

3

The Days of Genesis 1

The Early Church & the Age of the Earth

The development of a Christian chronology owes much to the need to answer a persistent charge made by their opponents. It was alleged that Christianity was a new religion, and as such, unworthy of serious consideration. On the contrary, the Christians replied, Christianity is in fact the oldest, and therefore, the true religion.¹ Whatever was good or noble in the writings of pagan philosophers was there because it had been plagiarised from Moses. This “Theft of the Greeks” argument became very popular in the early church (see Table 3.1) and the development of a chronology to support it was a natural consequence.²

Table 3.1: Church Fathers Who Believed In “The Theft of the Greeks.”

Church Father	Date	Reference
Justin Martyr	c.100 - c.165	<i>Hortatory Address</i> (whole book)
Tatian	110-180	<i>Address</i> , 31
Clement of Alexandria	c.150 - c.215	<i>Miscellanies</i> , 1.21; 2.5; 6.3
Eusebius of Caesarea	263-339	<i>Preparation</i> , 10.11-13.21

The belief that the world would last 7 000 years appears to have been almost universally accepted by the early church (see Table 3.2). The early church writers based their teaching on the days of Genesis 1, Psalm 90:4, 2 Peter 3:8 and the biblical genealogies. They reasoned that as God created in six days and a day is as a thousand years, therefore the earth would last for 6 000 years. After this would come a thousand years of rest, equivalent to the seventh day. The same idea is found in Jewish literature. The *Babylonian Talmud* refers to a chronological scheme by which history is divided into three ages of 2 000 years each: an age of chaos; the age of the Law, and the age of the Messiah.³ A thousand years of rest would

follow.⁴ Because the origin of this teaching cannot be dated accurately we cannot say with certainty if the belief was widespread within Judaism or at what time it originated.

Quoted in full Psalm 90:4 reads: “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.” It means that viewed from God’s perspective the span of a man’s life is like the twinkling of an eye. The verse is therefore not saying that the two lengths of time are identical, rather it is making a comparison concerning divine and human perspective. While we might disagree with their exegesis the widespread acceptance of the creation week pattern for earth history implies the acceptance by many of the church fathers’ of two important points:

1. The earth is young (less than 6 000 years old).
2. The biblical genealogies provide an accurate chronology.

Table 3.2: Church Fathers Who believed that This World Would Last 6 000 years

Name	Date	Reference
Pseudo Barnabas	70-135 AD	<i>Epistle of Barnabas</i> 15:1-4
Irenaeus	c.115-202	<i>Against Heresies</i> 5.28.3
Sulpiicius Severus	c.363-c.420	<i>History</i> , 1.2.1
Gaudentius of Brescia	d. after 410	<i>Tractatus</i> 10.15
Hippolytus	d. 235	<i>Commentary on Daniel</i> 4.23
Julius Africanus	d.240	<i>P.G.</i> 10.65 A10-B2
Hilary of Pontiers	c.315-367	<i>In Matthew</i> 17:1; 20:6; <i>Tract Myst.</i> 1.41; 2.10
Lactantius	d. after 317	<i>Divine Institutes</i> 7.14-27
Firminus Maternus	c.346	<i>The Error of the Pagan Religions</i> 25.3
Tyconius	d. c. 400	<i>Book of Rules</i> , 5

In the interests of accuracy it is important to note that unlike most of the other writers listed above Tyconius rejected the idea that the seventh ‘day’ of earth’s history was to be interpreted as a literal 1 000 years. Augustine does note that he believed himself to be living

in the sixth millennium of world history, but believed that the 1 000 year rule of Christ on earth was to be interpreted spiritually.⁵ Elsewhere he rejected the exegesis upon which the entire “day = 1 000 years” formula was based as well as the use of this formula to calculate the date of the return of Christ.⁶

Progressive creationist Dr. Hugh Ross interprets the evidence presented above rather differently. He argues that the fathers believed that the days of Genesis were a thousand years in length and not 24 literal hours.⁷ Ross cites two writers in support of his position: Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons. Justin Martyr wrote:

Now we have understood that the expression used among these words, “According to the days of the tree [of life] shall be the days of my people; the works of their toil shall abound, obscurely predicts a thousand years. For as Adam was told that in the day he ate of the tree he would die, we know that he did not complete a thousand years. We have perceived, moreover, that the expression, “The day of the Lord is as a thousand years,” is connected with this subject.⁸

Irenaeus wrote:

And there are some again, who relegate the death of Adam to the thousandth year; for since “a day of the Lord is as a thousand years,” he did not overstep the thousand years, but died within them, thus bearing out the sentence of his sin. Whether, therefore, with respect to disobedience, which is death; whether [we consider] that, on account of that, they were delivered over to death, and made debtors to it; whether with respect to [the fact that on] one and the same day on which they ate they also died (for it is one day of the creation); whether [we regard this point] that with respect to this cycle of days, they died on the day in which they did also eat, that is, the day of the preparation, which is termed “the pure supper,” that is, the sixth day of the feast, which the Lord also exhibited when He suffered on that day; or whether [we reflect] that he (Adam) did not overstep the thousand years, but died within their limit...⁹

Both of these early Christian writers argue that because Adam was told that he would die on the day that he sinned, therefore he lived for less than a thousand years which is a day in the Lord's sight (cf. Psalm 90:4). Irenaeus adds a further parallel between Adam and Christ: they both died on the sixth day of the week. Taken in isolation it might be concluded from this that both believed that all the days of creation were a thousand years in length, as well as the "days" of the history of the earth. Further research shows that the idea that Adam's life span being less than a thousand year "day" was not a new one. It originated in Jewish literature and is found in the *Book of Jubilees* (c.105-153 BC):

And at the close of the Nineteenth Jubilee, in the seventh week in the sixth year thereof Adam died, and all his sons buried him in the land of his creation, and he was the first to be buried on the earth. And he lacked seventy years of one thousand years; of one thousand years are as one day in the testimony of the heavens and therefore was it written concerning the tree of knowledge: "On the day ye eat thereof ye shall die." For this reason he did not complete the years of this day; for he died during it.¹⁰

A similar saying occurs in *Bereshith Rabba* on Genesis 3:8: "I said to him, on the day thou eatest of it, thou shalt surely die. But you know not whether it is one of My days or one of yours. Behold I give him one of my days which is as a thousand years."¹¹ This last quote appears to me to give us the key to understanding how the various "days" were viewed. There seems to be a distinction being made between one of the Lord's "days" and one of man's "days". The former are a thousand years in length, the latter last for 24 hours. This would explain how Irenaeus, a few chapters after the passage quoted above is able to write:

For in six days as the world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. And for this reason the Scripture says: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their

adornment. And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made; and God rested upon the seventh day from all his works.” This is an account of the things formerly created, as also it is a prophecy of the things to come. For that day of the Lord is a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year.¹²

So Irenaeus seems to have seen no contradiction here. For him the days of Genesis were 24 hours long and served as a pattern for the history of the world. Adam lived for 930 years, which was 70 years less than a full “day of the Lord” and so he solved an apparent contradiction in Scripture. Justin Martyr makes no further reference to the days of creation, so we are unable to confirm that he too believed the days of Genesis to be “human” days, but it seems likely that he followed what appears to be an accepted practice. Later writers, such as Hippolytus, Lactantius, Victorinus of Pettau do not mention the “explanation” of Adam’s life span given by Justin and Irenaeus probably because they understood Genesis 2:17 (“...on the day you eat of it you will die...”) differently. Table 3.3 shows how the writers of the early church viewed the days of creation. We cannot be sure of the views of most writers for a variety of reasons already mentioned above. My own view based upon the style of exegesis of other passages of Scripture would lead me to think that the vast majority of those listed as having an unclear view would opt for 24 hours had they discussed the subject. The shortage of references does not mean that they thought the issue of the age of the earth was unimportant. On the contrary it was clearly an contentious issue in the early church, because the Greeks believed that the world was extremely ancient.¹³ Lactantius wrote:

Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six thousandth year is not yet completed, and that when this number is completed the consummation must take place, and the condition of human affairs be remodelled for the

better, the proof of which must first be related, that the matter itself be plain. God completed the world and this admirable work of nature in six days, as is contained in the secrets of Holy Scripture, and consecrated the seventh day, on which He rested from His works.¹⁴

Hugh Ross notes that Eusebius makes no reference to a date for creation or to the age of the earth anywhere in his works.¹⁵ He then goes on to note that Eusebius twice cites Genesis 2:4¹⁶ and finds in this proof that he took the days of Genesis 1 to be longer than 24 hours. It has been well said that arguments from silence are seldom worth considering! The length of the “day” of Genesis 2:4 essentially tells us nothing about what an author believes about the days of Genesis 1 as to the best of my knowledge all modern writers and commentators take Genesis 2:4 to mean a period other than 24 hours - most take it to include (as Eusebius did) the entire period of God’s creative activity up to Genesis 2:3. The most that can be deduced from the available evidence is that there is no way of knowing what Eusebius believed on the subject of the days of Genesis 1.

Even those who rejected literal 24 hour days still believed in a young earth as Table 3.4 demonstrates. Origen believed that the world was less than 10 000 years old and Clement thought it was still younger. In my view Davis A. Young is right when he concludes that the early church fathers “...did not believe that the creation had taken place over six thousand years, but that the totality of human history would occupy six thousand years, a millennium of history for each of the six days of creation.”¹⁷

Table 3.3: The Length of the Days of Creation

Writer	Date	24 hours	Figurative	Unclear	Reference
Philo	c.20 BC- c.AD 50		✓		<i>Creation</i> 13
Josephus	AD 37/38- c.100			✓	<i>Antiquities</i> 1.1.1 (1.27-33)
Justin Martyr	c.100 - c.165			✓	
Tatian	110-180			✓	

Theophilus of Antioch	c.180	✓			<i>Autolytus</i> 2.11-12
Irenaeus of Lyons	c.115-202			✓	
Clement of Alexandria	c.150 - c.215		✓		<i>Stromateis</i> 6.16
Tertullian	c.160 - c.225			✓	
Julius Africanus	c.160-240			✓	
Hippolytus of Rome	170-236			✓	<i>Genesis</i> , 1.5
Origen	185-253		✓		<i>Celsus</i> , 6.50, 60
Methodius	d.311	✓			<i>Chastity</i> 5.7
Lactantius	240-320	✓			<i>Institutes</i> 7.14
Victorinus of Pettau	d. c. 304	✓			<i>Creation</i>
Eusebius of Caesarea	263-339			✓	
Ephrem the Syrian	306-373	✓			<i>Commentary on Genesis</i> 1.1
Epiphanius of Salamis	315-403	✓			<i>Panarion</i> , 1.1.1
Basil of Caesarea	329-379	✓			<i>Hexameron</i> , 2.8
Gregory of Nyssa	330-394			✓	
Gregory of Nazianzus	330-390			✓	
Cyril of Jerusalem	d. 387	✓			<i>Catechetical Lectures</i> 12.5
Ambrose of Milan	339-397	✓			<i>Hexameron</i> , 1.10.3-7
John Chrysostom	374-407			✓	
Jerome	347-419/420			✓	
Augustine of Hippo	354-430		✓		<i>Literal</i> , 4.22.39

Table 3.4: Specific Statements Made by the Early Church Writers Concerning the Age of the Earth

Writer	Date	Date of Creation of Adam (BC)	Reference
Clement of Alexandria	c. 150- c. 215	5,592	<i>Miscellanies</i> 1.21
Julius Africanus	c.160-240	5,500	<i>Chronology</i> , Fragment 1
Hippolytus of Rome	170-236	5,500	<i>Daniel</i> , 4
Origen	185-253	< 10 000	<i>Celsus</i> , 1.20
Eusebius of Caesarea	263-339	5,228	<i>Chronicle</i>
Augustine of Hippo	354-430	< 5 600	<i>City</i> 12.11

Dr. Richard Landes, in a detailed examination of the early church's chronography, describes how the chronology of Hippolytus and Julius Africanus rapidly gained wide acceptance. This was then superseded in the 4th century by the chronology of Eusebius (republished by Jerome) which brought the date of creation forward by 300 years.¹⁸ Despite New Testament injunctions against the setting of dates chronology was being used to predict the time of the Lord's return. Landes argues that the change in dates was part of an attempt on the part of the church leadership to cool apocalyptic expectations by moving the predicted date further into the future.¹⁹ This concern led to further revisions in calculation which made the world younger and younger as time passed.²⁰ From the 8th century calendars began to

date events *Annus Domini* (AD) instead of the traditional *Annus Mundi* (A.M.).²¹ For the purposes of our present study the important point to note is that it was ecclesiastical concern over eschatology rather than arguments that the world was more ancient that caused these changes.

Before we move on to discuss the Day-Age Theory it is worth noting the teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses on the length of the creation days. They, it might well be argued, take the "creation week" model for the history of mankind to a ridiculous extreme. The reasoning presented in their publications might be summarised as follows:

God created the world in six "days". In Scripture a day can mean long periods of time (cf. Zech. 14:8; Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8, 10).²² Adam died on the "day" in which he sinned, a "day" in this case being equal to a thousand years.²³ The seventh "day" on which God rested is still continuing today. Six thousand years have elapsed between the creation of Adam and the year 1914 when Christ established his heavenly throne.²⁴ After this there remains a thousand years until the end of the seventh "day".²⁵ Therefore, each of the days of creation was 7,000 years long.²⁶ This of course raises the question of how the year 1914 for the establishment of Christ's rule is arrived at. The Witnesses argue that just as Nebuchadnezzar was removed from the throne for seven 'times' (in his case seven years, Daniel 4:10-17). Seven years is 84 months of 30 days or 2 520 days. Ezekiel 4:6 in the *New World Translation* reads: "I have appointed thee each day for a year." So, the 2 520 days now become 2 520 years. As Jehovah's theocracy on earth (the independent nation of Israel) ended in 607 BC, the date of the restoration of His new theocracy (the Watchtower organisation) is arrived at by adding 2 520 years to this date, giving you 1914 AD.²⁷

Their argument appears to be that because a 'day' can mean something other than a 24 hour day it can therefore mean any length of time that you want it to. Such elastic exegesis contradicts the fundamental principle of linguistics which states that a word's possible range

of meanings is limited by its context. The Jehovah's Witnesses view is therefore a product of an arbitrary manipulation of Scripture carried out to support a preconceived theological framework. Needless to say that there is no basis in the teachings of the early church to support them.

The Early Church & The Day-Age Theory

Perhaps no other writer of the early church has been so consistently called upon as a support theistic evolution as Augustine of Hippo. Such is his inherent authority that appeals made to him are evidently considered quite important. Many writers have argued that Augustine supported the Day-Age interpretation of Genesis 1, whereby the creative days lasted for long periods of time. One of the most influential proponents of this position was William Greenough Thayer Shedd (1820-1894). Shedd placed special emphasis on the history of Christianity as a means of identifying and countering false teaching.²⁸ For this reason his opinions on the history of doctrine continue to carry a great deal of weight. He wrote in the first volume of his *Dogmatic Theology* that:

Respecting the length of the six creative days, speaking generally, for there was some difference of views, the patristic and mediaeval exegesis makes them to be long periods, not days of twenty-four hours. The latter interpretation has prevailed only in the modern church. Augustine, teaches (De Genesi ad literam, IV.xxvii.) that the length of the six days is not determined by the length of our week-days.²⁹

In similar vein John Dickie commented:

But long before Christian thought and scholarship had any knowledge of the close relation between Babylonian and Hebrew accounts of the Creation, the theory was widely held that the six days of Creation meant six extended periods of time.³⁰

More recently Oliver Barclay, wrote in a conclusion to a published creation/evolution debate that:

...many on both sides of the discussion will agree that *the most natural reading of Genesis 1 is in terms of creation in six 24-hour periods*. That, after all, is how it has normally been understood in the history of the church until quite recently. There are exceptions, like Augustine who thought it referred to a long process, and he had considerable influence, but at least since the seventeenth century most people have understood it in terms of six periods of 24 hours, until modern geology got going in the early nineteenth century (before Darwin).³¹

Barclay here contradicts many of Shedd and Dickie's arguments, but continues to repeat the same interpretation of Augustine. A far more accurate assessment of Augustine is given by Bernard Ramm, who points out that in his work on Genesis:

Augustine does not call them geological days, and it has been argued that there is nothing in Augustine to justify any belief in a period of time for these days. The point Augustine actually makes is that the creation days are so great, so majestic, so profound that we cannot consider them as mere sun-divided days but as God-divided days. They are creative days, not solar days, and so he calls them *natures, growths, dies ineffabiles*.

With the recent translation of Augustine's works on Genesis into English writers unfamiliar with Latin no longer have to rely on secondary sources when discussing his views. It is to be hoped that this will finally lay to rest the idea that he supported the day-age theory.

Creation According To Seminal Principles

Several of the early church fathers believed that God created the universe in the form of seminal principles, including Hilary of Pontiers (c. 315-367), Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. As Augustine's writings present the most developed version of this theory it is worth looking at them in some detail.

Augustine believed that God created all things *ex nihilo*, instantaneously. He identified "in the beginning" with the beginning of time which is considered one of his most valuable contributions to the doctrine of creation. By coining this theory Augustine cut the ground from under his opponents, the Manichees, who asked "What was God doing *before* he created the world?" If time was created with the world then such temporal questions become meaningless, because you cannot have a time *before* time existed! Augustine based his doctrine on Sirach 18:1 which reads "He who lives forever created all things together" in the Old Latin and *Vulgate*. The *NRSV* of this verse reads: "He who lives forever created the whole universe", so his argument is based on a mistranslation of an apocryphal book, which Augustine apparently accepted as inspired.

In his exegesis of Genesis Augustine recognised three acts of creation. The first, the plan of everything in the mind of God, in the second (Gen. 1:1 - 2:4) of the creation of everything instantaneously in the form of *seminal principles*. The final act (Gen. 2:5 onwards) describes God's works within time which we now experience in which the *principles* became this world and its creatures. The creation of man took place as part of God's third act, as did the making of Eve from one of Adam's ribs. However, even this formation of Eve from a rib was part of the *seminal principles* created during God's second act.

It is probable that Augustine derived his concept of seminal principles from Stoic and Pythagorean teaching. This stated that every living thing is derived from *seeds* and that from

these tiny particles the fully grown plant or animal developed. The *seeds* created in the beginning were not the same as those observed now, being far smaller. These in turn produced the world as we now know it just as an acorn produces an oak tree. Closely linked with this is Augustine's acceptance of the widely held belief in the spontaneous generation of such creatures as flies, bees and frogs. Such a belief required that both living and dead matter contain these *seeds*, from which these creatures sprang. Augustine wrote that

With regard to certain very small forms of animal life, there is a question as to whether they were produced in the first creatures or were a later product of the corruption of perishable beings. For most of them came forth from the diseased parts or the excrement or vapors of living bodies or from the corruption of corpses; some also from decomposed trees and plants, others from rotting fruit.... it is absurd to say that they were created when the animals were created, except in the sense that there was present from the beginning in all living bodies a natural power, and, I might say, there were interwoven with these bodies the seminal principles of animals later to appear, which would spring from the decomposing bodies, each according to its kind and with its special properties, by the wonderful power of the immutable Creator who moves all His creatures.

The seminal principles developed into everything we now know in the visible universe over a period of six 'days'. In his earlier works Augustine maintained that these were literal 24 hour days, but later in his *Literal Meaning of Genesis* he changed his view. The days of Genesis 1 were not for Augustine temporal periods at all, but a way of describing creation as it was revealed to the angels. Six days are described, not because God needed that length of time, but because six is the first perfect number. Thus the "...story of the six days is a dramatic representation of what took place at once as a whole." Augustine even suggests a logical framework for the six days, based on the numbers which make up the number 6 (1, 2 and 3) as shown in Table 3.5 below. He admits that there may be a better interpretation of the

meaning of the passage, but admits that after years of study he has been unable to find it. To those who disagree with him he wishes God's help in finding the true meaning.

Table 3.5: Augustine's "Framework" Interpretation of Genesis 1

Day	Work
1	Creation of Light
2 & 3	Creation of heaven and earth.
4, 5 & 6	Creation of visible beings in heaven and earth.

The concept of *seminal principles* has often been seized upon and interpreted (anachronistically) as proof that Augustine was a theistic evolutionist. According to this reasoning what Augustine described as the seminal principles actually refers to God's guidance of the evolutionary process following the "Big Bang". Closer analysis of Augustine's argument shows that such a parallel is not justified. The doctrine of *seminal principles* requires that every living creature is potentially formed at the beginning. There is no room for a development from molecules to man because from the outset species are fixed and cannot be changed. Augustine's view excludes any idea of millions of years of development because in his view the change from seminal principles to a mature creation was instantaneous.

The Early Church & The Pictorial Day Theory

The modern pictorial-day theory was developed by Air Commodore P.J. Wiseman (1888-1948). Wiseman held that the days of Genesis 1 were not days of creation at all, but rather six days of revelation during which God explained what He had done to Adam. He considered this theory to be original to himself and did not attempt to find support for it in the writings of the church fathers. His theory allows for an old-earth and a local flood and was championed by Robert E. D. Clark (1906-1984). It may be true to say, however, that Augustine may have been the source of what Bernard Ramm refers to as the pictorial-day

theory in that he believed “that creation was *revealed* in six days, not *performed* in six days.” Wiseman cites Origen and Augustine as supporting the view that the creation days extended over long periods of time, but it is probable that he was relying on a secondary source for this information.

The Early Church & The Framework Hypothesis

The *Framework Hypothesis* is founded on the supposed parallel of days 1-3, 2-5 and 4-6 of the creation week. Henri Blocher, Charles E. Hummel, Roger Forster & Paul Marston and Victor Hamilton all cite Augustine as a supporter of this theory. Examination of the reference that Hamilton gives (*City of God* 11.6) shows that Augustine believed no such thing. Although he did experiment with various parallels, Augustine eventually rejected them in favour of the pattern shown in Table 3.5. Such an error is not only poor scholarship, but is also an example of the importance of establishing a historical tradition for a doctrine. In this case the tradition cannot be traced to the early church, the *Framework Hypothesis* being formulated only two centuries ago by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). Von Herder wrote:

The earliest picture of creation is arranged after this model, and the division of the so-called six days' work has also a reference to it. When the heaven is lifted up, the earth is brought forth also and adorned; when the air and the water are peopled, the earth also becomes inhabited. The same parallelism of the heavens and the earth pervades all the hymns of praise that are grounded on this picture of creation; the psalms, where all the works of nature are invoked to praise their Creator; the most solemn addresses of Moses and the prophets; in short, it appears most extensively throughout the poetry and the language.