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From Astronomy to Theology: The Interdisciplinary Story of Abraham in Clement

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From Astronomy to Theology

- ❖ Abstract: The second century author, Clement the Alexandrian, developed a complex approach to natural contemplation which corresponds to contemporary interdisciplinary methods. One of Clement's illustrations of this approach was Abraham, construed as an astronomer interested in the divine. This presentation, a summary of a book in preparation, will outline the elements of Clement's method and will focus on his take on Abraham.

From Astronomy to Theology

- ❖ Outlines
 - ❖ Clement's natural contemplation: summarising the project
 - ❖ The Clementine profile of Abraham

Clement's Natural Contemplation

- ❖ Clement (d. early second century)
- ❖ Athenian (?), philosophical quest
- ❖ Conversion in Alexandria, guided by Pantaeenus
- ❖ Teacher of Christian philosophy; catechist (?)
- ❖ Major works: *Exhortation, The Tutor, Miscellanies*

Clement's Natural Contemplation

- ❖ Adherent to the Classical principles of *paideia*: training and formation
- ❖ A structured pedagogy rooted in
 - ❖ Ecclesial initiation: catechumen, baptised, advanced
 - ❖ Platonic curriculum: ethics, physics, epoptics

Clement's Natural Contemplation

- ❖ The platonic curriculum as a framework for theology and scriptural interpretation
- ❖ “Moses’ philosophy is divided into four parts: the historical one, the one properly referred to as legislative (both pertaining to **ethical** subjects), then the third is the liturgical one, which corresponds to **natural contemplation**, and the fourth, above all, the domain of theology or the **epoptic**, which, according to Plato is about the great mysteries of existence and which domain Aristotle designates as coming after the natural things.” (*Miscellanies* 1.28.176)

Clement's Natural Contemplation

- ❖ A development of the platonic curriculum of ethics, physics, epoptics
- ❖ Clementine physics / natural contemplation
 - ❖ Description: scientific expertise
 - ❖ Interpretation: theological insight
 - ❖ Vision: divine grasp

Clement's Natural Contemplation

- ❖ Clementine physics
 - ❖ Description: reality is unity and diversity (*Miscellanies* 1.13.57; 2.17.76)
 - ❖ Interpretation: reality perceived as song and doxology through the lens of Scripture (*Prophetic selections* 1.1-5)
 - ❖ Vision: grasping, like Christ, the past, the present, and the future of the cosmos (*Miscellanies* 6.8.70; 6.9.78)

Clement's Natural Contemplation

- ❖ The “holy gnostic” (*Miscellanies* 2.20.104; 7.1.2)
 - ❖ Saintly: illustrating ethics
 - ❖ Educated: illustrating physics
 - ❖ Deified: illustrating epoptics

Abraham

- ❖ The “holy gnostic”: Abraham, the astronomer become a theologian
- ❖ The patriarch “was [initially] called Abram, which means ‘elevated father,’ for being interested in the lofty philosophy of the atmospheric occurrences and the celestial movements of the astronomical phenomena. Afterwards, however, on looking up to heaven, he saw either the Son in the Spirit, as some interpret [the events], or a glorious angel, or he recognised God in some other way as superior to the whole of creation’s order. For this reason he received [another] *alpha*, [which signifies] the knowledge of the one and only God. So he was called Abraham, becoming a sage and a lover of God instead of a natural scientist.” (*Miscellanies* 5.1.8)

Abraham

- ❖ Observations
 - ❖ From Abram (astronomy) to Abraham (theology)
 - ❖ Astronomy prepares one for theology, but once theology is found astronomy does not cease to matter (*Miscellanies* 6.10.80)

Abraham

- ❖ Exemplifying Abraham's natural contemplation by commenting on Genesis 22:3-4 (the three-day journey to Mount Moria)
- ❖ "The first day [represents] the sight of beautiful things [in nature]; the second [signifies] the soul's desire of improvement; the third [corresponds to] the mind discerning the spiritual things, for the eyes of understanding have been opened by the Teacher that resurrected in the third day . . . It was only normal for him to have seen the place from a distance since the location of God is inaccessible—that place of which Plato learnt from Moses as encompassing all things and the universe, and which he called the space of the forms." (*Miscellanies* 5.11.73)

Abraham

- ❖ Observations
 - ❖ Realising the beauty of the cosmos
 - ❖ Desiring improvement
 - ❖ Discerning the invisible / spiritual side of reality

Conclusions

- ❖ The inextricable link between the spiritual journey and the contemplation of nature
- ❖ Purification and virtue are catalysts for knowledge
- ❖ The more spiritual one gets, the more interested one is in making sense of God's creation
- ❖ This entails an interdisciplinary bridge of scientific expertise and theology

Of interest

- ❖ A context for this talk
- ❖ <https://www.academia.edu/37072990/>
A Triadic Pattern within a Triadic Pattern Clements
Contemplation of Nature