

Augustine: young-earth creationist¹

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The first chapters of Genesis

Augustine read the first eleven chapters of Genesis as God's revelation. For that reason he took what is described there quite literally.

Ambiguity about the age of the earth

Augustine was not vague about the age of the earth, the historicity of Adam and Eve as our first ancestors, or the events in the Garden of Eden and the worldwide Flood later in Genesis. However, his doctrine of creation was complex. All matter, according to him, was created on the first day. Subsequently God created pregnant ideas that Augustine called *rationes seminales*, which were imbedded in creation. Some only came to fruition afterwards, even, it might be argued, after the Fall. Augustine thought that God could even have catered for the eventuality of the Fall of man into sin and the subsequent curse. But, all speculations set aside, Augustine did not teach a process of one kind changing into another. As a result of his rather philosophic view of creation he took the word "day" in Genesis as symbolic. "Hooray", cry those who hold the day-age view of Genesis one. This optimism is unwarranted. Augustine's symbolic use did the very *opposite*. He wanted a period that was actually *shorter* than six earth days. In Augustine's mind, God would have created all matter as well as the seminal ideas in the blink of an eye. The material expression of those ideas followed later. We have to combine his instant creation theory with his literal reading of other events in Genesis. Adding his belief that the world is about 8,000 years old makes it extremely hard to call on him to support Darwinian evolution of any kind or deep time.

City of God and the creation of man

Not quite 6,000 years, but a young earth definitely. Augustine wrote in *De Civitate Dei* that his view of the chronology of the world and the Bible led him to believe that Creation took place around 5600 BC [He used the somewhat inflated Septuagint chronology²]. One of the chapters in his *City of God* bears the title "On the mistaken view of history that ascribes many thousands of years to the age of the earth." Would you like it clearer? Several pagan philosophers at the time believed that the earth was more or less eternal. Countless ages had preceded us, with many more to come. Augustine said they were wrong. This goes to show that theistic evolutionists who call in Augustine's support do so totally out-of-context. All they allow themselves to see is his symbolic use of "day" in Genesis, and a very difficult philosophical doctrine of creation with ideas that develop. "Wonderful!" they think, "Augustine really supports our post-Darwinian theories!" It takes a superficial view of Genesis and Augustine to arrive at such conclusions. His instant creation, his young earth and immediate formation of Adam and Eve rule out Augustine's application for this purpose.

Augustine's view on the days of creation

In this later work of his, Augustine says farewell to his earlier allegorical and typological exegesis of parts of Genesis and calls his readers back to the Bible.

As Augustine became older, he gave greater emphasis to the underlying historicity and necessity of a literal interpretation of Scripture. His most important work is *De Genesi ad litteram*. The title says it: *On the necessity*

of taking Genesis literally. In this later work of his, Augustine says farewell to his earlier allegorical and typological exegesis of parts of Genesis and calls his readers back to the Bible. He even rejected allegory when he deals with the historicity and geographic locality of Paradise on Earth.

Was Augustine misled by a bad Latin translation of Genesis 2:4?

Augustine was not a Hebrew scholar, nor exactly an expert in Greek. I would be inclined to say the basis for his theory was in one of the deuterocanonical books. He used an old Latin version when he quoted from Jesus Sirach 18:1—"He who lives eternally has made *omnia simul*". Augustine interpreted the Latin words *omnia simul* as "everything at the same time".



Painted by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1480 from www.wikipedia.org

Figure 1. As his theology matured, Augustine abandoned his earlier allegorizations of Genesis that old-earth creationists and theistic evolutionists have latched onto in an attempt to justify adding deep time to the Bible. Furthermore, he always believed in a young earth.

He consequently thought that God would have created everything instantaneously. That is why he came up with the theory that Creation should have been shorter than six earth days. He was comparing Scripture with what he saw as Scripture, not editing the Bible with Darwinism. There is a profound difference. His conclusion, however, was based on a wrong interpretation of the Latin, which doesn't do justice to the Greek original. The Greek says that God made all things together (*panta koinee*), or "the whole world". The New Revised Standard Version translates it that way, for instance. This history contains a warning for today's theologians: know your Greek! It might help you to avoid speculative theories that people take seriously because you are a well known church leader.

Faith and science

There is no conflict between faith and science on the data, or the facts. Sometimes faith and science clash on the level of interpretation and theorizing. We see this particularly in our time, now science in the post-Christian West has embraced worldview presuppositions that are incompatible with Christianity. Augustine's main aim in writing his Commentary on Genesis (*De Genesi ad litteram*) was to show that there needn't be any conflict between the Genesis account, even if this was to be taken literally, and science and philosophy. If one cannot come up with a scientific explanation that supports the Scriptures, one should still accept that God's Word is true and trust that we will find out later. Augustine takes this attitude, for instance, when he writes on the waters above the earth (Genesis 1:7).

The doctrine of Creation over the last 2,000 years

Early Church leaders like Origen, Augustine and Basil³ were young-earth creationists. This view was commonly held within the Church until the 19th century (including Aquinas, Bede,

the fourth Lateran council in AD 1215 and Pius X). The Church of all times and places embraced the traditional doctrine of Creation from the day of Pentecost until the Enlightenment. In the Roman Catholic Church this even continued until the Great War. But after the Enlightenment, darkness reigned. Miracles disappeared. Divinity became part of the humanities. Divine revelation was doubted or outright denied. Human religiosity was the new object. Theology became a science that explained the Bible as if there never was Divine intervention in history. Mythology, comparative religion and egalitarianism were the new keys of interpretation. There was no revelation, but a democratic process where earliest Christianity produced ideas about Jesus and decided what to think about God, creating a god after our likeness. The seeds were sown in 17th century philosophy and the political changes of the French revolution. The implications become fully visible in the 19th century. Especially from the early part of that century onward the natural sciences started to filter out God as a relevant factor. We observe a similar move in continental theology around the same time.

References

1. The full text of an interview of which a summary in Dutch appeared in *Reformatisch Dagblad (Reformed Daily)*, <www.refdag.nl/hoofdpunten.html>, 15 April 2009.
2. See Sarfati, J., Biblical chronogenealogies, *Journal of Creation* 17(3):14–18, 2003; <creation.com/chronogenealogy>.
3. Genesis means what it says: Basil (AD 329–379), *Creation* 16(4):23, 1994; <creation.com/basil>.

Comparative cytogenetics and chromosomal rearrangements

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Creationists accept that creatures can change over time, but a clearer understanding of the types of changes involved is necessary for a robust creation model. In creation apologetic arguments, many genetic changes are assumed to be "accidents" and the degenerative nature of these changes are commonly pointed out. Biblically, degenerative changes are expected because of the Curse imposed on Creation after Adam and Eve sinned.¹ However, there is no biblical reason why all genetic changes must be "accidents" or even degenerative. After all, God is also portrayed in Scripture as a provider, so adaptive genetic changes are perfectly reasonable within the creation model.²

Related to this issue is a critical need for a reasonable estimate of genetic similarity between various kinds at Creation. For example, evolutionists often point to human-chimp similarities to support their model's assumption of common ancestry. Creationists commonly respond that similarity can be from a common designer and then list genetic differences between humans and chimps. Which of these differences are because God created humans and chimps differently and which are from changes that have been acquired since then? If we point to differences that can reasonably be attributed to changes since Creation, our arguments will be weak and misleading. A proper use of evidential arguments depends on a robust creation model which requires a more detailed understanding of genetic changes that have occurred during history.

Chromosomal rearrangements

Comparative cytogenetics has been important in establishing that many mammals have undergone significant