

Chapter 8

Interpretations of the Evidence

We have now completed our survey of the early church's interpretation of Genesis 1 - 11. In this final chapter I intend to use this information to test the accuracy of some of the many generalisations that have been made about the early church's views.

Did The Early Church Teach "Creation Science"?

Louis Lavellee in an *ICR Impact* article published in 1986 argued that the early church fathers defended creation science because they believed in creation ex nihilo, literal creation days and a young earth.(1) Historian Ronald L. Numbers, on the other hand, has argued in his influential book *The Creationists* that scientific creationism can be traced back no further than George McCready Price (1870-1963). Price in turn derived many of his views from the prophetess of Seventh-day Adventism, Ellen Gould White (1827-1915).(2) Numbers uses the following definition of scientific creationism / creation science:

Creation-science includes the scientific evidences and related inferences that indicate: (1) Sudden creation of the universe, energy, and life from nothing; (2) The insufficiency of mutation and natural selection in bringing about development of living kinds from a single organism; (3) Changes only within fixed limits of originally created kinds of plants or animals; (4) Separate ancestry for man and apes; (5) Explanation of the earth's geology by catastrophism, including the occurrence of a worldwide flood, and (6) A relatively recent inception of the earth and living kinds.(3)

Echoing Number's argument Roger Forster and Paul Marston provide the following summary of the teaching of scientific creationism / creation science:

1. The world is not much more than about 6-10,000 years old.
2. It came into being during a period of 144 hours, by a series of instantaneous miraculous fiat creations.
3. Genesis 1 describes these events literally, and the Bible is itself a source of high-quality scientific information, which enables it to set a framework of basic scientific truth which may be elaborated by observation.
4. Before the first human sin there was no animal death, and scientific laws were radically different.
5. Evolution cannot account for any basic change in animal structures, but 'degenerative'

evolution has - since Adam's sin - caused the production of present habits and organs of predatory life within basic animal kinds.

6. The Flood of Noah was a worldwide cataclysm, during which most of the present geological strata was laid down.(4)

While I have some sympathy for Lavallee's argument it simply does not follow that just because the early church held to some of the points in the above lists (belief in creation *ex nihilo*, a worldwide flood, and a young earth) they therefore supported creation science. Creation-science as above defined *is* a modern phenomenon, because it is dependent on modern science for most of its terminology and concepts. It would be anachronistic to appeal the early church for answers to questions they did not ask relating to science they did not practice.

It would be equally incorrect, however, to argue that all of the central tenets of creation science are of modern origin. Mark A. Noll, for example implies that the belief that the earth is less than 10 000 years old was invented by Ellen G White.(5) In fact the early church, together with the majority of the church up to the eighteenth century, held that the world was less than 10 000 years old.(6) The majority of the church up until the mid-seventeenth century also believed that the Flood was both geographically and anthropologically universal.(7) Belief in creation *ex nihilo*, far from being a modern development became an established part of the church's tradition by the end of the second century. The length of the days of Genesis 1 was clearly an issue of debate in the early church. Nevertheless, the literal 24 hour view has a long history and sound Biblical support.

The fact that a doctrine was held by the early church fathers does not mean that it cannot be challenged or even rejected at a later date. A good example of this is the interpretation of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 which see the King of Babylon and the King of Tyre as referring to Satan. Such a view has a long history, the first reference to it being found in the writings of Tertullian,(8) Origen,(9) John Cassian,(10) Cyril of Jerusalem,(11) Jerome,(12) Athanasius of Alexandria,(13) Nevertheless, the Reformer Martin Luther(14) rejected it, pointing out that both passages referred primarily to human kings who suffered from human pride.(15) The majority of modern commentators follow his example.(16)

Evaluating the Evidence

When one comes to evaluating the importance of the historical interpretation of a doctrine there are no set rules to follow. In order to present as unbiased an assessment of the evidence of possible a number of unrelated historical studies were examined. Noting the methodology of these studies I have attempted to draw up a list of general principles that will allow the early church's teaching to be evaluated.

1. **Was the issue debated by the early church?** If the answer is "yes", then this would imply that at least some of the possible interpretations were examined and the relevant

biblical passages exegeted. An important the issue would also debated by a larger number of people and therefore there is a greater likelihood that the results of the debates would survive.

2. **Was there relative unanimity concerning the results of their exegesis?** If “yes” then this would indicate that the father’s varied backgrounds had little effect on their reading of Scripture.
3. **Did any Seven Ecumenical Councils of the early church rule on the issue?** Although some councils contradicted the findings of previous ones conciliar evidence would indicate that the issue was considered important at that time.
4. If the modern understanding of a particular text or doctrine is different to that of the early church, what caused the view to change?

1) Was the issue debated by the early church?

The evidence is that the contents of Genesis 1-11 were not the subject of the debates that took place during the first centuries of the Church.

2) Was there relative unanimity concerning the results of their exegesis?

Apart from on the subjects of the extent of the flood and creation *ex nihilo* there was little unanimity on the interpretation of Genesis 1-11. On these subjects Christians should be confident that these views are supported by the testimony of both Scripture and history.

3) Did any of the Seven Ecumenical Councils of the early church rule on the issue?

The Seven Church Councils universally accepted both Roman Catholics and Protestants were: Nicaea I (325); Constantinople I (381); Ephesus (431); Chalcedon (451); Constantinople II (553); Nicaea II (787). The First Council of Nicaea marked any important turning point in the use of creeds in the church. After this event creeds became more than baptismal confessions: they became the tests of orthodoxy.(17) While no one would argue that their doctrinal content is exhaustive they remain authoritative in the subject matter the cover.

Most of these Councils were concerned with some aspect of the Godhead, Christology or church polity and none discussed the doctrine of creation. The creeds produced by the Councils of Nicaea I and Constantinople I refer only to God as the “...maker of all things visible and invisible..”(18) and “..maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible..”(19) respectively. The Ecumenical Councils, therefore, are of no direct help to us in our present study as far as the doctrine of creation is concerned. What is clear is that the only aspect of the doctrine

of creation that was made a test of orthodoxy by the early church was the creation *ex nihilo*. From other works on church history we know that this is also true of the rest of church history up to the 1920's and the rise of fundamentalism.

In his eagerness to recruit historical figures to the ranks of scientific creationism Henry M. Morris includes men like Sir Isaac Newton and William Whiston. Morris refers to Newton as a "...man of gigantic intellect was also a genuine believer a Christ as his Savior and in the Bible as God's Word."(20) Nevertheless it is a matter of record that both of these men rejected the Ecumenical Creeds, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity as a heresy invented by Athanasius of Alexandria in the Fourth Century.(21) Surely such an opinion (if it cannot be dismissed simply as ignorance or poor scholarship) indicates that Morris's theological perspective is somewhat distorted if he considers denial of the Trinity acceptable as long as a person's doctrine of creation is (in his view) correct!(22)

4) What Caused Our Interpretation of Genesis to Change?

This final question takes us beyond the scope of present study and into areas covered by other studies and is one that has perhaps best left to experts in modern history to answer. When it comes to issues on which the interpretation of the text is clear (e.g. the extent of the Flood) perhaps we should re-examine our views. Reading the works of the first Christians reminds us how easy it is to fail to let the Biblical text speak for itself and in its own terms before smothering it with preconceived theories. This study has also shown in many ways modern Christians are in a better position than the early church, with regard to sophisticated linguistic aids, historical and archaeological studies and the benefit of centuries of church history to learn from. Modern Christians therefore have at least as good a chance as they had to interpret the texts correctly. We should acknowledge that the early church cannot answer the scientific questions that we are asking of the text of Genesis, because they could never have asked them for themselves. Finally, we would do well to emulate the early Christians' thirst and respect for the Word of God, even if we do not follow them in all of the conclusions they drew from it. Augustine of Hippo struggled for most of his life with the text of Genesis and even at the end felt that he had not quite grasped its meaning. Would that we had the same degree of determination mixed with humility!

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References

(1) Louis Lavallee, "The Early Church Defended Creation Science," ICR Impact, No. 160 (October 1986). Lavallee titles is misleading, but the content of his article is much the same as this present work.

(2) Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*. London: California University

Press, 1993), 72-89.

(3) Numbers, *Creationists*, x.

(4) Forster & Marston, 21-22.

(5) Mark A Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 13. Noll claims to be quoting Numbers when he makes this point, but I think that he has misread his source. See Numbers, *Creationists*, xi.

(6) David A. Young, *Christianity & The Age of the Earth*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 19, 25:

The virtually unanimous opinion among the early Christians until the time of Augustine was that human history from the creation of Adam to the birth of Christ had lasted approximately fifty-five hundred years...

It cannot be denied, in spite of frequent interpretations of Genesis 1 that departed from the rigidly literal, that the most universal view of the Christian world until the eighteenth century was that the Earth was only a few thousand years old.

(7) Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence*. (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1995), 307.

(8) Tertullian, *Marcion*, 2.10; 5.11, 17 (*ANF*, Vol.3, 305-306, 454, 466).

(9) Origen, *Principles* 1.5.4-5; *Marcion* 6.43 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 258-300, 593).

(10) John Cassian, *On Principalities* 8

(11) Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 2.4 (*NPNF*, 2nd series, Vol. 7, 9).

(12) Jerome, *Jovianus* 2.4 (*NPNF*, 2nd series, Vol. 6, 391).

(13) Athanasius, *To the Bishops of Egypt*, 1.2; *Discourse III*, 25.17 (*NPNF*, 2nd series, Vol. 4, 224, 403).

(14) Commenting on Isaiah 14:20 Luther wrote: "This is not said of the angel who once was thrown out of heaven, but of the king of Babylon, and it is figurative language." Martin Luther "Lectures on Isaiah," Jaroslav Pelican & Hilton C. Oswald, ede. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 16. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), 140.

(15) John N. Oswalt, "The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39," *NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 320.

(16) See further Sydney H.T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan & Demons*. (Grand Rapids / Leicester: Baker Book House / IVP, 1995), 37-42.

(17) Kelly, *Creeds*, 206-207.

(18) J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edn., 1972 Harlow, Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1995), 215.

(19) Kelly, *Creeds*, 297.

(20) Henry M. Morris, *Men of Science, Men of God: Great Scientists Who Believed the Bible*, 1982. (El Cajon, California: Master Books, 1992), 23.

(21) Richard H. Popkin, "Newton as a Biblical Scholar," James E. Force & Richard H. Popkin, *Essays on the Context, Nature and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology*. (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 108-111; James E. Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-18; 105-

113.

(22) David N. Livingstone points out that Morris is not the only creationist to make this mistake. See David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought*. (Grand Rapids / Edinburgh: Eerdmans / Scottish Academic Press, 1987), 170.

