

How was the Genesis creation story interpreted before Darwin?



"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." — [Genesis 1](#)

Introduction

Many people assume that Darwin's theory must have shaken the foundation of the Christian faith because of the stark difference between evolution and the idea of six-day creation. In truth, the literalist six-day interpretation of [Genesis 1-2](#) was not the only perspective espoused by Christian thinkers prior to the publication of *The Origin of Species*. The works of many early Christian theologians and philosophers reveal an interpretation of Genesis compatible with Darwin's theory.

Early Christian Thought

Origen, a third-century philosopher and theologian from Alexandria, Egypt — one of the great intellectual centers of the ancient world — provides an example of early Christian thought on creation.

Best known for *On First Principles* and *Against Celsus*, Origen presents the main doctrines of Christianity and defends them against pagan accusations. *On First Principles* offers the following perspective on the Genesis creation story:

"What person of intelligence, I ask, will consider as a reasonable statement that the first and the second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven? [...] I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history." ¹

Origen opposed the idea that the creation story should be interpreted as a literal and historical account of how God created the world. There were other voices before Origen who advocated more symbolic interpretations of the creation story. Origen's views were also influential for other early church thinkers who came after him.²

St. Augustine of Hippo, a bishop in North Africa during the early fifth century, is another central figure of the period. Although he is widely known for *Confessions*, Augustine authored dozens of other works, several of which focus on [Genesis 1-2](#).³ In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine argues that the first two chapters of Genesis are written to suit the understanding of the people at that time.⁴

"Perhaps Sacred Scripture in its customary style is speaking with the limitations of human language in addressing men of limited understanding. ... The narrative of the inspired writer brings the matter down to the capacity of children." ⁵

In order to communicate in a way that all people could understand, the creation story was told in a simpler, allegorical fashion. Augustine also believed God created the world with the capacity to develop a view that is harmonious with biological evolution.⁶

Later Christian Thought

There are many other non-literalist interpretations of [Genesis 1-2](#) later in history. St. Thomas Aquinas, a well-known 13th century philosopher and theologian, was an Italian priest who was particularly interested in the intersection of science and religion. Aquinas did not fear the possible contradiction between the Genesis creation story and scientific findings. William Carroll notes,

"Aquinas did not think that the opening of Genesis presented any difficulties for the natural sciences, for the Bible is not a textbook in the sciences. What is essential to

Christian faith, according to Aquinas, is the "fact of creation," not the manner or mode of the formation of the world." ⁷

Aquinas' interpretation of the creation story is evident in *Summa Theologica*, in which he responds to the question of whether all six days of creation are actually a description of a single day, a theory Augustine had suggested. Aquinas does not take sides in the debate, but attempts to seek harmony between the two views. Aquinas argues in favor of the view that God created all things to have potential:

"On the day on which God created the heaven and the earth, He created also every plant of the field, not, indeed, actually, but "before it sprung up in the earth," that is, potentially. ... All things were not distinguished and adorned together, not from a want of power on God's part, as requiring time in which to work, but that due order might be observed in the instituting of the world. Hence it was fitting that different days should be assigned to the different states of the world, as each succeeding work added to the world a fresh state of perfection." ⁸

Clearly, Augustine strongly influenced Aquinas.

Augustine's creation perspective can be seen even as late as the 18th century — just before Darwin published *The Origin of Species* — in the works of John Wesley. An Anglican minister and early leader in the Methodist movement, Wesley, like Augustine, thought scriptures were written in terms suitable for their audience. He writes,

"The inspired penman in this history [Genesis] ... [wrote] for the Jews first and, calculating his narratives for the infant state of the church, describes things by their outward sensible appearances, and leaves us, by further discoveries of the divine light, to be led into the understanding of the mysteries couched under them." ⁹

Wesley also argues the scriptures "were written not to gratify our curiosity [of the details], but to lead us to God."¹⁰ Darwin's theory of biological evolution would not necessarily have conflicted with the perspectives of Wesley, Augustine, Aquinas, Origen or others, but the interpretation of Genesis was only one of the issues at hand.

In the nineteenth century, Princeton Theological Seminary was known for its staunch defense of conservative Calvinism and the absolute authority of scripture. Perhaps the most noted Princeton theologian of that era, B. B. Warfield, accepted evolution as giving the proper scientific account of human origins. He believed that hearing God's voice in scripture and the findings of solid scientific work were not at odds. As historian Mark Noll puts it, "B. B. Warfield, the ablest modern defender of the theologically conservative doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible, was also an evolutionist."¹¹

Conclusion

The history of Christian thought has not been consistently dominated by proponents of a literalist interpretation of Genesis. Although a comparable list of theologians who did believe in a six day creation could be made, the examples cited here show that significant Christian thinkers advocated non-literal, even allegorical, interpretations of Genesis long before science presented evidence in its favor.¹² The discoveries of modern science should neither be seen as the instigator of some abandonment of trust in Scripture, nor as contradictory to Scripture, but as guideposts toward a proper understanding of scripture's meaning.

Augustine offers this advice:

"In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture."¹³

Consulted Experts:

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Pete Enns](#) and [Alister McGrath](#) in drafting this response.

Notes

1. Origen, "Book IV, Ch. 3," in *First Principles*, trans. G. Butterworth (London: SPCK, 1936), quoted in Ernest Lucas, "[Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century](#)," *Faraday Papers*, no. 11 (2007), (accessed January 28, 2009). Also available online at "[De Principiis \(Book IV\)](#)," *New Advent*. (accessed January 28, 2009).
2. Peter C. Bouteneff, *Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).
3. Gillian Clark, *Augustine, the Confessions, Landmarks of World Literature* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
4. Bishop of Hippo Saint Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Ancient Christian Writers*,

- no. 41 (New York, N.Y.: Newman Press, 1982).
5. Saint Bishop of Hippo Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 41 (New York, N.Y.: Newman Press, 1982).
 6. For a further discussion of Augustine's perspective on creation, see chapter six of Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), as well as chapters eight and fifteen of Alister McGrath, *A Finely Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
 7. William E. Carroll, "Aquinas and the Big Bang," *First Things* 97 (1999): 18-20.
 8. St. Thomas Aquinas, "Question 74: All the Seven Days in Common," in *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920). Also available online at "Summa Theologica," New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1074.htm#2>.
 9. John Wesley, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1987), 22, quoted in Darrel R. Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds between Faith and Biology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 35. Also available online at John Wesley, "John Wesley's Notes on the Bible," Wesley Center Online, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/notes/index.htm (accessed January 28, 2009).
 10. John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: Or, a Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (London: J. Fry, 1777), 2:463, quoted in Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds between Faith and Biology*, 35.
 11. Mark A. Noll and David N. Livingston, eds., *B. B. Warfield: Evolution, Science, and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 14.
 12. The Catholic Church also acknowledges the diversity of early Christian interpretations of Genesis. See, for example, Catholic Answers, "Creation and Genesis," Catholic Answers, http://www.catholic.com/library/creation_and_genesis.asp (accessed January 28, 2009).
 13. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*.

Further Reading

Web site

- Catholic Answers. "[Creation and Genesis](http://www.catholic.com/library/creation_and_genesis.asp)."

Articles

- Lucas, Ernest. "Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century ([PDF](#))."
Faraday Papers.
- Young, Davis A. "The Contemporary Relevance of Augustine's View of Creation."
Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith.

Books

- Collins, Francis S. *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. New York: Free Press, 2006.
 - Falk, Darrel R. "Science and Religion: Trying to Live in Two Worlds at Once." In *Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds between Faith and Biology*, 19-38. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
 - McGrath, Alister E. *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
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