

Creation and Time in the Early Church Fathers: Looking to the Patristics for Guidance in the Genesis Debate

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Abstract

The primary focus of the debate over the proper understanding of Genesis 1–11 has been focused on hermeneutics and theology. Special emphasis is placed on the interpretation of the Hebrew, the weight given to extrabiblical Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) sources, and the influence of contemporary science. While it is right for the central focus of the debate to be hermeneutics and theology (first biblical and then systematic,) a consultation of church history is valuable and instructive for determining what doctrines and beliefs have persisted widely in the church more broadly. If a belief has been held from the time of the early church, Christians should exercise caution and humility before accepting a different belief. When the stream of tradition flows against what is clearly taught in Scripture, Christians should side with Scripture, just as if Scripture clearly teaches something that contradicts the conclusions of scientists.

This research will examine the writings of the early Church Fathers and show the three interpretations of the word “day” held by the early church, of which only the 24-hour day view has survived in any consequential form in Protestant circles. In addition, this research will demonstrate from early Christian writings that the early church was nearly united in the belief in a young earth, dating it between five and ten thousand years, even though they disagreed on how to interpret the Creation Week. This is not grounds alone for belief in a young earth or a literal six-day Creation period; however, it provides strong support for these ideas today and should cause one to pause before considering an alternative interpretation of Scripture.

Keywords: Creation Week, Age of the Earth, Millennium, Augustine

Introduction

The primary focus in the debate over the proper interpretation of Genesis 1–11 has been on hermeneutics and theology. For example, when looking at some of the principal tomes arguing for a Young Earth Creation (YEC) perspective since new life was injected into YEC by Morris and Whitcomb’s *The Genesis Flood*, they do not address church history. Ken Ham’s *The Lie: Evolution/Millions of Years* (2016) provides a good lay-level overview of the foundational importance of a YEC perspective to the biblical worldview. Kurt Wise in *Faith, Form, and Time* (2002) provides a detailed explanation of YEC understanding of Scripture and science. Paul Garner in his *The New Creationism* (2009) provides a great overview of the YEC model from a biblical and scientific perspective. These three books from a wide variety of perspectives in YEC all make great cases for YEC, but all three also neglect the use of historical theology in making their cases in these books.

The main questions in the debate are those of the literary genre, the meaning of certain Hebrew phrases used in the Genesis text, the influence that should be given to extra-biblical ANE sources in interpretation, and the weight that contemporary science should be given in interpretation. These

should be the main questions, and the previously mentioned authors are right to keep these questions as the main focus. To determine the meaning of any portion of Scripture, biblical scholars and theologians should look first to the inspired and inerrant word of God before engaging in the useful study of historical theology to assess any interpretive options Scripture provides. The writings of those who came before, while not inerrant, are valuable and instructive for interpretation today. The function of historical theology is to inform biblical, exegetical, and systematic theology with wisdom from the past. (Allison 2011, 33) When a position has endured as a major position in the church through history, it is a major support for that position.

Unfortunately, in the creation debate historical theology is more often used to recruit authority figures to back our claims rather than inform our studies.¹ No figure is a greater example of being misused than Augustine, who has been cited in support of YEC (Smith 2021), Old Earth Creation (OEC) (Ross 2004, 45), and Evolutionary Creation (EC) (Haarsma and Haarsma 2011, 32–33). There are examples of historical theology being used correctly in the context of this debate that deserve credit, including some from those outside the YEC community.²

¹ For a summary of this problem see Brown, Andrew. 2023. *Recruiting the Ancients for the Creation Debate*.

² See for example VanDoodewaard, William. 2015. The Quest for the Historical Adam; Mook, James R. 2008. “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth.” In *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*; Brown, Andrew J. 2023. *Recruiting the Ancients for the Creation Debate*.

While the other theological disciplines deal directly with the text of Scripture, historical theology focuses on what others wrote about Scripture in the past. Tradition “should impart an element of humility and tentativeness to our commitment to our own view.” (Erickson 1998, 74) For 2,000 years Christian thinkers have contemplated the Scriptures and recorded their thoughts. With these facts in mind, Christians should be cautious about adopting novel interpretations that differ from interpretations that have been major positions throughout church history. When an interpretation of Scripture has existed as a major position in the church from the early church to the modern era, extreme caution should be exercised before taking an alternative position. Christians should go against the grain of tradition where it is certain that Scripture goes against the grain. Tradition should never determine interpretation; however, it should be strongly considered, particularly when dealing with a difficult or contested passage of Scripture, such as Genesis 1–11.

This examination of the early church fathers will reveal three different categories of interpretations for the word “day” in the Genesis 1:1–2:3 creation account: the allegorical, the literal, and the eschatological.³ Among Protestant groups, the literal interpretation is the only one that has survived today in any consequential form. Elements of the other two interpretations have survived, but these other ancient interpretations have, for the most part, transformed to the point that they cannot be considered the same as the originals. In addition, it will be shown that the early Church was nearly united in dating the earth between five and ten thousand years despite differences of interpretation on creation week.

These interpretive categories must be defined if we are to analyze them. The “literal” approach shall here be defined as the one that seeks to understand the plain meaning of the text as written. The literal approach understands “day” as an approximately twenty-four-hour period much like what is experienced today. The most common use of יום refers to the twenty-four-hour period of time (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1997, 398–401). יום, like the English word “day,” can refer to the daylight portion of the 24-hour day or a period of time (for example, Genesis 2:4, “in the day that the Lord God made the heavens and the earth”) but the context will help us discover which is the literal meaning. For the Creation days, the ordinal descriptors and the repeated use of the phrase “evening and morning” indicate a 24-hour period, and this is further reinforced by Exodus 20:11 which says that God

created everything in six days and rested one day. (Davis 1975, 52) These contextual clues help establish the day as ordinary 24-hour periods in the mind of the average modern reader and arguably the ancient reader as well.

The millenary eschatological day interprets the days of the Creation Week in light of the statement in Psalm 90:4, later quoted in 2 Peter 3:8, that a day with the Lord is as a thousand years. This interpretation, not uncommonly paired with a literal interpretation, understands the Creation week as indicating the number of years the world will endure before the eschaton. The allegorical approach views “day” as a spiritual signification of some form to accommodate to human understanding or reconcile some perceived inconsistency in the text. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. As clearly indicated in the millenary eschatological day interpretation, it is not uncommon to find examples of Church fathers who held to two or more interpretations simultaneously, understanding the different interpretations as different layers of meaning in the text. It was very common at this time to see a literal meaning in the text and some form of spiritual or symbolic meaning.

Literal and Prophecy

Literalist interpretation

The literalists did not write much in their surviving works compared to modern commentators about why they understood the creation days as being ordinary in length. For example, John Davis and H.C. Leupold devote multiple pages in their commentaries to explaining why a literal day is the correct interpretation, while this study found that a couple paragraphs of explanation on this topic was a lengthy explanation among the early fathers (Davis 1975, 48–55 and Leupold 1942, 51–57). They were straightforward in writing that the days were roughly 24-hour periods of time and did not seek explain their reasoning to same extent as modern commentators. Victorinus of Pettau (AD250–304) wrote of God creating in six days and resting on the seventh, explicitly saying that God divided light and darkness perfectly into twelve hours each (Victorinus 1975, 341). He does not elaborate on this further. Ephraem the Syrian (4th century AD) does not provide much more detail, simply asserting that all that is was created in six days and going on to describe the light of Day 1 as being a real source of light that lasted the first three days of Creation before being replaced on Day 4 (Ephraem 1994, 77, 81–82)

Basil of Caesarea (AD330–379) addresses the days in his *Hexameron* (n.d.), interpreting the days straightforwardly as literal and answering perceived

³ Two different literal uses of “day” are present in the passage, one referring to the daylight portion of the day and the other referring to the twenty-four-hour period

inconsistencies in the literal day interpretation, such as how days could occur before the creation of the celestial luminaries, why evening occurs before morning, and why it is described as “one day” instead of “first day” (Basil of Caesarea, 2.8). The first question he answers by referring to the light created in Genesis 1:3 in a similar way to Ephraem, stating that there was a real created unidentified source of light which provided light to the world until the creation of the celestial luminaries. The second question he answers by citing that there was darkness (Genesis 1:2) before the creation of light (Genesis 1:3). Therefore, evening was first and then morning. The third question he answers by saying that the description of “one day” is to make clear that the evening and morning combine to make the length of one day, which he specifies is measured out as 24 hours. He continues to say that “one day” allows the description of the day returning on itself, adding to a week, then a year, and so forth. By saying “one day” the 24-hour cycle of light and darkness is given a name just like the light and the darkness. Basil does not confine himself to the literal, explaining how the first day is also a type for eternity, being the day on which light was created and the day on which later Christ would rise from the dead.

Ambrose (AD 339–397,) typically in the allegorical camp, speaks of the latter two questions of Basil in his own *Hexameron*, providing similar answers to Basil’s and also specifying the length of a day as 24 hours (Ambrose 1961, 1.10.36–37). Ambrose also dips his toes into the well of allegory at the end of his section, speaking of the circle of time, its connection to the coming day of the Lord, and the connection to the darkness of Genesis 1 (Ambrose 1961, 1.10.37). Ambrose believed in literal days, but he also engaged in allegorism just as Augustine (AD 354–430) described in his *Confessions*, thus holding to a literal and allegorical interpretation simultaneously. (Augustine 1952, 5.14.24)

Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170–236) writes in a manner that is similar to Basil and Ambrose, though commentary on only three verses from Genesis 1 remain from his *Hexameron*. In what does survive, Hippolytus seeks to answer why the first day is described as “one day” in a similar manner to Basil (Hippolytus 1975, 1.5). Hippolytus also describes the day as returning back on itself in a similar manner to Basil. This similar phrasing suggests that Hippolytus probably held to a literal day. Not enough of his commentary on Genesis remains to say for certain. If he did follow Basil and Ambrose as closely as it seems, it would not be unreasonable for expect

for him to have held to an allegorical interpretation of some form as well.

Speculations on Ancient Literalist Reasoning

John Millam, a theoretical chemist who has done some study of the views about Creation in the early church, suggests that a major factor behind the literalist interpretation was a lack of knowledge of Hebrew (Millam 2011). This seems unlikely though given that some of the early Church fathers, most notably Jerome, knew Hebrew. Even if none of the early Church fathers had any knowledge of Hebrew, the Greek and Latin texts make little difference in how “day” is understood. The LXX uses ἡμέρα which has the same range of meaning as יום. It can be understood as a 24-hour period, the daylight portion of that 24-hour period, or a specific era of time. (Robinson and House 2012, 168) The Vulgate uses the word *dies* which has the same range of meaning as יום as well (Glare and Stray 2012, 591–592). The earlier *Vetus Latina* also uses *dies* to translate יום. The words used to translate יום into the predominate languages of the era do not impact how “day” was understood by the early fathers. There were other factors which would cause some in the early church to reject a literal Creation Week.⁴

Literalists generally sought the most plain, straightforward meaning of the text. Since the primary meaning of “day” in all three languages is a twenty-four-hour period, especially when paired with ordinal descriptors, it makes sense why ancient literalists understood “day” to be a roughly twenty-four-hour period. They saw it as the most straightforward interpretation of the text, which is what the literal meaning is supposed to be.

Eschatological Interpretation

The millenary eschatological day is probably the most interesting of the early Christian interpretations of “day.” This interpretation understands the creation week as a pattern for how history will unfold and seems to have been rooted in the literal day view. It postulates that God will bring the earth to an end in its six or seven thousandth year (depending on the author) because God created in six days and a day with the Lord is as a thousand years (Psalm 90:4; 1 Peter 3:8). Following this period God establishes the true Sabbath, the time in which the saints will dwell with God forevermore. Furthermore, many who write in favor of this interpretation directly state that God created in six ordinary length days, but these ordinary days also signify God’s plan for the history of the world. It is explained well in the words of Irenaeus (AD 130–202):

⁴ See Augustine fn 6.

For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years it shall be concluded ... 'And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made' ... This is an account of the things formerly created, as also it is a prophecy of what is to come. For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident therefore, that they will come to an end at the six thousandth year. (Irenaeus 2012, 5.28.3)

These thoughts are expressed in greater detail by Lactantius of North Africa (AD250–325.) In *The Divine Institutes* he wrote:

Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says, 'In Thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day.' And God labored during those six days in creating such great works, so His religion and truth must labour during these six thousand years while wickedness prevails and bears rule. And again, since God, having finished His works, rested on the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteousness reign for a thousand years. (Lactantius 1975, 7.14)

Irenaeus and Lactantius are arguing that because God created over a period of six literal days and rested on the seventh, He will work in His Creation to reconcile it for 6,000 years before establishing a Sabbath age for the world. This interpretation is based on a reading of Psalm 90:4 and 1 Peter 3:8 (a day with the Lord is as a thousand years) into Genesis 1 and a desire that persists even today to know when Christ will finally return.

The earliest Christian writing with this view is the *Epistle of Barnabas* (Anonymous 2012) (~AD100)

in which is written, "He finished in six days.' This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years." (Anonymous 2012, chapter 15) The epistle goes on to identify the Sabbath as the time when Christ will return, destroy the wicked, and set up His earthly kingdom. (Epistle of Barnabas 2012, chapter 15)

Victorinus wrote after citing Psalm 90:4, "Therefore in the eyes of the Lord each thousand of years is ordained, for I find the Lord's eyes are seven. Wherefore, as I have narrated, that true Sabbath will be in the seven millenary of years, when Christ with His elect shall reign." (Victorinus 1975, 341) Victorinus argued that the true Sabbath would come after 7,000 years as opposed to six, basing his reasoning on the idea that seven is the perfect number and the number of God's "eyes" in Zechariah 4:10.

Methodius (AD250–311) adds the details of the feast of booths, which lasted for seven days, stating in the seven thousandth year of the earth the true feast would be celebrated, possibly referring to the marriage supper for the lamb (Methodius 1971, 9.1). Methodius further clarifies in the same section that the earth will be terminated in the seven thousandth year, agreeing with Victorinus.⁵

Hippolytus of Rome argued for an eschatological day in the fragments of his commentary on Daniel 2, clearly linking the Sabbath age with the termination of 6,000 years. He wrote, "6,000 years must needs be accomplished, in order that the Sabbath may come, the rest, the holy day 'on which God rested from all His works'" (Hippolytus 1975, 2.4). Because other interpreters who held this view based it on a literal day, and given the similarities mentioned earlier in his approach to "day," it is reasonable to suggest that Hippolytus held to a literal day as well based on his

Table 1. Comparisons of Day-Age and Eschatological Day view. There are no church fathers I found who specifically break down the ages this way. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the interpretive difference between day-age and eschatological day. These eschatological ages are broken down based on a LXX chronology since that was the more commonly used translation in the early church.⁶

Day-Age	Eschatological Day
Age 1: Creation activities	Age 1: Creation, Fall, Adam Dies
Age 2: Creation activities	Age 2: Sons of God and Nephilim
Age 3: Creation activities	Age 3: Flood and Babel
Age 4: Creation activities	Age 4: Patriarchs through Descent into Egypt
Age 5: Creation activities	Age 5: Exodus through the Jewish Exile
Age 6: Creation activities	Age 6: Christ comes, Church is established
Age 7: History from Fall until Christ's Return	Age 7: Jesus returns and establishes Kingdom

⁵ It is unclear if these thoughts reflect Methodius' beliefs or if Methodius is representing this belief in one of the characters of this dialogue.

⁶ The use of the LXX chronology here is not meant as a commentary on the LXX v MT chronology debate, but rather is used because the LXX chronology was more commonly used chronology in this period of church history.

belief in the millenary eschatological day coupled with his aforementioned comments on “day” in Genesis 1.

Justin Martyr (AD100–165) also makes use of this reasoning in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. In this particular section, Justin seeks to prove the coming millennial reign of Christ to Trypho. Justin connects the promise of Genesis 2:17, that in the day Adam ate of the fruit he would surely die, and Adam’s lifespan (Genesis 5:5) with Psalm 90:4 and 1 Peter 3:8 to argue that the “days of the tree of life” in Isaiah 65:22 represent 1,000 years (Justin Martyr 2003, 81). Justin is not arguing for a millenary eschatological day, but he is employing the same reasoning in his argument for a coming millennial reign of Christ on earth.

The millenary eschatological day should not be confused with the day-age perspective, illustrated in Table 1. While both argue from Psalm 90:4 and 1 Peter 3:8 that the days of Genesis can signify something other than a 24-hour day, this line of argument is their only commonality. The day-age perspective seeks to interpret Creation Week as an undefinably long period of time, rejecting a literal six-day Creation and placing death before the Fall. The millenary eschatological day was focused on understanding the organization of world history and when Christ would come again.

Allegories

The allegorists wrote at great length about the reasoning of their interpretations. Below the interpretations of an ancient Jewish allegorist, Philo of Alexandria (25BC–AD50,) and two well-known Christian allegorists, Origen (AD185–253) and Clement of Alexandria (AD150–215,) are discussed.⁷ The allegorists are not necessarily denying a literal interpretation. Their allegorical interpretations could have been held simultaneously with a literal interpretation. Unfortunately, their focus on the allegory led to them being, at best, unclear about their views of a literal interpretation. These interpretations suggest the six days are a way to organize creation in the mind of God and the actual physical creation took place in an instant, an idea later taken up by Augustine as well.

Philo of Alexandria

In *On Creation* Philo wrote that God must have first created the incorporeal invisible world as a pattern for the visible world. (Philo 1900, chapter 4) He also writes “[Moses] says that in six days the world was created, not that its Maker required a length of time for his work, for we must think of God as doing all things simultaneously, remembering that

‘all’ includes with the commands which He issues the thought behind them. Six days are mentioned because for the things coming into existence there was need of order. Order involves number, and among numbers by the laws of nature the most suitable to productivity is 6” (Philo 1900, chapter 3). This statement suggests Philo held to God creating the physical world instantly, having the six days of Genesis exist as a mechanism for ordering the world in the mind of God, similar to the position Augustine takes in his *Literal Commentaries*. Philo reinforces this idea by stating, “For, even if the Maker made all things simultaneously, order was none the less an attribute of all that came into existence... Now order is a series of things going on before and following after, in due a sequence, a sequence which, though not seen in the finished productions, yet exists in the designs of the contrivers” (Philo 1900, chapter 7). One cannot mistake Philo here for stating that Creation is taking place in a sequence in the space of time, because just before this statement he states that he believes we should not understand this sequence as taking place in time (Philo 1900, chapter 7). The days of Creation Week, and the sequence of Creation, according to Philo would occur only in the mind of God before the occurrence of an instant physical Creation. Philo’s principal focus throughout his discussion of the Creation Week is the allegorical significance of each detail, but he never denies a literal day outright. He spends time explaining why Day 1 refers to the Creation of the incorporeal world (Philo 1900, chapter 9) and refers to the other Creation days as though describing history. It is not certain that he believed material creation was in six literal days or instantaneous because of his focus in this work on the allegorical significance of the text, but his statements are more consistent with a belief in an instantaneous Creation. This pattern of not totally excluding literal interpretation while focusing heavily on allegorical interpretation will be seen further in Origen and Clement.

Origen’s Allegory

In *Against Celsus*, Origen writes that some pagans, Celsus specifically, viewed the Mosaic creation account as ridiculous because of the existence of days before the celestial bodies, among other reasons (Origen 1972a, 6.49, 50, 60). In this work Origen writes that in his notes on Genesis he found fault with those who “taking the words in their apparent signification, said that the time of six days was occupied in the creation” (Origen 1972a, 6.60). He goes further in “First Principles,” writing, “in those narratives which appear to be literally recorded,

⁷ Though Augustine is well known for allegorizing the days of Genesis 1:1–2:3, the complexity of the development of his thoughts on the matter requires a separate treatment further below

there are inserted and interwoven things which cannot be admitted historically, but which may be accepted in a spiritual signification” (Origen 1972b, 4.16). These statements do not shut the door on a literal interpretation, but certainly indicate a disdain for the literal in keeping with Origen’s heavy reliance on allegorical interpretation.

Throughout “Against Celsus” Origen refers readers to the greater details in his commentary. Unfortunately, Origen’s commentary was lost, but his *Homilies on Genesis* have survived. In them, Origen identifies a seeming discrepancy between Genesis 1:1, which says in summary that God made everything and the rest of Genesis 1 which details the 6 days of Creation. In speaking of the firmament, he writes that God already created the spiritual heaven and that the firmament was speaking of the creation of a physical heaven (Origen 2002, 1.2). Origen brought the two accounts together in his *Homilies* by viewing them as two separate creations, one material and one immaterial, stating “And, therefore, that first heaven indeed, which we said is spiritual, is our mind, which is also itself spirit, that is, our spiritual man which sees and perceives God. But that corporeal heaven, which is called the firmament, is our outer man which looks at things in a corporeal way” (Origen 2002, 1.2). It would seem that Origen sees Genesis 1:1 as a spiritual creation and the rest of the chapter as physical, which also accord with his statement that time began to exist with the days. (Origen 2002, 1.1) His *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* leave the door open to a literal interpretation, though “Against Celsus” and “First Principles” indicate a clear preference for allegorical interpretation.

Clement of Alexandria’s Allegory

Clement of Alexandria writes that God created all things in six days, but is not clear if these six days are six literal days or a way the Creation was organized in the thought of God (Clement 1975, 6.16). He writes:

the creations on different days followed in a most important succession; so that all things brought into existence might have honour from priority, created together in thought, but not being of equal worth. Nor was the creation signified by the voice, inasmuch as the creative work is said to have made them at once. For something must needs have been named first. Wherefore those things were announced first, from which came those that were second, all things being originated together from one essence by one power. For the will of God was one, in one identity. And how could creation take place in time, seeing time was born along with things which exist. (Clement 1975, 6.16)

Clement seems to state that creation could not

take place in time because time was created with the rest of creation, but he does not outright deny the possibility of a literal interpretation (Clement 1975, 6.16). From this passage, Clement seems to have either placed great emphasis on the conception of creation in the thought of God before He created over the course of six literal days or he is stating that the six days were utilized as a way to organize the creation in priority in the thought of God followed by all things being created instantly.

It is important to also keep in mind that Clement states that in this section he is seeking to provide a Gnostic exposition of the decalogue (Clement 1975, 6.15). In the previous chapter, Clement expounds on the veil over the meaning of Scripture and the way to understanding Scripture, indicating that the purpose of his gnostic exposition of the decalogue is, “to look the splendours of truth in the face” (Clement 1975, 6.15). *The Stromata* is a very challenging work to understand; however, the description above appears to have been the allegorical interpretation to which Clement held. This interpretation does not preclude Clement from simultaneously holding to a literal day interpretation; however, in the course of this study no evidence to his holding to a literal day was revealed.

Augustine

The most difficult Church Father to understand on the days of creation is Augustine of Hippo. He wrote more than any other Church Father on Creation, writing two finished commentaries, one unfinished commentary, *City of God* and *Confessions*, in addition to many sermons and references in other works. The following examination of Augustine’s thoughts shall focus mainly on the progression of his thought in his commentaries, with some attention given to the major works of *Confessions* and *City of God*.

Against Manichees

Throughout Augustine’s life, probably more than for most individuals, his views changed dramatically, even after becoming a Christian. In *On Genesis: a Refutation of the Manichees* his thoughts closer reflect those of his mentor, Ambrose. The purpose of this work, as indicated by the name, is to refute the attacks on Genesis from Manichaeism (Chaffey 2011, 91). The questions Augustine answers regarding the days, raised by the hyperliteral interpretations of the Manicheans, are the same questions the literalist interpreters had. Why is there evening first and then morning? How can three days occur without the celestial bodies? The former he answers briefly like Basil and Ambrose, but the latter he answers in greater detail. He begins by saying that one does not have to see the sun to experience the passage of time in a day and refers to men who dwell in caves and

do not see the sun (Augustine 2002a, 1.14.20). He continues to say that the celestial bodies are for the measurement of time and to rule the day and night, not to cause time (Augustine 2002a, 1.14.21–23). The similarity to Ambrose is no surprise given the role Ambrose played in Augustine's conversion, and it also explains Augustine's subsequent focus on an allegorical hermeneutic (Augustine 1952, 5.14.24).

Augustine comes his closest to a literal day view in this commentary, clearly saying that Genesis 1:1 and 2:4 it speak summarily of Creation Week, making the description of the seven days not contradictory (Augustine 2002a, 2.3.4). In his commentary, Augustine also puts forward what might be considered a form of eschatological day, though his ages are connected to events and individuals rather than time (Augustine 2002, 1.23.35–41). It has been suggested that one of the motives for divorcing the eschatological day from the calendar was to discourage the practice of attempting to predict the day and hour of Christ's return (Landes 1988, 159).

Augustine concluded his section on creation week by presenting an allegory of the seven stages of the Christian life based on the seven days of Creation (Augustine 2002a, 1.25.43). This is the third interpretation presented in "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees." It is plain that Augustine saw the text as holding multiple layers of meaning that needed to be to be peeled back, leading him to hold to three diverse yet presumably non-contradictory interpretations of the meaning of creation week simultaneously.

The Literal Commentaries

It is clear that when writing his literal commentaries Augustine's view of Creation Week had changed, writing in *Literal Meaning of Genesis*:

So it is altogether more probable that these seven-day periods follow one another under the names and number of those first seven, and thus unfurl their sails to run before the wind of time, while those first six days were unfolded, in a manner quite beyond what we are used to in our experience, with the original fashioning of things, so that in them neither evening nor morning, neither light itself nor darkness, presented the same alternations as they do in these days. (Augustine 2002c, 4.18.33)

He instead argues that the works of the creation occurred instantaneously and were recorded as six days because the number six is a perfect number and recording it as six days work accommodates to man's limited understanding (Augustine 2002c, 4.7.14, 4.32.49). Neoplatonist thought, which echoes other allegorists, shows in his belief in a creation "in the knowledge of the mind" organized in six stages for the angels to observe before it was physically

created instantaneously (Augustine 2002c, 4.32.49). Augustine does not seem to have suddenly made this transition in thought. Evidence of a change can be seen roughly a decade earlier in his unfinished literal commentary on Genesis. In this work, Augustine relies heavily on a single verse in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Sirach* to argue for an instantaneous creation; however, he also asks many questions of how God could speak as described in Genesis 1 (Augustine 2002b, 7.28). He returned to this question without use of *Wisdom of Sirach* (though the influence can still be seen) in his finished commentary and sought to develop an answer that kept God from being bound by time or other human restrictions (Augustine 2002c, 1.2.4–6). The greatest difference between the literal commentaries and *Against Manichees* in interpreting Creation Week is that Augustine's tone displayed great confidence in his conclusions in "A Refutation of the Manichees," but his tone seems more tentative in the literal commentaries, posing more questions than he answers.

A Holistic View of Augustine

It is generally accepted that although Augustine called them literal commentaries, the interpretations today would be considered allegorical because he went beyond the plain meaning of the text. He called them literal because, "they are interpreted not according to allegorical significations, but according to historical events proper" (Augustine "Retractions" 1968, 2.50). In Augustine's literal commentaries the goal is to identify what actually happened, which he understands in the literal commentaries to be an instantaneous creation which was ordered in the mind of God according to the pattern of the six described days. In his earlier "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees," while Augustine recognizes six ordinary days, he turns to allegories to develop prophetic and moral meaning for the Christian life based on the text but does not seek to examine the events described in the text. Augustine's commentaries display a development of thought as Augustine continued to read and think on Scripture, a development which would doubtless be further elucidated by a detailed examination of Augustine's references to Creation throughout his vast number of writings. Tim Chaffey's examination of Augustine's commentaries on Genesis 1 is a great start towards this end (Chaffey 2011).

Comparison to Contemporary Forms

The literal interpretation has survived to the modern era with the least changes among Protestants. Today the literal interpretation still sees the days as 24-hour periods. Generally, modern advocates of literal day do not include the allegories of the coming

of Christ or the consummation as Basil, Ambrose, and others did. Any form of allegorical or symbolic meaning in the days is generally deemphasized by modern literalists. Modern literalists today focus on what *יוֹם* means in the Creation account given the use of the phrases “evening and morning” and the use of ordinal descriptors.

The millennial eschatological day is almost non-existent in Protestant communities. It is just as well considering Jesus’ statement in Matthew that no one knows the day or the hour of his return (Matthew 24:36). Though, there are still some who seek to predict Christ’s return, the days of Creation are rarely used as a tool to predict. Though some day-age proponents would like to claim continuity with church fathers who utilized the millennial eschatological day, the reality is that the day-age interpretation is wholly incompatible with the millennial eschatological day.

Contemporary allegorical interpretations are harder to identify because most evangelical biblical scholars today at least say that they seek to understand the original intended message of the author based on the plain meaning of the text in its historical-grammatical context. Augustine sought to do this it seems in his literal commentaries but fell into attempting to find a hidden meaning behind the text. There are many laymen who generally read to find “what it means to me,” but outside of this, a true allegorical interpretation does not seem to exist in Protestant evangelicalism today. Interpretations which deviate from that of the literal day are not attempting to extract a deeper meaning from the text than the author intended. They say they are seeking to understand the text as the author intended in its original historical-grammatical context. It may be argued that some of these interpretations are influenced by outside pressures to make the text conform to contemporary science, but the expressed intent of the modern interpreters is antithetical to the allegorical tradition.

More often today, those seeking to reconcile evolution and long ages with Scripture resort to reclassifying the genre of the early chapters of Genesis. One popular example of this would be classifying the first chapters of Genesis as “mytho-historical,” as William Lane Craig does in his recent publications on Adam.⁸ Another example would be Walton’s cosmic temple interpretation of the Creation account which goes well beyond the plain meaning of the text in a manner reminiscent of the allegorists even though Walton would claim it provides a face value exegesis

(Walton 2009, 87, 93, 102). A final example would be Meridith Kline’s framework hypothesis which classifies the early chapters of Genesis as semi-poetic (Kline 2016, 11–12).

In general, the modern literal-day proponents accept one interpretation for “day” as opposed to the multi-faceted approach of the early literal-day proponents. The modern interpreter may not want to accept the non-literal interpretations of the early fathers due to them going well beyond the meaning presented in the text, but we cannot neglect to study these giants of the faith who came before. There may be other facets to the text of Genesis 1–11 that go beyond history, but we must be careful as we seek to mine the depths of Scripture⁹ to avoid straying into the ditch of the early allegorists by divining meanings of the text that are unrelated to the intended meaning of the text. An example would be Augustine’s allegory of the seven stages of the Christian life which, while interesting and perhaps beneficial, is not grounded in the text of Genesis 1.

Age of the Earth

Despite the various views on the interpretation of “day,” the early church was united in their belief about the age of the earth. Their dating appears to have been anchored in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11. Except for Origen, all known calculations dated the earth at less than 7,000 years, shown in Table 2. When giving a chronological age of the earth, the early church seems to have been more consistent with the LXX than the MT, though all of the given age ranges place the earth at less than 10,000 years old (refer to Table 2 below). These ages raise questions for proponents of an MT-based chronology worth exploring; however, these questions go beyond the purpose of this research.

Generally, when citing an age for the earth the Church Fathers were attempting to refute the longer ages given by the Greek philosophers which the Church recognized as incompatible with the biblical record. Lactantius, prefacing his statements on the days of creation and the age of the earth, describes Greek philosophers saying that “many thousands of ages (thousand-year periods) have passed since the creation of the world.” (Lactantius 1975, 7.14) This is followed by Lactantius’ previously discussed statements on the eschatological day which demonstrates his belief that the earth was not yet 6,000 years old. This same eschatological day reasoning is how it is known that Irenaeus

⁸ See for example Craig, 2024, 2021.

⁹ As we continue to study Scripture, we may notice deeper meaning than we had before as we notice such features as chiastic structures in narratives, allusions to other passages of Scripture, and typology being employed. These discoveries do not negate the literal meaning we first read but rather enrich and deepen this meaning. Interpretations based on these features can help keep us grounded in the text, focused on the intended meaning of Scripture rather than falling into eisegesis.

Table 2. Ages assigned to the earth by the early church arranged from earliest father to most recent father.

Pseudo-Barnabas	<6000	Epistle to Barnabas 15
Irenaeus of Lyons	<6000	Against Heresies 5.28.3
Clement of Alexandria	5818 ¹⁰	Stromata 1.21
Julius Africanus	~5500	Chronology 1
Hippolytus of Rome	~5500	Fragments Daniel 2.4
Origen	<10000	Against Celsus 1.20
Lactantius	<6000	Divine Institutes 7.14
Victorinus of Pettau	<7000	On the Creation of the World
Methodius of Olympus	<7000	Banquet of the 10 Virgins 9.1
Eusebius of Caesarea	5228	Chronicle 1.42
Augustine	<6000	City of God 12.12

and other eschatological day proponents held to an age for the earth of less than 6,000 years. Julius Africanus (AD 160–240) states that Christ was born in AM 5500. (Julius Africanus 1971, 1–5) Hippolytus says the same before making his statements about eschatological day (Hippolytus 1975, 2.4).

Origen in the same chapter where he says the earth is less than 10,000 years old says that the Greeks believed that the earth was ancient but appeared younger because throughout history great deluges and conflagrations have periodically occurred and wiped evidence of earlier things (Origen 1972, 1.20). Eusebius (AD 260–339) wrote a detailed chronology, dating to the fifteenth year of Tiberius. Augustine of Hippo in *City of God* refers to a group who were teaching that the world is eternal and so he pointed out that Adam's Creation was less than 6,000 years ago and cited the Creation account of Genesis as evidence (Augustine 1952a, 12.10–12). Augustine, however, leaves the question of how much time passed before Adam's creation open-ended (Augustine 1952a, 12.12). The vast majority of the early church believed in a young earth because they believed that is what the text of Scripture showed and because they generally calculated the age of the earth by determining when Adam was created. They held to this conviction despite the prevailing paradigm in their culture being an earth which was either significantly older or eternal. This unity on the age of the earth was also despite differing views about Creation Week.

Conclusion

In the early church, there was a diversity of

interpretations for “day” in the Genesis creation account, however, of these interpretations, one remains largely unaltered and in use still today in Protestantism. The eschatological day is no longer widely used. Allegorism of the ancient type is not common in Protestant circles today. The proponents of literal day still hold to a roughly 24-hour period of time as the meaning of “day,” though they have now generally rejected non-literal meanings for the days entirely which were once held simultaneously with the literal day position. Despite the variety of views about how to interpret “day,” the early church was nearly united in a belief in a relatively young earth based on the text of Genesis 1 and the Genesis 5 and 11 genealogies.

The conclusions drawn from history are not sufficient reason on their own to determine how the Genesis Creation account should be interpreted, but they should be given great weight. Those differing from a literal day interpretation and a relatively young earth should be certain that a plain reading of Scripture in its historical-grammatical context has led to their interpretation before differing from what does not appear to have been a major area of debate in the early church. There is a possibility that an interpretation which better explains the text exists which the early church failed to come up with, however, such an interpretation must undergo rigorous scrutiny and answer why the new interpretation was missed by all who came before. For now, while there is back and forth debate on the textual and theological front, tradition stands strongly in favor of a literal day interpretation and a young earth.

¹⁰ Clement did not provide an exact calculation of the age of the earth, but rather provided the length of time between certain events and people (for example, from Adam to the Flood or from Shem to Abraham). My own adding of the numbers provided by Clement is represented in the chart though others present different numbers. Robert Bradshaw in *Creationism in the Early Church* lists 5592 (Chapter 3). John Ferguson in Clement of Alexandria lists 5784 (page 117). It is unclear how they arrive at their own calculations. The number represented in the chart is based on Adam to Deluge 1250 + Shem to Abraham + 2148 + Isaac to Division of Land 616 + Judges to Samuel 463 + Days of Kings 572 + Persian Monarchy 235 + Macedonian Rule to Death of Antony 312 + Rome to Death of Commodus 222 = 5818.

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