



## What's Happening?

Hopefully, you were able to attend some of the recent events we did in the area with Hugh Ross. As always, the events were well attended and left a lasting mark on the diverse audiences that Dr. Ross spoke to. What a blessing to see Christians get excited about their faith and, more important, to see skeptics recognize that science and faith are not enemies!

The Seattle Chapter plans to resume the *Sound Reasons* meetings after the first of year. This is a great opportunity for you to fellowship with local RTB supporters while hearing informative talks that are designed to help equip you. If there are topics you would like us to discuss, please contact us at [seattle@reasons.org](mailto:seattle@reasons.org).

In the meantime, we would ask you to think prayerfully about how you might contribute to our local efforts. Reasons To Believe is at the forefront of trying to reach unbelievers by using science to remove the obstacles to faith in Jesus Christ. The harvest is great, but the workers are few. As a chapter, our primary mission the coming year is to change that. But, to do that we need your help and we welcome your involvement.

As always, we welcome your questions and comments. Contact us at [seattle@reasons.org](mailto:seattle@reasons.org) or our new facebook page,  RTB Puget Sound.

### In This Issue

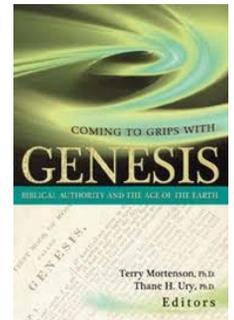
- In the News . . . . 2
- Who We Are . . . . 6

## Coming to Grips with the Early Church Father's Perspective on Genesis

By Dr. John Millam

Understanding early Jewish and Christian interpretations of Genesis' opening chapters has been a passionate pursuit of mine for the last five years. This is a very difficult and complex topic, but one that can yield important insights into the contemporary debate over the age of the earth. Given my background, a friend asked me to review *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, a new young-earth creationist book edited by Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury.

The book is a collection of 14 scholarly articles written by different authors defending modern young-earth creationism, namely a calendar-day (or 24-hour-day) view, recent creation, global flood, and no animal death before the Fall. In the first chapter, James Mook covers how the early church fathers dealt with Genesis 1, Noah's flood, and the age of the earth. Since the subject matter corresponds to an area I have studied intently, I will limit my response to just this chapter. The central question I am trying to address in this article series is whether or not the church fathers lend valuable support to modern young-earth creationism as argued by Mook.<sup>1</sup>



### A Little Background

While my actual academic background is in chemistry, I became interested in patristics (the study of early church fathers) after reading *The Genesis Debate*, which presents three different views of the creation days side-by-side. J. Ligon Duncan III and David W. Hall support a 24-hour day (young earth) view; Hugh Ross and Gleason L. Archer defend a day-age (old earth) view; and Lee Irons and Meredith G. Kline argue for the framework hypothesis. Each pair of authors appeals to the church fathers' writings to support their own positions; yet their analysis of the material clearly contradicts their opponents'.

So, who is right? This question was very frustrating for me because there are so few resources available to help resolve it. Feeling deadlocked, I focused on other things until I eventually came across *Creation and the Early Church*, Robert Bradshaw's lucid and

# Bible & Science In the News

---

well-documented introduction to this difficult topic. What I found so refreshing and educational about Bradshaw's work was that rather than simply cataloging the church fathers according to their interpretations, he analyzed the complex history and undercurrents behind their views. I appreciated his work despite the fact that he wrote from a young-earth view and was refuting old-earth creationists' claims about the church fathers. I also greatly valued his refreshing honesty, such as his acknowledging that the early church fathers held to a "diversity of opinion" with respect to Genesis 1–11.<sup>2</sup>

Bradshaw's study reinvigorated my interest in the patristic view of Genesis. It did much to correct and clarify my thinking, but there was still much more to research. I soon realized that the only way to fully appreciate what these ancient figures taught was to wade through the original writings and study their historical context for myself. Moreover, it soon became clear that I also needed to include early Jewish writings in my study. The church was birthed in a Jewish context, so some of these works helped shape the church fathers' thinking.

The current scope of my research includes more than thirty early Jewish sources and fifty church fathers and so covers the majority of the relevant extrabiblical writings up to the fifth century. While the bulk of my research is first-hand reading, I do still read whenever possible what young-earth creationist writers have to say to insure that I don't overlook relevant information and to counter-balance my own old-earth perspective.

## Problems with Old-Earth Use of Early Church Fathers

Mook begins his essay by criticizing those who argue that the early church fathers supported the notion of "deep time" (i.e., an old earth) and other modern theories. He identifies:

1. William G. T. Shedd as claiming that some of the early church fathers taught a day-age view;
2. Henri Blocher as writing that Augustine held to a view similar to the framework hypothesis; and
3. Arthur Custance as claiming that Origen held to the gap theory.<sup>3</sup>

Mook's rejection of these specific claims as inaccurate is justified. This kind of misuse of the patristic writings to support old-earth creationism is a common complaint echoed by other young-earth creationists, including Bradshaw.

Mook also takes aim at Dr. Hugh Ross' claims on this subject. Ross' earliest statements claim that Irenaeus, Origen, Basil, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas taught that the creation days were long periods of time, which Mook rejects as incorrect.<sup>4</sup> In later books, Ross has backed away from many of those claims but still argues that Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and several others taught that the days of creation were 1,000 years each. Mook concludes that while Ross became more nuanced in his claims, he remains substantially wrong.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, few old earth creationists have written about the church fathers and what little they have written is often poor quality (with Stanley Jaki as a notable exception).<sup>6</sup> This scarcity of solid resources is part of what motivated me to research this issue for myself.

---

## ■ New Whale Fossil

In this Evolution News article, Casey Luskin explains how the discovery of a jawbone of a fully aquatic whale means that there was not enough time (less than 5 million years) for whales to evolve from fully terrestrial mammals to fully aquatic whales. Go to [www.evolutionnews.org/2011/10/discovery\\_of\\_oldest\\_fully-aqua05202.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/10/discovery_of_oldest_fully-aqua05202.html).

---

## ■ Sulphur Caused Early Life to Sprout

This article by Fuz Rana discusses the finding that sulfur-loving organisms existed on Earth around 3.4 billion years ago. This adds to the growing body of evidence that life emerged much too early to have evolved. In other words, life emerged almost immediately once the Earth was ready for it. Go to: [www.reasons.org/sulfur-caused-early-life-sprout](http://www.reasons.org/sulfur-caused-early-life-sprout).

---

## ■ Blinded by Science?

This *Salvo* magazine discusses how the "New Atheism" seeks to overcome religious myth and superstition and replace it with a new religion that doesn't require faith, namely science. The problem is there is no conclusive evidence for evolution, so it still requires faith. Go to <http://www.salvomag.com/new/articles/salvo777clemmons.php>.

---

## ■ Is Science Catching Up to Faith?

This *tothesource* article discusses how compassion is now considered legitimate subject area for research. What they have discovered is compassion is good for you. This merely verifies the reality and goodness of what is found throughout the Bible's Old and new Testaments. Go to [www.tothesource.org/10\\_12\\_2011/10\\_12\\_2011.htm](http://www.tothesource.org/10_12_2011/10_12_2011.htm).

---

## ■ One More Crack in the Mirror

We are told that scientific evidence exists for the emergence of life from inanimate matter via chemical evolution. In this RTB article, Fuz Rana discusses work on homochirality, a necessary condition for life's origin and how the experiments conducted are irrelevant. Go to: <http://www.reasons.org/one-more-crack-mirror-misplaced-hope-latest-model-life-origin>.

Based on my own research, no early church father taught any form of a day-age view or an earth older than 10,000 years. In fact, the first people that I can clearly identify as teaching the old-earth view are Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet in the late seventeenth century. This seems like a fatal blow to old-earth creationism and a strong vindication of Mook's position but closer examination shows otherwise.

### **Problems with Young-Earth Use of Early Church Fathers**

While Mook has many valid criticisms of old-earth creationists' use of the church fathers, what of his own claims? Do the fathers really support his young-earth view? Does he accurately represent their positions?

Mook does an admirable job of documenting specific claims made by individual fathers (and thus avoiding the trap that many old-earth creationists often fall into), but he fails to look deeper at the underlying factors that helped mold their interpretations. Instead, he presents an extremely one-sided analysis of the biblical and non-biblical factors shaping the fathers' interpretations in order to support his own desired conclusion. Sadly, I have found this to be a very common flaw in the young-earth usage of the patristics (with Bradshaw as a noteworthy exception). Consequently, most attempts to use the church fathers by both old-earth and young-earth creationists are seriously flawed, just in different ways.

The simplest and most important example of Mook's poor analysis is that he fails to grapple with the patristic fathers' linguistic dependence. These men were almost entirely dependent upon Greek and Latin translations of the Old Testament rather than the actual Hebrew in which Genesis was written. As Bradshaw documents in detail, none of the church fathers were fluent in Hebrew until Jerome and Theodore of Mopsuestia in the late fourth century.<sup>7</sup> (Prior to that, only Origen and possibly Eusebius in the third century seem to have actually studied Hebrew, but neither was fluent.)

A deficient knowledge of Hebrew is probably the single most important factor leading to a young-earth misunderstanding of Genesis (see here for previous articles on this issue). This problem has continued to play a significant role even in our own time.

Mook acknowledges that the church fathers were largely ignorant of Hebrew, but he relegates this critical observation to a mere footnote.<sup>8</sup> He does not discuss the implications this ignorance poses for their interpretations. Greek and Latin are very similar to each other but very different from ancient Hebrew. So even a "literal" interpretation based on either of these languages will not necessarily represent a literal understanding of the original Hebrew.

Ironically, Mook does apply this principle selectively to dismiss Augustine's non-calendar-day interpretation on

the basis of Augustine's dependence on a Latin translation of Genesis.<sup>9</sup> If Augustine's Latin-based interpretation is suspect, then should not the views of the fathers mentioned by Mook be questioned for their dependence on Greek? This inconsistency undercuts the objectivity of his analysis.

The main interest in the church fathers stems from the assumption that they were closer in language and culture to the Bible's writers. While that is largely true for the New Testament (written in Greek), the early church lacked a clear understanding of Hebrew and the Jewish culture of the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Bradshaw asserts: "Given this evidence, I think it is fair to conclude that at least in its knowledge of Hebrew modern Christian scholarship has the edge over the church of the third and fourth centuries." Unfortunately, this omission is not the only flaw in Mook's analysis.

### **The Early Church Divided**

It is well-acknowledged that the church fathers were by no means unified on how to understand the creation days. Even Mook recognizes that Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine rejected a calendar-day view, believing instead that everything was created instantly. For completeness, we should include Hilary of Poitiers and the Jewish scholar Philo who believed likewise, even though Mook does not discuss them.

These facts carry two important consequences for Mook's point. First, there was genuine disagreement in the early church over how to best understand the days of creation, with a small but significant number rejecting the idea that they were "ordinary" days. Second, the church allowed for charitable disagreement on this point and did not view it as an issue of orthodoxy. Recognition that Augustine was the single most influential theologian of the early church further challenges Mook's position by demonstrating that opposition to a calendar-day view cannot be dismissed as a mere fringe position.

Mook responds to this challenge by dividing the church fathers into two camps: the "literalists" and the "allegorists." In the former, he includes Lactantius, Victorinus, Ephrem the Syrian, and Basil, all of whom he claims taught a 24-hour days view.<sup>11</sup> In the second camp, he places Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine.<sup>12</sup> (Hilary and Philo, whom I mentioned earlier, also belong to this group.) While Mook lists Ambrose among the allegorists, he is quick to point out that Ambrose largely followed Basil with respect to Genesis 1. So for Mook's purpose's, Ambrose can be treated as being among the literalists.

The implication of all this is that Augustine and company's creation views should be dismissed because—according to Mook—they did not interpret Genesis literally. That would support Mook's conclusion by effectively removing any

early church opposition to a calendar-day view.

### **Allegory vs. Allegorical Interpretation**

To understand what is meant by allegorical interpretation, we need to draw a clear distinction between that and plain allegory. Allegory is a figurative or symbolic representation referring to a meaning other than the literal one. Certain passages of Scripture contain allegory, as well as other figures of speech, which can be understood using the normal rules of interpretation. For example, Paul uses an allegory based on Hagar and Sarah (Galatians 4:21–31) to illustrate why the Galatians should not listen to the Judaizers.

Allegorical interpretation, on the other hand, involves looking for a symbolic or figurative meaning beyond or instead of the literal/historical one. One extreme example comes from Philo, where he interprets allegorically the cherubim guarding the entrance to Eden (Genesis 3:24) as representing the two hemispheres of heaven (On the Cherubim 7–8). The key difference between allegory and allegorical interpretation is that for the former the meaning is found in the text itself while the latter looks beyond the text and relies heavily on the ingenuity of the interpreter.

### **Historical Background on Allegorical Interpretation**

Allegorical interpretation of Scripture first gained prominence among the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, starting around the second century BC. (Philo of Alexandria, whom I mentioned earlier, is the most prominent example of this group.) Alexandria represented one of the largest Jewish communities living outside of Israel; it was also a major center of Greek learning. The Jews there were caught between engaging the surrounding Greek culture and remaining faithful to their own.

In three different ways allegorical interpretation played an important role in helping the Hellenistic Jews find a balance between these two different worlds. First, it provided a way to apply Scripture passages to the audience's non-Jewish context. Second, it allowed writers to comment on Greek ideas not directly discussed in Scripture. In the example I mentioned earlier, Philo used the cherubim as a springboard to write about the nature of the heavens. Third, some parts of Scripture seemed meaningless or even absurd to a Gentile audience. Allegorizing them would help blunt those objections.

It was in Alexandria that this mode of interpretation eventually crossed over into Christianity. Alexandria was a major intellectual center for early Christendom with an important catechetical school located there and of which both Clement and Origen served as headmasters in their day. Allegorical interpretation served a similar purpose in the early church as it had among the Hellenistic Jews because they too were surrounded by Greco-Roman

culture. Even more, the early church—including all of the church fathers—was itself almost entirely non-Jewish with little knowledge of the Hebrew language or Jewish culture.<sup>13</sup> So, the Old Testament as plain Jewish history would have had little meaning to the church fathers or their listeners.

Origen was the leader in popularizing allegorical interpretation. Even more, he codified it in his three-fold method of interpretation (First Principles 4.1.11–13). In his system, interpretation occurred on three different levels paralleling the tripartite nature of man (body, soul, and spirit). The first level of interpretation is the “body” representing the plain literal (obvious) meaning; followed by the “soul” consisting of moral principles; and lastly the “spirit” representing the deeper meaning that is brought out by allegorical interpretation. When the plain literal (“body”) interpretation seemed absurd, it indicated that the reader needed to look beyond it using allegorical (“spiritual”) interpretation. While this mystical approach may seem extreme or unnecessary, it did serve to apply the text to people's current situations and concerns. Today, we might call this method “contemporary application.”<sup>14</sup>

The early church saw the entire Old Testament as being about Jesus Christ. Every detail—not just specific prophecies—could be viewed as serving as a type or symbol of Jesus Christ. Along with a variety of other nonliteral devices, allegorical interpretation served as a way to uncover hidden Christological meanings. For example, scriptural references to wood were sometimes seen as prefiguring the cross of Christ. Most of the church fathers (not just the allegorically inclined ones) viewed the Old Testament through a Christological lens. We see this, for example, in Hilary of Poitiers's Homilies on the Psalms, where he views the psalms as primarily being about Jesus Christ and so downplays their original historical context.<sup>15</sup>

Allegorical interpretation went on to dominate the theology of the Middle Ages. It was the Protestant Reformers who ultimately rejected it in favor of a literal (i.e., plain meaning) approach. They likewise specifically rejected Augustine's instantaneous creation view even though they were deeply indebted to him in most other areas. I wholeheartedly agree with the Reformers on these points. If allegorical interpretation is therefore to be rejected, does this invalidate Augustine's challenge to the calendar-day interpretation and, therefore, lend credibility to Mook's thesis that the church fathers were predominantly young-earth creationists? No, it does not.

### **Legitimate (non-allegorical) concerns**

While we should not follow the specific interpretations of the allegorical fathers, they do provide some valuable insights into Genesis 1 that are worth considering. In particular, they identified at least three scriptural arguments that seem to rule out the idea that the creation days could be ordinary solar days.<sup>16</sup>

1. **Nature of the first three creation days.** If the Sun, Moon, and stars were not created until the fourth creation day (as popularly understood by the church fathers), then what was the nature of the first three creation “days”?<sup>17</sup> How could they be ordinary solar days if the Sun did not yet exist? This question provoked more discussion and disagreement among the early church fathers than any other part of Genesis 1. Philo, Origen, and Augustine saw this as clear proof that at least the first three days could not be ordinary days.<sup>18</sup> (A detailed discussion of the fourth creation day and its implications for the days of creation can be found in chapter 7 of *A Matter of Days* by Hugh Ross.)
2. **Genesis 2:4.** This verse uses the words “in the day” (KJV) to summarize all of the preceding events described in Genesis 1. This usage seems to equate the “six days” of Genesis 1 with a single day, which caused considerable confusion in the early church. One way that some fathers resolved this apparent contradiction was to view the days as being instantaneous periods.<sup>19</sup> Today, we understand “in the day” in this verse to refer to an indeterminate period of time (covering all the events of Genesis 1) and, therefore, longer than 24 hours.
3. **Seventh day is not closed out.** Each of the first six days is closed out with the phrase, “And there was evening, and there was morning—the X-th day” (NIV). This phrase is conspicuously absent from the seventh creation day, which indicates this “day” is still ongoing and so spans a time much longer than an ordinary solar day.<sup>20</sup> Psalm 95:11 and Hebrews 4:1–11 further support the idea that we are still in the seventh day.<sup>21</sup> At a minimum, this contradicts a simple calendar-day view where each day is a natural day.

So what are we to conclude from this? First, the fathers who used allegorical interpretation did have at least three significant scriptural reasons for rejecting a calendar-day interpretation. Second, it was issues like these three that led them to read Genesis allegorically because a calendar-day view seemed impossible to them. Third, recognition that the days of creation need not—or even should not—be understood as simple solar days is a tradition going back as far as Philo in the first century.

[This is Part 1 of this article. The second part will appear in our November newsletter.]

*Dr. Millam recieved his doctorate in theoretical chemistry from Rice University and currently serves as a programmer for Semichem in Kansas City. He is a trained RTB apologist and has written many articles on science and the Bible. This article was published by Reasons To Believe.*

## ENDNOTES

1. In this work, the term “church fathers” is being defined in a broad sense to include church leaders and influential writers, not just theologians. “Early church” is used here to refer to the period after the Apostles (starting c. AD 90) until the death of Augustine in AD 430.
2. Robert I. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, last updated January 25, 1999, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Contents.htm>, summary.
3. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” in *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, eds. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 24.
4. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 25–26.
5. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 26.
6. Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages*, (London: Thomas More Press, 1992). He covers more than 15 Jewish and Christian writers throughout church history, which is the broadest review of any of my sources. Unfortunately, this great breadth means that he does not have the room to provide the level of detail I need for my study.
7. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 1, table 1.1.
8. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 37-45. 7.
9. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 38.
10. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 1.
11. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” in *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, eds. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 29–32. Mook lists Theophilus, Methodius, Epiphanius of Salamis, and Cyril of Jerusalem as all teaching that the creation days were ordinary days, but did not specify the days as 24-hours long.
12. *Ibid*, 32–38.12.
13. In contrast, the apostolic church (c. 30–90 AD) had been primarily Jewish in composition and centered in Jerusalem. The change over from Jewish to Gentile adherents occurred very rapidly between about AD 70–150.
14. Robert I. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, last updated January 25, 1999, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Contents.htm>, chapter 1. Bradshaw

comes from a young-earth perspective but provides a well-documented and balanced look at the early church.

15. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series vol. 9 (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 235.
16. The allegorists were not the only ones to identify these problems. Celsus, a critic of Christianity, made use of these verses to try to discredit Genesis. Origen wrote *Against Celsus* to respond to the skeptic's claims.
17. This belief that the Sun, Moon, and stars were created for the first time on creation day four is a common error due to a lack of understanding of the original Hebrew. For a detailed explanation, see Rodney Whitefield, "The Fourth 'Day' of Genesis," <http://www.creationingenesis.com/TheFourthCreativeDay.pdf>.
18. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretations* 1.2; *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things* 34. Origen, *Against Celsus* 6. 60–61; *First Principles* 4.1.16. Augustine, *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 4.26.43, in *The Patristic Understanding of Genesis*, eds. William A. Dembski, Wayne J. Downs, and Fr. Justin B. A. Frederick (Riesel, TX: Erasmus Press 2008), 428.
19. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretations* 1.8; *Questions and Answers in Genesis* 1.1. Clement of Alexandria *Miscellaneous* 6.16. Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.50, 60. Augustine, *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 4.27.44.
20. Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.59; 6.61. Augustine, *Confessions* 13.51.
21. Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), 81–83.



## Seattle Chapter Reasons To Believe

### Who Are We?

The Seattle Chapter of Reasons To Believe is a local extension of the worldwide, interdenominational Reasons To Believe ministry. We exist to support our parent organization and foster local involvement in the ministry. We serve the Puget Sound and are composed of Christians of different ages and backgrounds.

It is our conviction the same God who created the universe inspired the Bible. Therefore, God's Word must agree with the facts of nature. We reject the notion that science and the Bible are at odds and provide a scientifically-sound and Biblically-faithful alternative to Darwinism and young-Earth creationism.

### What Do We Do?

Our mission is to remove the doubts of skeptics and strengthen the faith of believers. We provide scientific, historical and philosophical evidence that supports the Christian worldview and helps remove barriers to a belief in God, the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We carry out this mission by:

- Helping people access RTB and other scientifically and biblically sound resources.
- Bringing nationally-known speakers into the area to promote the scientific reliability of the Bible.
- Assembling a team of local apologists to address questions about science and the Bible.
- Building alliances with local churches, ministries and groups to maximize the exposure of RTB.
- Reaching out to unbelievers with gentleness and respect, to expose them to God's word.

We welcome your involvement and support. For more information, contact us at [seattle@reasons.org](mailto:seattle@reasons.org). Tax-deductible donations can be sent to: Seattle RTB, PO Box 99683, Seattle, WA 98139-0683.

## Questions? Get Answers.

If you're looking for scientific support for your faith or answers to questions about God, the Bible, and science, contact us at [seattle@reasons.org](mailto:seattle@reasons.org). Or call the RTB hotline seven days a week, 5:00 to 7:00 PM at 626-335-5282.