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AUGUSTINE ON THE CREATION DAYS

LOUIS LAVALLEE*

Augustine, the famous bishop of Hippo, is venerated by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike. Both quote him to support a nonliteral interpretation of the six creation days.

A Catholic catechism, referencing Augustine, reads:

As early Christian writers noted, the six "days" of creation could hardly have been solar days such as we now know, for according to the account in Genesis the sun was not made until the fourth "day."¹

On the Protestant side James Montgomery Boice writes:

On the surface it would be natural to take the word "day" in Genesis 1 as referring to a literal twenty-four-hour day. But even this is not without question, for the account clearly indicates that God did not establish the sun and other heavenly bodies for the regulating of "seasons and days and years" until day four. Augustine noted this 1500 years ago.²

R. Laird Harris states: "As far back as Augustine, it was considered that these could be epochal days."³

Yet Davis Young has shown that "in general, the church fathers regarded the days of creation as ordinary days corresponding to our existing sun-measured, solar days."⁴ Why did Augustine reach a different conclusion? Was it only because the sun was made on the fourth day? How long were the days in his view? Did Augustine find exegetical reasons to warrant harmonizing Scripture with long geologic ages and/or evolutionary development? In this paper we will examine Augustine's ideas and the reasons why he held them.

After his conversion Augustine humbly submitted to the authority of Scripture. Yet much of his argument about the creation days is unacceptable to evangelicals. He exegeted Genesis from the OL, a translation of a translation (the LXX). He relied again and again on the Apocrypha as Scripture. And he harmonized his interpretation with now outdated scientific theories, the ideas of spontaneous generation and geocentrism.

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¹ *The Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism for Adults* (ed. R. Lawler, D. Wuerl and T. Lawler; Huntington: *Our Sunday Visitor*, 1976) 59.

² J. M. Boice, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 1. 66.

³ R. L. Harris, *The Bible and Science: Leader's Guide* (St. Louis: Covenant Seminary Multi-Media Ministries, 1987) 9.

⁴ D. A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 20.

I. AUGUSTINE'S INTEREST IN CREATION

Augustine was interested in the Genesis creation account in part because he had been a Manichee. The Manichees, who rejected the OT, were dualists. They believed that the world arose from a mythical struggle between light and dark powers. In his *Confessions* Augustine tells us how he fell in with the Manichees in his early twenties:

I resolved, therefore, to direct my mind to the Holy Scriptures, that I might see what they were . . . but . . . my inflated pride shunned their style, nor could the sharpness of my wit pierce their inner meaning. Yet, truly, were they such as would develop in little ones; but I scorned to be a little one, and, swollen with pride, I looked upon myself as a great one. Therefore I fell among men proudly raving, very carnal, and voluble, in whose mouths were the snares of the devil.⁵

For almost nine years Augustine "wallowed in the slime of that deep pit."⁶ Then with the help of "those identical persons, drunk with Manichean vanities,"⁷ Augustine secured a position teaching rhetoric in Milan. This was a providential answer to his mother Monica's prayers since he now came under the preaching of Ambrose, whose speaking ability first attracted Augustine and who held to twenty-four-hour creation days.⁸ Augustine confessed to God: "To him was I unknowingly led by Thee, that by him I might knowingly be led to Thee."⁹

Augustine had thought "nothing could be answered to the Manichees' arguments."¹⁰ But now "after I had heard one or two hard places of the Old Testament resolved . . . , I was slain. . . . Earnestly hereupon did I bend my mind, to see if it were possible upon certain proofs to convince the Manichees of falsehood."¹¹ It was in this spirit that two years after his conversion Augustine wrote of Genesis:

If anyone wishes to interpret in a literal sense everything written in this book, that is, to understand it only according to the letter of the text, and if in doing this he avoids blasphemy and explains everything in agreement with the Catholic faith, not only is he not to be discouraged, but he should be considered an outstanding interpreter worthy of great praise.¹²

Yet this commentary was largely an allegorical interpretation. Augustine later wrote:

Whenever I was unable to discover the literal meaning of a passage, I explained its figurative meaning as briefly and as clearly as I was able, so

⁵ Augustine *Confessions* (NPNF 1) 3.5-6.9-10.

⁶ *Ibid.* 3.11.20.

⁷ *Ibid.* 5.13.23.

⁸ Ambrose *Hexameron* (FC 42) 1.10.37.

⁹ Augustine *Confessions* 5.13.23. Augustine's celebrated conversion came in the year 386 when he was thirty-two years old.

¹⁰ Augustine *Confessions* (LCL 27) 5.14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Augustine *A Commentary on Genesis: Two Books against the Manichees* 2.2.3, quoted in Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (ACW 42) 8.2.5.

that the Manichees might not be discouraged by the length of the work or the obscurity of its contents and thus put the book aside. I was mindful, however, of the purpose which I had set before me and which I was unable to achieve, that is, to show how everything in Genesis is to be understood first of all not in the figurative but in the proper sense.¹³

Three years later, in 391, Augustine tried again in a work he later called *The Literal Meaning of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*. In his *Retractions*, written about 427, Augustine comments on this work and suggests that people "read the twelve books that I composed much later. From those, this book can be judged."¹⁴ In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* he wrote:

And now the Lord has wished that I should look at and consider the same matter more thoroughly, and I believe that according to His will I can reasonably hope that I shall be able to show how the Book of Genesis has been written with a proper rather than an allegorical meaning in view.¹⁵

Augustine also wrote on creation in books 11–13 of his *Confessions*, about the year 400, and again in his greatest work, *The City of God*, books 11–12, about 417. Only in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* and *The City of God* did Augustine discuss the six creation days, with the latter generally following the more extensive treatment in the commentary.

II. CRITIQUE OF AUGUSTINE'S EXEGESIS

1. *Dependence on the OL*. In his *Confessions* Augustine prayed:

Let me hear and understand how in the beginning Thou didst make the heaven and the earth. Moses wrote this; he wrote and departed, passed hence from Thee to Thee. Nor now is he before me; for if he were I would adjure him by Thee that he would open unto me these things, and I would lend the ears of my body to the sounds bursting forth from his mouth. And should he speak in the Hebrew tongue, in vain would it beat on my senses, nor would aught touch my mind; but if in Latin, I should know what he said.¹⁶

Although Augustine had laid aside Manichean rationalism and embraced the Scriptures, he was limited by his reliance upon the OL text. For example Augustine argues from the OL of Gen 2:4, which reads: "This is the book of the creation of heaven and earth. When day was made, God made heaven and earth"¹⁷:

¹³ *The Literal Meaning* 8.2.5.

¹⁴ Augustine *The Retractions* (FC 60) 1.17.

¹⁵ *The Literal Meaning* 8.2.5.

¹⁶ *The Confessions* (NPNF) 11.3.5.

¹⁷ *Hic est liber creaturae caeli et terrae. Cum factus est dies, fecit Deus caelum et terram*. The Vg, translated from the Hebrew by Jerome during Augustine's lifetime, reads *Ista sunt generationes caeli et terrae, quando creatae sunt, in die quo fecit Dominus Deus caelum et terram*.

Now perhaps here we have a confirmation of what we tried to show in the previous book, that God created everything at one time. The earlier narrative stated that all things were created and finished on six successive days, but now to one day everything is assigned, under the terms "heaven" and "earth."¹⁸

2. *The Apocrypha as Scripture.* Augustine goes on to say, "Hence, I do now appeal to another book of Holy Scripture to prove that God 'created all things together.'"¹⁹ He is quoting Sir 18:1,²⁰ an apocryphal book he regarded as "Holy Scripture."

Augustine had earlier resolved the apparent conflict between the seven days in Genesis 1 and the simultaneous creation of Sir 18:1:

It follows, therefore, that He, who created all things together, simultaneously created these six days, or seven, or rather the one day six or seven times repeated. 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 arrive at the meaning of Scripture unless the narrative proceeds slowly step by step.²¹

Later Augustine wrote:

Now the reason why Scripture records that the creation was made perfect in six days, with the same day repeated six times, is that six is a perfect number, not that any interval of time was necessary for God, as if he could not have simultaneously created all things, which would thenceforth by regular movements mark the successive units of time.²²

Augustine's use of the OL with the Apocrypha reflected his view of the LXX. A. Polman shows that Augustine believed that the LXX, with the Apocrypha, had been divinely inspired. Except for this "deviation" Polman thought Augustine was on the "right road" in his treatment of Scripture.²³

Although he had a high view of the LXX, Augustine's command of Greek was limited until late in life. John Hammond Taylor, translator of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, writes of Augustine's

limited knowledge of Greek at the time he was writing his commentary on Genesis (A.D. 401-15). He was constantly studying Greek during the years of his episcopate in order to understand better the Greek text of Scripture

¹⁸ *The Literal Meaning* 5.3.6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The Latin reads *Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul* and the Greek *Ho zōn eis ton aiōna ektisen ta panta koinē*. According to translator J. H. Taylor (*The Literal Meaning*, 1. 254), "The word *simul* ('at one time,' 'all together') in the Latin version seems to be a mistranslation of the Greek *koinē* ('commonly,' 'without exception')." Jerome, not accepting the Apocrypha as Scripture, did not retranslate Sirach, so the Vg today contains this OL reading.

²¹ *The Literal Meaning* 4.33.52.

²² Augustine *The City of God* 11.30.

²³ A. D. R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 180-198.

and the works of the Greek Fathers, but it was not until after 415 that he had a sufficient mastery to read *in extenso* Greek patristic works in the original.²⁴

3. *Spontaneous generation.* The OL of Gen 2:4b-5a reads: "When day was made, God made heaven and earth and every green thing of the field before it appeared above the earth, and all the grass of the field before it sprang forth."²⁵ Augustine explained:

One might be much more inclined to believe that God made them at the time when they sprang forth, not before they sprang forth, were we not informed by the sacred text that it was before they sprang forth that God made them.²⁶

Elaborating, he stated:

On the one hand, they were made with heaven and earth when that day transcending our knowledge and experience was made, which God first made; and on the other hand, they sprang forth above the earth, a thing that could not happen except on days marked by the course of the sun after the proper lapse of time for each kind.²⁷ . . . In the earth from the beginning, in what I might call the roots of time, God created what was to be in times to come.²⁸

This was also true for Adam and Eve:

The original creation, therefore, of the two was different from their later creation. First they were created in potency through the word of God and inserted seminally into the world when He created all things together, after which He rested from these works on the seventh day. From these creatures all things were made, each in its own proper time throughout the course of history. Later the man and the woman were created in accordance with God's creative activity as it is at work throughout the ages and with which he works even now; and thus it was ordained that in time Adam would be made from the slime of the earth and the woman from the side of her husband.²⁹

As to the maturity of Adam when "inserted seminally" and when he sprang forth, Augustine concludes: "It is most likely that God made him in those causes in the form of perfect manhood."³⁰

Augustine is careful not to attribute any inherent power to the material creation to bring forth life. Only what had been made potentially on the first day could subsequently spring forth.³¹

²⁴ *The Literal Meaning*, 1. 271.

²⁵ Verse 5a reads essentially the same in the OL, Vg, LXX and Hebrew. We are concerned here with Augustine's understanding of "before it sprang forth."

²⁶ *The Literal Meaning* 5.4.7.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 5.4.9-10.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 5.4.11.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 6.5.8. Augustine uses various Latin expressions for the seminal seeds implanted in the earth at creation including *primordia causarum*, *rationes*, *causales rationes* and *rationes seminales* (*The Literal Meaning*, 1. 253).

³⁰ *Ibid.* 6.18.29.

³¹ *Ibid.* 5.4.11; 5.20.41; 6.11.19.

Many attribute Augustine's ideas to the influence of philosophy. For example, Frederick Copleston wrote:

The idea of these germinal potentialities was to be found, and doubtless was found by Augustine, in the philosophy of Plotinus and ultimately it goes back to the *rationes seminales* or *logoi spermatikoi* of Stoicism.³²

W. K. C. Guthrie observed that

the belief in spontaneous generation was practically universal throughout antiquity. St. Augustine's version of it was that there were two kinds of seeds, one implanted in animals that they might reproduce their own kinds, the other existing in the elements and becoming active under certain conditions.³³

Augustine believed in the spontaneous generation of trees³⁴ and of creatures like frogs.³⁵ After the flood larger animals may have sprung forth on isolated islands,³⁶ but all men are "descended from the one man who was first created."³⁷

4. *Geocentricism*. We have seen how 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."³⁸ Geocentrism influenced this conclusion on the six creation days. In his commentary Augustine considered the possibility that the light made on the first day "travels round like the sun."³⁹ But he rejected this idea for philosophical and scientific reasons:

We must ask again how light could have traveled about to cause the passage of day and night not only before the heavenly bodies were made, but also before the making of the heaven which is called the firmament. . . . We finally took a stand and brought our discussion to an end by advancing the opinion that the light which was first made was the formation of the spiritual creation.⁴⁰

For Augustine a day required the sun going around the earth, but the sun was not made until day four. Later Augustine was more open to the possibility that the light made on day one somehow moved causing the daily cycle.

What these days were like it is highly difficult or even impossible for us to imagine, let alone say. We see, I mean to say, that days as we know them

³² F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Search, 1950), 2. 76. Augustine envisioned three aspects of creation. In addition to the "seminal reasons" and the later "springing forth" there were the prior "unchangeable forms in the Word of God" (*The Literal Meaning* 5.12.28).

³³ W. K. C. Guthrie, *In The Beginning* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1957) 41.

³⁴ *The Literal Meaning* 8.3.6.

³⁵ *The City of God* 16.7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* 16.8.

³⁸ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977 [1938]) 127.

³⁹ *The Literal Meaning* 1.10.22.

⁴⁰ *The Literal Meaning* 4.21.38.

have evening only as a result of sunset and a morning only as a result of sunrise. But the first three days of creation passed without any sun; the sun is reported to have been created on the fourth day. Scripture tells us that originally at least light was created by the word of God, and God is said to have divided the light from the darkness and to have called the light day and the darkness night. But the nature of that light, by what shift back and forth it caused morning and evening and what kind of thing evening and morning were are questions that are far beyond the reach of our perception. Nor can our understanding see the way which it is true, though that it is true we must believe untroubled by doubt. For either there exists a physical light, whether in the upper regions of the universe far beyond our power of sight or some light from which derived the later inflammation of the sun, or else the word light is used of that holy city, composed of holy angels and blessed spirits, of which the Apostle says: "The Jerusalem that is above, our eternal mother in heaven."⁴¹

5. *The place of science.* Augustine desired to harmonize Scripture with science. He even warned against criticizing science:

Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens . . . about the motion and orbit of the stars . . . about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon . . . about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics.⁴²

While we admire Augustine's appreciation for science, men have been wrong even when they were "certain from reason and experience." Augustine did go on to acknowledge the priority of Scripture over scientific theory:

But more dangerous is the error of certain weak brethren who faint away when they hear these irreligious critics learnedly and eloquently discoursing on the theories of astronomy or on any of the questions relating to the elements of the universe. . . . I have learnt that a man is not in any difficulty in making a reply according to his faith which he ought to make to those who try to defame our Holy Scripture. . . . When they produce from any of their books a theory contrary to Scripture, and therefore contrary to the Catholic faith, either we shall have some ability to demonstrate that it is absolutely false, or at least we ourselves will hold it so without any shadow of a doubt.⁴³

Concerning the proper interpretation of Scripture, Augustine concluded:

Let us choose that one which appears as certainly the meaning intended by the author. But if this is not clear, then at least we should choose an interpretation in keeping with the context of Scripture and in harmony with our faith.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *The City of God* 11.6-7.

⁴² *The Literal Meaning* 1.19.39.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 1.20-21.40-41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 1.21.41.

This apparently explains how Augustine could hold an allegorical interpretation while seeking the "literal meaning" of the text. Norman Geisler suggests that Augustine "used allegory to build on the literal sense."⁴⁵

III. CONCLUSION

After his conversion Augustine had a high view of Scripture. He tried to submit to all its teaching:

Here then is the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. . . . This Mediator first through the prophets, then through himself and later through the apostles, said as much as he thought sufficient and in addition established the Scriptures which are called canonical; they have pre-eminent authority, and we put faith in them concerning matters of which it is not good to be ignorant, but which we are not capable of knowing ourselves. . . . We have no more trustworthy witness than God himself to testify that he made the universe. Where did we hear him speak? Nowhere more clearly as yet than in the holy Scriptures.⁴⁶

Here the bishop still sets an example for the Church.

We have focused on weaknesses in Augustine's exegesis to caution against following the tradition, since Darwin, of using Augustine's illustrious name to support harmonizing Genesis 1 and the idea of an ancient earth and/or evolutionary development.⁴⁷ Augustine himself cautioned his readers about his interpretation:

Whoever, then, does not accept the meaning that my limited powers have been able to discover or conjecture but seeks in the enumeration of the days of creation a different meaning, which might be understood not in a prophetic or figurative sense, but literally and more aptly, in interpreting the works of creation, let him search and find a solution with God's help. I myself may possibly discover some other meaning more in harmony with the words of Scripture.⁴⁸

The proper interpretation of Scripture is still our concern. Are we faithful to the original, inspired text? Is our interpretation governed by the inspired books alone? And do we refrain from harmonizing Scripture with transitory scientific theories?

⁴⁵ N. Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method? A Rejoinder to Gundry," *JETS* 26 (1983) 107.

⁴⁶ *The City of God* 11.2-4.

⁴⁷ Nineteenth-century theologians making such reference to Augustine include C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1. 557; W. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969 [1888]), 1. 475-476; J. Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963 [1890-91]) 421.

⁴⁸ *The Literal Meaning* 4.28.45.