



In this article, I will consider the interpretation of the creation account in Genesis 1 offered by various Church Fathers. The gain of this undertaking will be the observation that there have been different opinions among the greatest saints and scholars in the Church. By taking note of this, we can avoid a myopic reading of Genesis and thus steer clear of an overly defensive reaction to atheistic materialistic assertions about the origin of the universe.

I will briefly review the positions of nine Church doctors and then consider St. Augustine of Hippo's understanding at greater length.

Augustine is a good choice, not only because he is one of the most influential figures in the Church, but also because he is exemplary in explicitly joining a defense of the truth of Scripture with a caution about drawing too detailed conclusions about this mysterious event that predates human existence.

A distinction that must be noted preliminarily is the difference between the act of creation properly speaking, which is to produce something where before there was simply nothing, and the act of making something more interesting out of basic elements that already exist. With the benefit of ancient Greek philosophy, some of the earliest Fathers already articulate this, observing that the act of creation properly speaking must be instantaneous, leaving the question of the six days to be a matter of interpreting the formation of the basic elements created out of nothing.

Some Fathers of the Church suggest a reading of the six days as twenty-four hour periods, such as Ss. Basil the Great, Ambrose of Milan, and John Damascene. In speaking of the "first day," Basil explains that "it is as though [Scripture] said: twenty-four hours measure the space of a day, or that, in reality a day is the time that the heavens

starting from one point take to return there."¹ And Ambrose, also commenting on the first day, asserts that "Scripture established a law that twenty-four hours,

including both day and night, should be given the name of day only, as if one were to say the length of one day is twenty-four hours in extent."² John Damascene describes a day's length in terrific detail, comparing the solar solstice to the solar equinox, and the period of the moon to the sun, when he ponders the sun's being created on the fourth day.³ However, to recall our previously noted distinction, Basil, Ambrose, and Damascene also teach that the universe was created instanta-

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neously; that is, time only began with creation, so the act of creation itself was outside of time.⁴

We also find ancient Doctors of the Church who do not suppose that a day in the Lord's time is twenty-four hours. Ss. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons quote the line "The day of the Lord is a thousand years" from Psalm 90:4 in connection with Adam's dying on "the same day" that he ate the apple (**Gen 2:17**).⁵ And St. Cyprian writes that "The first seven days in the divine arrangement contain seven thousand years."⁶

Along the same lines, but with deeper metaphysical considerations, Clement of Alexandria and Origen both recall Genesis 2:4: "In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens," as evidence that the "six days" are to be taken figuratively.⁷ In his *Miscellanies*, Clement notes that the creation could not have taken place in time because time itself was created.⁸ So, new things could be "generated" over a span of days,

but creation itself did not transpire over a period of time but is rather the source of time.

Origen argues similarly that “there was not yet time before the world existed,”⁹ and that the first days cannot be taken literally because you cannot have a day without a sun, a moon, and a sky.¹⁰ So, early in the third century Clement and Origen have already articulated the central difficulties in taking six ordinary days as the literal sense of Genesis 1.

St. Augustine does not interpret the six days of creation to be six periods of twenty-four hours. He treats this theme in a few different works and is consistent on this point. In his *Literal Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Augustine explains that in a narration, you must give one thing before the other, but that doesn’t mean that there is a difference in time. So, the first day and the second day are not different times but different orders. He offers the example of speech: “But the speaker does not first utter a formless sound of his voice and later gather it together and shape it into words. Similarly, God the Creator did not first make unformed matter and later, as if after further reflection, form it according to the series of works He produced. He created formed matter.”¹¹

In a manner reminiscent of Origen’s argument, Augustine doubts the counting of six ordinary days, pointing out that the sun would never set on God in his creation—for where would it go, to another universe?¹² And not unlike Clement, Augustine insists that creation had to be instantaneous: “No one certainly would be so foolish as to think that, because God is great beyond all beings, even a very few syllables uttered by His mouth could have extended over the course of a whole day.”¹³

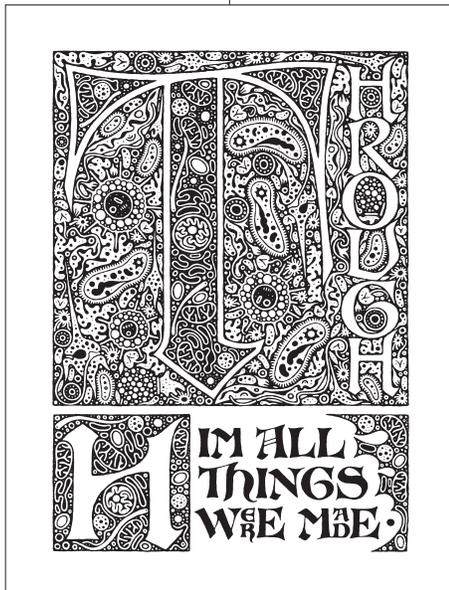
Helpful to our overall consideration, Augustine warns against pretending to have one single right interpretation of these difficult passages: “we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too 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.”¹⁴

Augustine presciently adds that we only damage Scripture’s credibility—especially in the minds of unbelievers who are educated in science—if we draw wrong conclusions about science from the Bible: “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.”¹⁵

To sum up then, it is clear that different Fathers of the Church interpreted the first chapter of Genesis in diverse ways. They

certainly did not all interpret the literal sense of the six days to be six twenty-four hour periods, as Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the Church, shows. And in the influential Fathers who do so interpret the six days, we find the distinction between creation, which is instantaneous and before time, and the subsequent development of that creation over six days. 



¹ *Hexaemeron*, Homily 2, no. 8 (c. AD 370).

² *Hexaemeron*, ch. 10, no. 37 (c. AD 393).

³ *De Fide Orthodoxa*, book 2, ch. 7 (c. AD 710).

⁴ St. Basil, *Hexaemeron*, Homily 1, no. 6; St. Ambrose, *Hexaemeron*, ch. 10, no. 37; St. John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, book 2, ch. 1.

⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 81 (c. AD 155); Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.23.2 (c. AD 189).

⁶ *Treatises* 11.11 (c. AD 257).

⁷ St. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.16 (c. AD 208); Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.51-61 (c. AD 248).

⁸ *Miscellanies* 6.16.

⁹ *Homilies on Genesis* (c. AD 234).

¹⁰ *On First Principles* 4.3.1.

¹¹ *On Genesis*, book 1, ch. 15, no. 29.

¹² *On Genesis*, book 1, ch. 10, no. 21.

¹³ *On Genesis*, book 1, ch. 10, no. 20.

¹⁴ *On Genesis*, book 1, ch. 18, no. 37.

¹⁵ *On Genesis*, book 1, ch. 19, no. 39.

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