

Augustine and Orthodoxy in the Creation Day Debate

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One of my seminary professors told the story of a married couple out for a drive. The wife complained that her husband no longer sat close. The husband replied, "Who moved?" That question might be asked of the church and the creation days. Are advocates of six-day creation troubling the church with something new, or are they calling the church back to orthodox faith? To help answer this question we will consider Augustine's nonliteral view of the creation days and some later reactions to his view.

AUGUSTINE'S NONLITERAL INTERPRETATION

Before his celebrated conversion in the year 386, Augustine (354-430) had been a Manichee. The Manichees rejected the Old Testament and held a form of dualism, believing the world arose from a mythical struggle between light and dark powers. After taking a position teaching rhetoric in Milan, Augustine was attracted to the gifted preacher Ambrose (340-397), the city's bishop. He later confessed, "To him was I unknowingly led by Thee, that by him I might knowingly be led to Thee."¹

After his conversion, Augustine accepted the authority of Scripture over human philosophy. Perhaps stimulated by Ambrose's teaching on six-day creation,² Augustine resolved to convince the Manichees of their error by expounding the book of Genesis. After two unfinished efforts, he finally completed a lengthy commentary, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, covering the first three chapters.

In his later and greatest work, *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, "the Scripture . . . has paramount authority . . . to which we yield assent in all matters . . . That God made the world, we can believe from no one more safely than God Himself."³ Regarding the age of the earth, he wrote in *The City of God*, "Reckoning by the sacred writings, we find that not 6,000 years have past."⁴

However, particularly in his earlier commentary, Augustine's interpretation of Scripture was influenced by Greek philosophy and science. Through both Neoplatonist philosophy and the "science" of spontaneous generation, Augustine saw three phases of creation: the "unchangeable forms in the Word of God," "seminal seeds" created in the instant of creation, and a later "springing forth" in the course of time.⁵ Frederick Copleston in his *A History of Philosophy* noted that these ideas were doubtless found by Augustine in the philosophy of the Neoplatonist, Plotinus, and could be traced back to Stoicism.⁶ The later "springing forth," of which Augustine wrote, reflected the common belief in spontaneous generation. According to W. K. C. Guthrie, "St. Augustine's version of [spontaneous generation] was that there were two kinds of seed, one implanted in animals that they might reproduce their own kinds, and the other existing in the elements and becoming active under certain conditions."⁷

How did these secular beliefs affect Augustine's view of the six creation days? In the words of Louis Berkhof, Augustine "was evidently inclined to think God created all things in a moment of time, and that the thought of days was simply introduced to aid the finite intelligence."⁸ Looking at Augustine's own words, taken from his Genesis commentary, we read, "In this narrative of creation Holy Scripture has said of the Creator that He completed His works in six days, and elsewhere, without contradicting this, it has been written of the same Creator that *He created all things together* . . . Why then was there any need for six distinct days to be set forth in the narrative one after the other? The reason is that those who cannot understand the meaning of the text, *He created all things together*, cannot understand the meaning of the Scripture unless the narrative proceeds slowly step by step . . . For this Scripture text

that narrates the works of God according to the days mentioned above, and that Scripture text that says *God created all things together*, are both true."⁹

Augustine's references to Sirach, an Apocryphal book, have been italicized for emphasis. Sirach 18:1 was Augustine's key verse to defend that everything recorded in Genesis 1 and 2 had been created simultaneously. It provided the Biblical support for his philosophy and science. A Platonic god could not be involved in his creation on a day by day basis. And spontaneous generation provided for things coming into existence after creation, but not just in six days, since everyone knew that it was still occurring.

Augustine reasoned he was giving priority to the authority of Scripture because he accepted the Apocrypha as Scripture. The Apocrypha was part of the Old Latin version upon which Augustine depended, for he could not read Hebrew and was not proficient in Greek when he wrote his commentary. This hindered his study of Scripture and limited his access to the early Greek fathers, such as Theophilus of Antioch, who defended six-day creation."¹⁰

Although we do not share Augustine's view of the Apocrypha, his rationale from Sirach 18:1 disappears if one examines the original Greek on which the Old Latin was based. The Old Latin reads, according to Taylor, the translator of Augustine's commentary, "He who lives forever created all things together,"¹¹ or "at the same time," from the Latin, *simul*, from which we get *simultaneous*. The original Greek reads, "He who lives forever created all things in common," from the Greek, *koine*, the same word used in speaking of the common or *koine* Greek of the time of Christ. The RSV which included a new translation of the Apocrypha from the Greek paraphrased this into, "created the whole universe." There is no extant Hebrew text of Sirach 18:1. Since Jerome did not accept the Apocryphal books as canonical, he never retranslated Sirach. The Roman Catholic church, which kept the Apocrypha in the Bible, incorporated the Old Latin text of Sirach into the Vulgate. See Figure 1.

Perhaps due to his correspondence with Jerome and his study of Greek, Augustine appears to have moderated his position in *The City of God*. We have already mentioned his 6,000 year estimate for the earth's age, a subject he did not touch in his earlier commentary. Sirach 18:1, the key verse in his commentary, was never mentioned in his lengthy discussion of creation in *The City of God*.

Figure 1

Sirach 18:1, Augustine's Key Verse in his Commentary	
OL & VG tr.	Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul. He who lives forever created all things simultaneously.
LXX tr.	Ho zon eis ton aiona ektisen ta panta koinei He who lives forever created all things in common.
	There is no extant Hebrew text.
Key: OL-Old Latin; VG-Vulgate; LXX-Septuagint; tr.-author's translation.	

In *The City of God*, Augustine leaned toward taking the creation days literally. He wrote about the first three days: "What kind of days these were it is extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible for us to conceive . . . the first three days of all were passed without sun, since it is reported to have been made on the fourth day. And first of all, indeed, light was made by the word of God, and God, we read, separated it from the darkness . . . but what kind of light that was, and by what periodic movement it made evening and morning, is beyond the reach of our senses; neither can we understand how it was, and yet must unhesitatingly believe it."¹² Augustine considered that the light may have proceeded "from the spot where the sun was afterwards kindled," but added that the light may have signified the heavenly Jerusalem.¹³

Though still allowing for an allegorical interpretation, Augustine, at the end of his life, was giving more weight to Genesis than to Sirach. Yet Augustine never retracted what he wrote in his earlier commentary and it has received much attention in the church.¹⁴

REACTION TO AUGUSTINE'S VIEW OF THE SIX DAYS

Middle Ages

A few medieval theologians followed Augustine's view, reflecting the continuing influence of Greek philosophy and science, as well as Augustine's stature. However, some like Andrew (d. 1175) of St. Victor, Paris, concluded that those who interpreted the creation days like Augustine were wrong because they relied on an apocryphal book instead of Scripture. Genesis was to be our primary source. If Scripture said the world was created in six days, then Augustine had to be rejected.¹⁵

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), in his *Summa Theologiae*, or "Summary of Theology," wrote about Augustine's view: "On this matter

Augustine departs from other commentators. Augustine's theory is that all of what is referred to as seven days is but one day presented under a seven-fold aspect. Other commentators hold that there were seven different days and not just one." Aquinas went on to list arguments on both sides: "So as not to prejudice either view, we must deal with the reasons for both."¹⁶

Reformation Period

When we come to the Reformers, we find, as with Andrew of St. Victor, a clear critique of Augustine's commentary on the creation days.

In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Martin Luther (1483-1564) wrote, "Augustine . . . [held] that the world was created instantaneously and all at the same time, not successively in the course of six days. Moreover, Augustine resorts to extraordinary trifling in his treatment of the six days, which he makes out to be mystical days of knowledge among the angels, not natural ones." Luther goes on to say, "[It does not] serve any useful purpose to make Moses at the onset so mystical and allegorical. His purpose is to teach us, not about allegorical creatures and an allegorical world but about real creatures and a visible world apprehended by the senses." Luther concludes, "Therefore so far as this opinion of Augustine is concerned, we assert that Moses spoke in the literal sense, not allegorically or figuratively, i.e., that the world, with all its creatures, was created within six days, as the words read. If we do not comprehend the reason for this, let us remain pupils and leave the job of teacher to the Holy Spirit."¹⁷

John Calvin (1509-1564), in his commentary on Genesis, criticized Augustine's view and his "unskillful" reliance on the Latin translation of Sirach 18:1. Commenting on the first day, Calvin wrote, "Here the error of those is manifestly refuted, who maintain that the world was made in a moment. For it is too violent a cavil to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction. Let us rather conclude that God himself took the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men. . . . For the confirmation of the gloss above alluded to, a passage from Ecclesiasticus is unskillfully cited. 'He who liveth forever created all things at once,' (Ecclus. 18:1). For the Greek adverb *koine*, which the writer uses, means no such thing, nor does it refer to time, but to all things universally."¹⁸

During this period there was a resurgence of Greek ideas about creation. One Neoplatonist, Sir Thomas Browne, speculated in the 1630s that the first

chapters of Genesis were "perhaps the mystical method of Moses bred up in the Hieroglyphical Schools of the Egyptians."¹⁹ Historian Basil Willey says, "Browne [did not] think that God took six days to create the world; the six days must rather symbolize the conception of the work in the mind of God."²⁰ Browne was following the same ideas that influenced Augustine.

It was in this climate that the Westminster Assembly, in their Confession of Faith, affirmed

It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create or make of nothing the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.²¹

Later in the century, Francis Turretin (1623-1687) critiqued Augustine's view in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Turretin wrote, "Augustine thought that creation took place not during an interval of six days, but in a single moment But there are the following objections to this opinion: (1) the simple and historical Mosaic narration, which mentions six days and ascribes a particular work to each day; (2) the earth is said to have been without form and void and darkness rested upon the face of the deep (which could not have been said if all things had been created in one moment); (3) in the fourth commandment God is said to have been engaged in creation six days and to have rested on the seventh This reason would have had no weight if God had created all things in a single moment."²²

References to Augustine's view of the creation days disappeared for almost two hundred years. The Westminster Confession of Faith's affirmation of six-day creation became the standard for many churches. The Confession with its article on creation was incorporated into the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Congregational Platform of 1648, the English Congregational Savoy Declaration of 1658, the Baptist London Confession of 1671 and the Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) Baptist Confession of 1742. These confessions were the doctrinal standard for several denominations into the 19th century.²³

Modern Era

The claim of long geological ages in the early 1800s led to new interpretations of Genesis. Some proposed a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Other said the six creation days were long ages. Charles Hodge (1797-1878) of Princeton first supported the former and then the latter view.²⁴ Hodge was apparently the first

in his day to appeal to Augustine's Genesis commentary to support this compromise with science.

In his *Systematic Theology* Hodge wrote, "There is . . . according to Scripture, not only an immediate, instantaneous creation *ex nihilo* by the simple word of God, but a mediate, progressive creation; the power of God working in union with second causes. Augustine clearly recognizes this idea." Hodge then quotes a passage from Augustine's Genesis commentary where Augustine is quoting Sirach 18:1. Hodge's quote is in the original Latin. John H. Taylor's translation reads: "In the seed, then, there was invisibly present all that would develop in time into a tree. And in this same way we must picture the world, *when God made all things together*, as having had all things together which were made in it and with it when day was made. This includes not only heaven with sun, moon, and stars, whose splendor remains unchanged as they move in a circular motion; and earth and the deep waters, which are in almost unceasing motion, and which, placed below the sky, make up the lower part of the world; but it includes also the beings which water and earth produced in potency and in their causes before they came forth in the course of time as they have become known to us in the works which God even now produces."²⁵

How long was Hodge's "progressive creation"? He wrote: "According to the more obvious interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis, this work is accomplished in six days. This therefore has been the common belief of Christians. It is a belief founded on a given interpretation of the Mosaic record, which interpretation, however, must be controlled not only by the laws of language, but by the facts. This is at present an open question. The facts necessary for its decision have not yet been duly authenticated. The believer may calmly await the result."²⁶ While Hodge opposed godless Darwinism,²⁷ he departed from the Reformers on the creation days. This included Turretin, whose work, cited above, was the systematic textbook at Princeton during Hodge's time as a student and teacher. Upon its publication in the 1870s, Hodge's text replaced Turretin's.

Even though Augustine thought the universe was young and creation had been instantaneous, his nonliteral approach to the creation days was now being used to accommodate the evolutionists' long ages. In 1912 James Orr (1844-1913) wrote in *The Fundamentals*, "One may well ask, as was done by Augustine long before geology was thought of, what kind of *days* these were. . . . There is no violence done to the narrative in substituting in thought *aeonic* days - vast cosmic periods - for *days* in our narrower, sun-measured scale."²⁸

Interestingly, a decade later John T. Scopes' (1900-1970) attorney attempted to discredit William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) by showing Bryan interpreted the creation days as long periods of time. Bryan's nonliteral interpretation of the days was seen by his opponent as a departure from the Biblical text, no different from departure on other details.²⁹

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLDING TO SIX-DAY CREATION

Some of Hodge's reasoning against six-day creation was used by B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) in rejecting any chronological significance of the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11. He wrote, "It must be confessed, indeed, that the impression is readily taken from a *prima facie* view of the Biblical record, that the human race is of comparatively recent origin. It has been the usual supposition of simple Bible readers, therefore, that the Biblical data allow for the duration of the life of the human race on earth only a paltry six thousand years or so." Warfield concluded, "So far as Scripture assertions are concerned, we may suppose any length of time to have intervened between these events which may otherwise appear *reasonable*."³⁰

In his argument for the unity of the human race Warfield assumed a universal flood,³¹ which is rejected by many Christian scholars today as inconsistent with geology. However, if we do not accept the language of Scripture beginning with the six creation days, what will keep us from rejecting whatever does not seem "reasonable"?

We have the privilege and responsibility of guarding what has been entrusted to our care and teaching it to the next generation.³² Should the church follow 19th century tradition rather than the Reformers, and more important, Scripture?

"Six days you shall labor and do all your work . . . for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them."³³ These words from the Ten Commandments, were spoken by God to his people. When these words are repeated in Exodus 31, we learn that God not only spoke them, but inscribed them on tablets of stone. The Sabbath commandment reminded the Israelites they were in a covenant with the almighty Creator, the One who made the world and everything in it in the space of six days as a pattern for His people.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ **Augustine, *Confessions*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers 1, tr. by J. G. Pilkington, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956, 5.13.23.**
- ² **Ambrose, *Hexameron*, Fathers of the Church 42, tr. by John J. Savage, New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961, 1.10.37: "Scripture established a law that twenty-four hours, including both day and night, should be given the name of day."**
- ³ **Augustine, *The City of God*, NPNF 2, tr. by Marcus Dods, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956, 11.3,4.**
- ⁴ ***Ibid.*, 12.10.**
- ⁵ **Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Ancient Christian Writers 41-42, tr. and annotated by John Hammond Taylor, New York: Newman Press, 1982, 5.12.28.**
- ⁶ **Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, London: Search, 1950, 2.76.**
- ⁷ **W. K. C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning*, 41.**
- ⁸ **Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977(1938), 127.**
- ⁹ **Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 4.33-34, 52-53.**
- ¹⁰ **John H. Taylor, note in Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1, 271. See Theophilus, *To Autolycus*, 2.4, 10, 15, Oxford Early Christian Texts, and author's "The Early Church Defended Creation Science," *Impact No. 160*, Institute for Creation Research, October 1986.**
- ¹¹ **John H. Taylor, note in Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1, 254.**
- ¹² **Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.6-7.**
- ¹³ ***Ibid.***
- ¹⁴ **Some of this material has been taken from the author's "Augustine on the Creation Days," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 32/4, December 1989, 457-464.**
- ¹⁵ **Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1964, 133-135; Smalley says the Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) had interpreted the six days literally. Andrew did not simply choose Bede over Augustine, but went back to Scripture to resolve the issue.**
- ¹⁶ **Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.74,2, tr. by William A. Wallace, Volume 10, *Cosmogony*, Blackfriars (McGraw-Hill: New York) 1967, 157 & 159.**
- ¹⁷ **Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1-5*, ed. by**

Jaroslav Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia, 1958, 4-5.

- ¹⁸ **John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, tr. by John King, Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979 (1554), 78. Sirach and Ecclesiasticus are alternate titles for the same Apocryphal book.**
- ¹⁹ **Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici (Religion of a Physician)*, i.xxxiv, pub. in 1642, quoted by Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967 (1933), 68.**
- ²⁰ **Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background*, 68.**
- ²¹ **Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, 3 Vols.*, Grand Rapids: Baker, [1877], 3.611.**
- ²² **Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, c. 1680, tr. by George Musgrove Giger, ed. by James T. Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1992, 444-445.**
- ²³ **See author's "Creeds and the Six Creation Days," *Impact No. 235*, Institute for Creation Research, January, 1993.**
- ²⁴ **John Corrigan Wells, *Charles Hodge's Critique of Darwinism*, Ph.D. diss., Yale, 1986, 57-60.**
- ²⁵ **Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, no date [1871-1873], 1.557-558; English translation from Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 5.23.45. Emphasis added.**
- ²⁶ **Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1.557-558.**
- ²⁷ **Charles Hodge, *What Is Darwinism?*, New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Company, 1874.**
- ²⁸ **James Orr, *The Fundamentals*, Chicago: Testimony Publishing Co., no date, IV, 101. Orr had earlier made such a reference to Augustine in *The Christian View of God and the World*, Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1963 (1890-91), 421. Another leading theologian, William G. T. Shedd, made a similar reference to Augustine in *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969 (1888), 1.475-476.**
- ²⁹ **Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958, 171-173.**
- ³⁰ **B. B. Warfield, "On the Antiquity and the Unity of the Human Race," *The Princeton Theological Review*, 9/1, January 1911, 2,11. Emphasis added.**
- ³¹ ***Ibid.*, 23.**
- ³² **1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14; 2:2.**
- ³³ **Exodus 20:11 (New International Version).**
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