

Augustine and Creation

Written by K B Napier

Wednesday, 03 October 2012 14:44

“Evangelicals... believe in the infallibility of Scripture, not the infallibility of its interpreters.”
(McGrath. See below)

Unfortunately this optimism does not appear to have percolated down to most! But, it ought to be uppermost in their minds.

If you are reformed, do you know the views of Augustine of Hippo on Creation? You should do, because Augustine influenced many later thinkers, including Calvin and Aquinas. Theistic Evolution (a theology owned by a weird band of misguided believers, and also pseudo-Christians) owes much to Augustine’s earlier comments.

Speaking of Augustine’s unwitting part in later evolution ideas, one writer warns that we must place our authority in scripture and not in the interpreters of scripture. Many reformed Christians make the mistake of attributing 100% accuracy to the writings of those they call the ‘church fathers’, as if they could do no wrong and make no mistakes. In itself, this is an error of judgment – every part of every writing must be examined, not just accepted blindly.

It is easy to see how what Augustine said could lead some to accept the hypothesis of evolution. On the other hand, it is only possible if we do not apply strict rules to interpretation and the genuine methodology of science. Readers who have read my own comments on proper interpretation should know what I mean by this... scripture must define itself, and when we ‘interpret’ we must take into account what the text says and how the writer wrote it. (Though Augustine also believed this, he still failed in some matters – none of us is infallible).

We will now look at what Augustine said, to see if his thinking was apt concerning Creation. It is my own view that he was in error. However, to give him credit, Augustine held a faulty view when he was younger; when he matured he took back his own words and veered more towards the idea of six-day creation, etc.

Even so, we can see how modern errors concerning Creation could be found in the earlier work of Augustine... it seems that believers in evolution conveniently forget or ignore his later amendments and changed beliefs. This is why, even now, you can read Christian comments

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that Augustine upheld what is now the 'theory' of evolution. Such modern Christians are either ignorant of Augustine's theology, or they are deliberately selecting only those words they wish to hear, which is not the way to deal with theology and scripture, or science.

One commentator on Augustine's Creation teaching said: "Augustine didn't "accommodate" or "compromise" his biblical interpretation to fit new scientific theories. The important thing was to let Scripture speak for itself." (Alister McGrath, 'Augustine's Origin of Species', Christianity Today, 5th August, 2009). That is, Augustine was true to the knowledge at the time and moreso (he thought) to scripture. The trouble is, many modern Christians THINK they are being true to scripture, but use dubious means to 'interpret', because they really have no idea how to do so!

Augustine's Long (and wrong) Conclusions

This inability is not just on the part of 'know-it-all' Christians, who invariably think that their knowledge is superb and beyond question. They have no concept of the true rigor of genuine interpretation, both intellectual and spiritual.

Augustine made his own mistakes of interpretation, as we will see. His earlier notions of Creation were very different from his later conclusions, and it is his later conclusions that should take priority, not his faulty earlier ones. For example, his 'Literal Meaning of Genesis' (written between 401 and 415). By 'literal' he meant 'in the sense intended by the author'.

Though reading the same scriptures as we read (but with faulty interpretation), Augustine concluded that God created everything, but all at the same time... a single moment in Creation. This creation was not static, but was intended by God to develop and grow from its initial 'seed'. These seed he calls 'divinely embedded causalities' (reflecting Greek philosophy), or things that emerge over time, having their foundation in something already created. This, says Augustine, is all in God's sovereign providence. Unfortunately, he thought that Genesis Two was different from Genesis One. In reality there is no 'second account' – the second chapter merely expands on chapter one.

To put all this another way; Augustine thought God made everything instantly, in one blink of an eye. He did not create everything fully grown and ready, but only created the seed of everything, so it all grew out of what God created, but in 'real time'. This, however, does not look at Genesis in proper terms. It is why I wrote a simple book proving that every word in chapters one and two is literal, historical, and not allegory as Augustine would have us believe in his earlier works. ('Genesis 1 and 2; Historical Fact').

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Let us suppose God only planted the 'seed' for everything. Now look at the absurdity of it. If the seeds of, say, plants grew at normal rate... how did animals live? Did Adam and Eve live on fresh air, while waiting to eat fruit that normally takes several years to be produced? And if the 'seed' of animals was just embryonic, how did they grow up in the first place? Can you see the problem? And evolution as a cause of life is a non-starter, scientifically.

The reading of chapters one and two show historical fact, not 'embedded causalities'. As I show in my book, to believe in long periods of time and that God did not make everything fully 'up and running', is to participate in absurdity. Once these chapters are NOT seen as literal, everything in scripture unravels.

For reasons I cannot really fathom, Augustine interpreted Psalm 33:6-9 to mean that God created everything instantaneously, in one moment. I invite you to read the text – it says nothing of the kind. It simply says that God created with His word. Augustine, then, judged the text wrongly. In the same way he interpreted John 5:17 to mean that God is still active in His creation... that is, still developing what He made initially. Again, read this text – it says nothing like it; it just says that Christ works in the same way as the Father, which is a truism.

"Further, he argues that a close reading of Genesis 2:4 has the following meaning: "When day was made, God made heaven and earth and every green thing of the field." This leads him to conclude that the six days of Creation are not chronological. Rather, they are a way of categorizing God's work of creation. God created the world in an instant but continues to develop and mold it, even to the present day." (McGrath)

Read the text for yourself. As I say in the book, verse 4 summarises what happened in chapter one. Thus, 'generations' and 'day' refer to the literal time God took. It does NOT mean everything was made in one day. Indeed, to say this would be to mock the text, for God made a point of telling us that each new part of creation was made before the end of each day. Augustine's thinking on this makes no sense to me.

Augustine believed that certain biblical texts are open to variable interpretation. My own conclusions are different – rather, there can be only ONE interpretation of scripture (by necessity, for God cannot speak variably). However, a very few texts cannot be fully explained, or be interpreted with finality, because we do not have sufficient information to do so. The vast

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majority of texts CAN be strictly interpreted. Otherwise, we have a Bible that is so vague as to be useless. And, after over four decades of examining scripture minutely, I can say that hardly any texts are vague or without singular interpretation.

Poor Interpretation

It is fact that at one time theologians thought the sun revolved around the earth. This is not because the scriptures are vague, but because interpreters made a mistake. We must always be on our guard against this kind of error. But, in most cases, scripture says what it says and cannot be variously interpreted, except by those with ulterior motives or stiff-necks. Poor interpretation does not mean *scripture* is poor.

Augustine was concerned that theologians should not try to tie interpretation to prevailing science.

"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 for truth justly undermines our position, we too fall with it."
(Quoted in McGrath)

Sadly, it is this kind of unthinking ideology that led to our current problem with homosexuality and evolution. In both, adherents claim 'facts' that do not exist, and untaught* Christians cling to their 'explanations' as if they were scripture! (*Note: the Greek for 'untaught' means 'barbarian!'). Scripture must speak for itself.

Augustine said that scripture teaches time is part of the created order, and God created space and time together. In his day, thinkers thought he was mad; they rejected the idea that God made time itself. Yet, Augustine said Time must be thought of as one of God's creatures and servants. "*For Augustine, time itself is an element of the created order. Timelessness, on the other hand, is the essential feature of eternity.*" (McGrath). In this, Augustine is correct, for time is outside eternity, being created for the duration of man's historical span only. In eternity, time does not exist!

I must be careful here not to pile onto Augustine modern strictures. It is easy to look back on

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early thinkers with disdain because we now have a few thousand years of theology behind us. In my view Augustine, like Calvin, was phenomenal in his thinking. Today, we can argue against some of his ideas, but, in his day, he stood head and shoulders above his fellows.

I urge readers, then, not to think I am hitting Augustine hard. No, I am sifting through historical beliefs that seemed good at the time, but which do not stand up to modern scrutiny, based on accrued theological knowledge. This said, we can note that Augustine was not entirely consistent in his Creation views. Again, this is easy to say 1500 years later! As McGrath says, we should use his words to spur us on to deeper consideration of the facts.

McGrath sums up Augustine's Creation thoughts thus:

"First, Augustine does not limit God's creative action to the primordial act of origination. God is, he insists, still working within the world, directing its continuing development and unfolding its potential. There are two "moments" in the Creation: a primary act of origination, and a continuing process of providential guidance. Creation is thus not a completed past event. God is working even now, in the present, Augustine writes, sustaining and directing the unfolding of the "generations that he laid up in creation when it was first established."

Of course one single action destroys this Augustinian idea – the great universal Flood! Even if God did intend to continue His creation through development and growth (evolution by another name!) it was stopped abruptly by the Flood, which destroyed everything made. After the Flood, everything began again. However, they began not with new things but with things already existing. Importantly, something Augustine did not know, what we see today is essentially what existed at the dawn of time. This is why there are no intermediary forms or 'missing links'. And this fact alone discredits the claims of evolution... and of Augustine.

"This twofold focus on the Creation allows us to read Genesis in a way that affirms that God created everything from nothing, in an instant. However, it also helps us affirm that the universe has been created with a capacity to develop, under God's sovereign guidance. Thus, the primordial state of creation does not correspond to what we presently observe. For Augustine, God created a universe that was deliberately designed to develop and evolve. The blueprint for that evolution is not arbitrary, but is programmed into the very fabric of creation. God's providence superintends the continuing unfolding of the created order." (McGrath)

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McGrath, then, is saying that Augustine's thinking leads us to evolution. This is only true if we read his earlier thoughts; his later thoughts contradicted them. This is why he goes on to say:

"Earlier Christian writers noted how the first Genesis Creation narrative speaks of the earth and the waters "bringing forth" living creatures. They concluded that this pointed to God's endowing the natural order with a capacity to generate living things. Augustine takes this idea further: God created the world complete with a series of dormant powers, which were actualized at appropriate moments through divine providence."

Is that not an eloquent and sophisticated way to uphold evolution by God? Yes, it is. But, it is also very wrong! Again, this is down to bad interpretation, not scripture itself, which does not allow for evolution in its declarations. 'Bringing forth' simply means that things 'came out of' an environment they would later be part of. Thus, God did not give 'power' to what He made, to create their own things.

This would again mean making something out of nothing, but being performed by things already created! Can you see the absurdity in this idea? God did not give 'dormant powers' to nature. He made everything as we see it, and imbued them with reproductive abilities. In this way the power was in God and not in the things made.

Wrong is Wrong

"Augustine argues that Genesis 1:12 implies that the earth received the power or capacity to produce things by itself: "Scripture has stated that the earth brought forth the crops and the trees causally, in the sense that it received the power of bringing them forth." (McGrath)

According to Augustine's early work, God only created the prime elements... earth, water, 'seeds' of animals and crops, etc. These 'seed' elements then had the power to develop as they wished from their own selves. The 'seeds' caused themselves to appear. Scripture says something different – that God created grown species ready to reproduce, because they were given 'seeds within them'. The difference is vital, for it means all the power is in God, and not in created things.

"Where some might think of the Creation as God's insertion of new kinds of plants and animals readymade into an already existing world, Augustine rejects this as inconsistent with the overall

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witness of Scripture. Rather, God must be thought of as creating in that very first moment the potencies for all the kinds of living things to come later, including humanity.” (McGrath)

And

“This means that the first Creation account describes the instantaneous bringing into existence of primal matter, including causal resources for further development. The second account explores how these causal possibilities emerged and developed from the earth. Taken together, the two Genesis Creation accounts declare that God made the world instantaneously, while envisaging that the various kinds of living things would make their appearance gradually over time—as they were meant to by their Creator.” (McGrath)

See how ‘humanity’ is viewed as coming later... by evolution, from ‘seed’ given power by God in the instant of Creation (not in six days). Everything has the ‘potential’ to develop and grow into things as we see them today, going through many transitions. Note McGrath’s reference to the ‘second account’ of Creation... which does not exist; there is only one account. Note that the final phrase, “as they were meant to by their Creator” is stated as fact and not as ‘interpretation’, and a very poor one at that.

One of the absurdities of evolution hypothesis is that if everything depended on developing over very long periods of time, then *nothing* would grow or develop, because they would have starved to death, or died because of developmental dead-ends. To put it in an over-simplified way, if a fish came onto land to ‘develop’ into something else in an entirely different environment, it would have died in minutes! It would not be able to develop. No matter what the change could have been, death is the result, or mutilation. Man as we see him today is exactly the same as Adam, but less fit and wholesome! There have been no radical changes and Man did not evolve from animals or other species.

“Augustine would have rejected any idea of the development of the universe as a random or lawless process. For this reason, Augustine would have opposed the Darwinian notion of random variations, insisting that God’s providence is deeply involved throughout. The process may be unpredictable. But it is not random.” (McGrath)

Augustine saying that evolution is the jurisdiction of God’s sovereignty is just nonsense. *Not*

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because God could have developed everything through evolution, but because scripture says nothing like it. If evolution is even hinted at in scripture then that would be the end of the story. But, scripture is very specific about six day Creation and that everything made was made whole and finished, and not as a 'work in progress'.

Authority or Interpretation?

“Unsurprisingly, Augustine approaches the text with the culturally prevalent presupposition of the fixity of species and finds nothing in it to challenge his thinking on this point. Yet the ways in which he critiques contemporary authorities and his own experience suggest that, on this point at least, he would be open to correction in light of prevailing scientific opinion.

So does Augustine's 'The Literal Meaning of Genesis' help us engage with the great questions raised by Darwin? Let's be clear that Augustine does not answer these questions for us. But he does help us see that the real issue here is not the authority of the Bible, but its right interpretation. In addition, he offers us a classic way of thinking about the Creation that might illuminate some contemporary debates.”

See how McGrath says Augustine would have given-in to prevailing scientific opinion? He may, or may not, be right about that. But, it does not matter, because all that matters is the authority of scripture. McGrath thinks otherwise – that the real issue is “right interpretation”. This is partially correct. The truth is eternal and is found in scripture, which states truth. Interpretation must be based on eternal truth as stated in scripture, so it is a proper step. Without understanding that authority of scripture is not just profound but absolute, no man can interpret properly.

A Modern Summation

Wikipedia is often used by amateurs to 'prove' their case, whatever it is. We should bear in mind that while it can offer much general material, which might be right, it is provided by those who are 'experts'. Therefore, how 'right' the information is depends on how right the informant is! On Augustine and Creation, the entry says this:

“In "The Literal Interpretation of Genesis" Augustine took the view that everything in the universe was created simultaneously by God, and not in seven calendar days like a plain account of Genesis would require. He argued that the six-day structure of creation presented in the book of Genesis represents a logical framework, rather than the passage of time in a physical way - it would bear a spiritual, rather than physical, meaning, which is no less literal.

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One reason for this interpretation is the passage in Sirach 18:1, *creavit omni simul* ("he created all things at once"), which Augustine took as proof that the days of Genesis 1 had to be taken non-literally. Augustine also does not envision original sin as originating structural changes in the universe, and even suggests that the bodies of Adam and Eve were already created mortal before the Fall. Apart from his specific views, Augustine recognizes that the interpretation of the creation story is difficult, and remarks that we should be willing to change our mind about it as new information comes up."

See how the one error leads to another? Because of his developmental notion of creation, Augustine also thought that original sin did not alter anything in Creation, even though scripture says that it did. Note, too, how modern Augustine's words are, in the final sentence of this entry – that we must alter our perception of scripture if science tells us something unscriptural! The only thing 'difficult' in interpreting the 'creation story' is to see it AS a 'story' and to give it a meaning it does not have. Yet, as some have said, Augustine does display a certain 'movement' in his beliefs, which does not really help...

"Let us, then, omit the conjectures of men who know not what they say, when they speak of the nature and origin of the human race. For some hold the same opinion regarding men that they hold regarding the world itself, that they have always been... They are deceived, too, by those highly mendacious documents which profess to give the history of many thousand years, though, reckoning by the sacred writings, we find that not 6000 years have yet passed." (Augustine, 'Of the Falseness of the History Which Allots Many Thousand Years to the World's Past', *The City of God*, Book 12: Chapt. 10 [419].)

Another Summation

"Augustine's most extensive discussions of philosophical and theological cosmology are found in his commentaries on Genesis (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*), in the last three books of the *Confessions*, and in Books 11 and 12 of the *De civitate Dei*. The main lines of his view of the creation are as follows. God created both the spiritual realm of angels and the visible world, including the incarnated souls, out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), without any pre-existing matter or other things outside God, so that ontologically new beings came into existence. The creation was based on an eternal free act of God's perfectly good will. It took place through God's omnipotence without toil, effort, or industry. God created simultaneously all first actualized things and, through "seminal reasons" inherent in them, the conditions of all those things which were to come up to the end of the world. God is the only creator. Created beings cannot bring things into existence out of nothing. God created time in creating movement in the universe. The story of the six days of creation is a metaphor which helps human imagination. Augustine sometimes interprets the "beginning" (*in principio*) of Gen. 1.1 as a temporal beginning, but following an established tradition, he also takes it to refer to the Word or the Son of God (John

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1.1-3): “In this beginning, God, you made heaven and earth, in your Word, in your Son, in your power, in your wisdom, in your truth” (Conf. 11.9.11).” (Simo Knuuttila, The Cambridge Companion to Augustine).

We can see that Augustine enjoins texts that do not belong together and though correct in many parts, speaks of Creation only as a ‘metaphor’. Immediately, this removes it from true history and lends credence to all who wish to damage scripture to maintain an atheistic, godless regime.

Augustine Changed His Mind

Despite his early errors, Augustine later changed his mind concerning the nature of Creation. In an entry in Creation.com 8th October, 2009, Professor Benno Zuiddam alludes to Augustine’s honest reappraisal, under the general title “Augustine: young earth creationist”. (With a sub-title: “theistic evolutionists take Church Father out of context”).

“(4) Is there a development in Augustine’s view of the days of creation?”

In this later work of his [On the necessity of taking Genesis literally], 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.

5) Some say that one of the reasons for Augustine taking the days of creation less literally is that he did not have a great command of the Hebrew language. They also question his knowledge of Greek. He would have been misled by a bad Latin translation of Genesis 2:4 that suggested that Creation took place instantly, giving rise to his particular theory. Is this correct?

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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”. 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.”

Ignoring reference to the RSV bible, we can see that Augustine ‘came good’ in the end, by recognising he had made an error and accepting the fully historical nature of Genesis 1 and 2! Even so, modern theologians and teachers can despoil thousands during their life time when they make inadequate interpretations based on their own ideas rather than on scripture itself. The reason Augustine is venerated by both Catholic and Reformed men is *because* he was not accurate at some points.

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