



THE HEXAEMERON



BASIL THE GREAT

THE HEXAEMERON

Translated from the Greek by Blomfield Jackson
From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 8,
edited by Philip Schaff, D.D., LL.D.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The *Holy Nativity Patristic Library* presents the foundational texts of the early Christian Fathers in carefully typeset pocket editions. Each volume is drawn from the public-domain English translations of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* and the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* – the thirty-eight-volume collection edited by Philip Schaff and his collaborators between 1886 and 1900, which remains the most comprehensive English-language gathering of the patristic writings ever assembled.

We have undertaken to issue these works one at a time, as portable single-author editions, so that they may travel where the original folio volumes cannot – in a coat pocket, on a long flight, beside a hospital bed. Each volume preserves the Schaff translation and the translator's introduction. The foot-

note apparatus is retained where it serves the text; we have set aside those notes that pertain only to the nineteenth-century volume context, and any commentary at variance with the Orthodox confession of the Fathers themselves. We add a subject index and a scripture index for the text in hand.

The texts are typeset in IM Fell English, a face cut by John Fell in seventeenth-century Oxford and freely available again through the work of Igino Marini. The Greek is set in Philokalia, designed for the Athonite tradition.

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THE HEXAEMERON

INTRODUCTION

By Blomfield Jackson, Translator

The *Hexæmeron* is the title of nine homilies delivered by St. Basil on the cosmogony of the opening chapters of Genesis. When and where they were delivered is quite uncertain. They are Lenten sermons, delivered at both the morning and evening services, and appear to have been listened to by working men. (*Hom.* iii. 1.) Some words in *Hom.* viii. have confirmed the opinion that they were preached extempore, in accordance with what is believed to have been Basil's ordinary practice.¹ Internal evidence points in the same direction, for though a marked contrast might be expected between the style of a

¹ *cf.* Rufinus ii. 9.

work intended to be read, like the *De Spiritu Sancto*, and that of the orations to be spoken in public, the *Hexæmeron* shews signs of being an unwritten composition.

In earlier ages, it was the most celebrated and admired of Basil's works. Photius (Migne, Pat. Gr. cxli) puts it first of all, and speaks warmly of its eloquence and force. As an example of oratory he would rank it with the works of Plato and Demosthenes.

Suidas singles it out for special praise. Jerome (*De Viris Illust.*) among Basil's works names only the *Hexæmeron*, the *De Sp. Scto*, and the treatise *Contra Eunomium*.

That Basil's friends should think highly of it is only what might be expected. "Whenever I take his *Hexæmeron* in hand," says Gregory of Nazianzus, (*Orat.* xliii. 67) "and quote its words, I am brought face to face with my Creator: I begin to understand the method of creation: I feel more awe than ever I did before, when I only looked at God's work with my eyes."

Basil's brother Gregory, in the *Proæmium* to his own *Hexæmeron*, speaks in exaggerated terms of

Basil's work as inspired, and as being, in his opinion, as admirable as that of Moses.

The *Hexæmeron* of Ambrose is rather an imitation than a translation or adaptation of that of Basil. Basil's *Hexæmeron* was translated into Latin by Eustathius Afer (c. A.D. 440) and is said to have been also translated by Dionysius Exiguus, the Scythian monk of the 6th C. to whom is due our custom of dating from the Saviour's birth.

More immediately interesting to English readers is the Anglo-Saxon abbreviation attributed to Ælfric, Abbot of St. Albans in 969, and by some identified with the Ælfric who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 996 to 1006. This is extant in a MS. numbered Junius 23 in the Bodleian Library, and was collated with the MS. Jun. 47 in the same, a transcript of a MS. in the Hatton Collection, by the Rev. Henry W. Norman for his edition and translation published in 1848. It is nowhere a literal translation, but combines with the thoughts of St. Basil extracts from the *Commentary upon Genesis* of the Venerable Bede, as well as original matter. It is entitled

STI Basilii Exameron, Pæt Is Be Godes Six Daga Weorcvm.

“L’Hexaméron,” writes Fialon, “est l’explication de l’œuvre des six jours, explication souvent tentée avant et après Saint Basile. ‘Il n’est personne parmi les hommes, disait Théophile d’Antioche au deuxième siècle, qui puisse dignement faire le récit et exposer toute l’économie de l’œuvre des six jours; eût il mille bouches et mille langues....Beaucoup d’écrivains ont tenté ce récit; ils ont pris pour sujet, les uns la création du monde, les autres l’origine de l’homme, et peut-être n’ont ils pas fait jaillir une étincelle qui fût digne de la vérité.”² Nous ne pouvons savoir ce que fut l’Hexaméron de Saint Hippolyte et nous ne savons guère qu’une chose de celui d’Origène: c’est qu’il dénaturait complètement le récit mosaïque et n’y voyait que des allégories. L’Hexaméron de Saint Basile, par la pureté de la doctrine et la beauté du style, fit disparaître tous ceux qui l’avaient précédé.”³ So, too, bishop Fessler. “Sapienter, pie, et admodum eloquenter istæ homilæ confectæ sunt; quædam explicationes physicæ profecto juxta placita scientiæ illius ætatis

² Theophilus of Antioch, *ii. Ad Autolyicum*.

³ *Étude sur St. Basile*, 296.