those who have descended to the demonic. Basil’s determined physical interpretation of the upper waters represents for Rasmussen a consciously anti-Origenist, realistic stance (140–42).

The third question, connected with Day Four of creation, is whether the reference to sun, moon and stars supports ancient beliefs around astrology, notably horoscope-casting (148), based on the assumption that the position of the stars and planets at the moment of one's birth defined one's destiny. Origen, committed to human moral responsibility before God, finds such a deterministic view unacceptable. Basil joins him in opposition against astrological fatalism.

Rasmussen's grand theme is that for both Origen and Basil, philosophy (or often, "science") may play a legitimate role as servant of theology (e.g., 146), finding them in harmony in their utilization of philosophical knowledge of the world. Rasmussen carefully analyses Basil's use of Origen's writings, citing the tradition that Basil and friend Gregory of Nazianzus edited the anthology of Origen's writings known as the *Philocalia* (39). Yet Rasmussen's claim that the differences between the two were rhetorical rather than hermeneutical and due to differences in audience and setting (187) overlooks the common paraenetic purpose of Origen's *Homilies on Genesis* and Basil's *Hexaemeron* and underplays Basil's rejection of some of Origen's allegorical stances as noted earlier in the book.

Rasmussen ultimately concludes that "the (!) approach of Origen and Basil ... simultaneously affirms science and upholds the integrity of Christian teaching" (194). His general observations on science and religion are perceptive and typically clear (189–93). Yet I do not find the twofold example of Basil and Origen quite as illuminating for this issue as Rasmussen does for these reasons: 1) the patristic intellectual landscape is so different from the modern, Western one that to talk about "science" in the former context borders on misleading; 2) Origen & Basil have a profoundly different attitude to nature. Origen manifests a Platonic disregard for physical creation, while Basil's meditations on natural phenomena in the *Hexaemeron* reveal a mind deeply appreciative of the physical world as God's creation; 3) Basil himself sends mixed signals about "secular" learning and requires careful handling, although to be fair, Rasmussen copes with this complexity rather well.

At the end of the day, Rasmussen's clarity, currency and topical competence make this comparative survey and interpretive analysis accessible and useful, even for a reader relatively new to patristic thought, despite being a little over-optimistic about their relevance for contemporary thinking about science and religion.

ANDREW BROWN
Melbourne School of Theology