

THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO EVOLUTION AND THE
EARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF GENESIS 1-3

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WISCONSIN

2/17/2016

Abstract

The theory of evolution has had a major impact on society. It is taught in our public schools and it is widely accepted within the scientific community. This theory has even greatly impacted the body of believers. Some brothers and sisters struggle to determine whether or not they can trust the details of the creation account in the opening chapters of Genesis. Others have chosen to believe both science and scripture concerning the origin of life on earth; The Catholic Church is just one example. This thesis begins with a brief look into the history of the Catholic Church's response to the theory of evolution. Next, it examines portions of the Hebrew text in order to show how the text presents itself as an actual, historical account. Finally, some of the earliest interpretations of the creation account will be presented. The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that the theory of evolution and the reliability of Scripture cannot stand together.

Table of Contents

I: How the Catholic Church has Responded to the Theory of Evolution	1
Direct Statements from the Popes Concerning Evolution.....	5
II: The Hebrew Text	10
Genesis 1:1-5.....	10
Genesis 1:14-19.....	12
Genesis 1:31-2:3.....	14
Genesis 2:4-9, 16-17	16
Genesis 2:18, 21-24.....	19
Genesis 3:1-6, 14-15	20
III: Early Interpretations of Genesis	22
Septuagint.....	22
Targums.....	23
Philo	26
Josephus	29
Augustine	30
IV: Conclusion	34
IV: Bibliography	37

“The Big Bang theory, which is proposed today as the origin of the world, does not contradict the intervention of a divine creator but depends on it. Evolution in nature does not conflict with the notion of Creation, because evolution presupposes the creation of beings who evolve.”¹ This quote comes from Pope Francis’s address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 2014. In the same address, Pope Francis also stated, “When we read the account of Creation in Genesis we risk imagining that God was a magician, complete with an all-powerful magic wand. But that was not so. He created beings and he let them develop according to the internal laws with which He endowed each one.”² Immediately following this address, the Washington Post, USA Today, and other various news sources painted Pope Francis as a champion of new and enlightened thinking for the Catholic Church. Judging by the comments from some who read these articles, the American society seemed quite pleased with the Catholic Church for finally getting with the times concerning evolution. However, these words from Pope Francis did not state a change of position for the Catholic Church. In fact, the Catholic Church has never officially opposed the theory of evolution. Rather, the church has been open to the idea of evolution for decades. This thesis will recount the Catholic Church’s gentle, and even receptive, response to the theory of evolution. Next, it will look at several sections of the Genesis account of creation in Hebrew. Through this study of the text we will see how a literal interpretation of Genesis is a reliable stance to take. Finally, it will briefly cover several of the earliest interpretations of the opening chapters of Genesis. Through this study it will become clear that the reliability of Scripture and the theory of evolution cannot stand together.

How The Catholic Church Has Responded to the Theory of Evolution

In 1859, Charles Darwin published his work entitled *On the Origin of Species*. Instead of condemning this work outright, the Catholic Church was very cautious in the language it used to speak about evolution. This was, no doubt, the result of the extreme embarrassment the church had received after the Galileo Galilei incident.³ Instead, the Catholic Church chose to deal with

¹ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141027_plenaria-academia-scienze.html (last accessed Feb. 8 2016)

² Ibid

³ In 1610, Galileo, while using his homemade telescope, noticed the different phases of Venus. These phases are similar to the phases of light which the moon goes through in which you can note the differing amounts of light that reflect upon the surface of the moon. This observation led Galileo to believe that Venus, as well as the earth, revolved around the sun. Until then it was believed that the stars held a fixed position in the sky and did not move. Thus, they concluded the earth also remained still while the sun and moon were moving. On this matter, Catholic

evolutionary ideas case by case. “Between 1870 and 1925, the outcome of these cases was generally not in favour of the attempts made by clergymen, theologians, and Catholic scientists to reconcile evolution with Catholic faith.”⁴ But the message the Vatican tried to convey came across far less strongly than if it had issued a public condemnation of the theory.

Nevertheless, the Vatican’s antagonism towards evolution lasted well into the 1920s. This was not so much because evolution seemed inconsistent with a literal interpretation of the Bible, more particularly of the book of Genesis, but because evolutionary theory, especially Darwin’s formulation of it, seemed to threaten certain tenets of Catholic doctrine, in particular, the special creation of man. However, it should be noted that even the Catholic intellectuals who sought to harmonise their faith with evolution did not go as far as to question the divine origin of the human soul or the creation of the first woman out of the first man’s body. They only proposed that the first man’s body could have been somehow prepared through an evolutionary process that was guided by God.⁵

One example of how gently the Catholic Church dealt with the theory of evolution can be found in a statement from the Council of Cologne in 1860. The Council reaffirmed the truth that Adam and Eve were the first parents from whom all humans have descended. That Council went on to say, “Therefore, we declare as contrary to Sacred Scripture and to the faith the opinion of those who are not ashamed to assert that man, insofar as his body is concerned, came to be by a spontaneous change from imperfect nature to the most perfect and, in continuous process, finally human.”⁶ While these words may seem opposed to the theory of evolution, in truth, they were unclear and often misinterpreted. “This kind of confusion on how to interpret the church’s actions and official documents became a recurrent theme in Catholics’ attitude towards

Answers reports that Galileo would not have been in so much trouble if he had chosen to stay within the realm of science and out of the realm of theology. “In 1614, Galileo felt compelled to answer the charge that this ‘new science’ was contrary to certain Scripture passages.” (<http://www.catholic.com/tracts/the-galileo-controversy> ‘last accessed Feb. 6, 2016) His opponents pointed to Bible passages concerning celestial motion, e.g. Joshua 10:13; Psalm 93:1; Psalm 104:5; Ecclesiastes 1:5. “A literalistic reading of these passages would have to be abandoned if the heliocentric theory were adopted. Yet this should not have posed a problem. As Augustine put it, “One does not read in the Gospel that the Lord said: ‘I will send you the Paraclete who will teach you about the course of the sun and moon.’ For he willed to make them Christians, not mathematicians.” Following Augustine’s example, Galileo urged caution in not interpreting these biblical statements too literally. (Ibid) At this time the Catholic Church was still reeling from the Reformation which sought to translate scripture into the language of the people which promoted personal biblical interpretation. The Catholic Church’s resistance to Galileo’s heliocentric teachings led to the perception that the Catholic Church would cling to their own outdated and incorrect traditions. To some extent this perception still lingers today.

⁴ Stefaan Blancke, *Catholic Responses to Evolution, 1859–2009: Local Influences and Mid-Scale Patterns* Journal of Religious History Vol. 37, No. 3, September 2013 355-356

⁵ Ibid, 356

⁶ Ibid, 357-358

evolution. The church's enduring hesitance to speak out definitively on the topic of evolution fueled this ambivalence, creating the ideal environment for alternative opinions to emerge."⁷

At roughly this same time there was a struggle in the Catholic Church between the Modernists and the Neo-Thomists. The Modernists were "a group of scholars that adopted a skeptical attitude toward the traditional doctrines of the church."⁸ Neo-Thomism, which was primarily based on the works of the medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, "was intended to bridge Catholic faith and modern science. In effect, this "synthesis" boiled down to molding scientific findings into the preset framework of Catholic dogma."⁹ While the neo-Thomists were trying to demonstrate how scientific findings matched the current dogma of the church, the Modernists were trying to demonstrate how scientific findings proved that the dogma of the church needed to change.

In 1907, Pope Pius X published an encyclical entitled *Pascendi dominicus gregis*. In that encyclical he denounced modernism as "the synthesis of all heresies."¹⁰ "The encyclical also included passages that were clearly intended to target evolutionary thought as part of the modernist heresy, but again, because of the indirect approach, it failed to get the message through."¹¹ Too many took Pope Pius X's words as a condemnation of modernism and not evolution itself. Several Catholic universities throughout the world continued to look for ways to reconcile their faith with the theory of evolution.

Another movement which the church had to contend with at this time was Americanism. Essentially, this movement was based on the separation between church and state. This constitutional right led some Catholics to believe that they had "more individual liberty in dealing with religious questions."¹²

In 1896, John Zahm, a prominent Catholic priest who was considered a member of the Americanist movement, published a book called *Evolution and Dogma*, in which he claimed that evolution, including the evolution of the human body, did

⁷ Blancke, 358

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html para. 39 (last accessed Feb. 6, 2016)

¹¹ Blancke, 358

¹² Ibid

not oppose Catholic orthodoxy. Zahm also argued that both St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas were evolutionists.¹³

Zahm's work received highly critical comments from Rome and was eventually condemned and prohibited. Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter entitled *Testem benevolentiae*, in which he condemned Americanism as another form of Protestantism.

The underlying principle of these new opinions is that, in order to more easily attract those who differ from her, the Church should shape her teachings more in accord with the spirit of the age and relax some of her ancient severity and make some concessions to new opinions. Many think that these concessions should be made not only in regard to ways of living, but even in regard to doctrines which belong to the deposit of the faith.

Let it be far from anyone's mind to suppress for any reason any doctrine that has been handed down. Such a policy would tend rather to separate Catholics from the Church than to bring in those who differ. There is nothing closer to our heart than to have those who are separated from the fold of Christ return to it, but in no other way than the way pointed out by Christ.¹⁴

“However, both Leo XIII's letter and the actions against Zahm's work failed to send a clear message. Although the church clearly did not favour evolution, pro-evolutionary Catholic intellectuals did not conclude that the Vatican conceived of their ideas as unorthodox.”¹⁵ Pope Leo XIII's criticism toward Zahm's work appeared to be against the Americanist movement, and not directly against evolution. Furthermore, in his encyclical entitled *Providentissimus Deus*, Pope Leo XIII's words certainly allow for a departure from the traditions taught by early Church Fathers.

The opinion of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they treat of these matters [the interpretation of Sacred Scripture] in their capacity of doctors... Wherefore the expositor should make it his duty to follow their footsteps with all reverence, and to use their labors with intelligent appreciation.

But he must not on that account consider that it is forbidden when just cause exists, to push inquiry and exposition beyond what the Fathers have done; provided he carefully observes the rule so wisely laid down by St. Augustine - not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires; a rule to which it is the more necessary to adhere

¹³ Blancke, 358

¹⁴ <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo13/113teste.htm> (Last accessed Feb. 6, 2016)

¹⁵ Blancke, 358

strictly in these times, when the thirst for novelty and unrestrained freedom of thought make the danger of error most real and proximate.¹⁶

As a result, many Catholics were encouraged because they believed that their studies were required by ‘reason’ and ‘necessity.’

In the decades that followed, Catholic scientists continued to hold their position that the theory of evolution did not disagree with Catholic doctrine. “In 1925, French Catholic scientists, who had organised an international meeting to discuss evolution at Altamira, sent a document to Pope Pius XI, in which they stated that evolution was an important scientific concept and did not oppose Catholic doctrine.”¹⁷ With the continued growth of those who sympathized with the theory of evolution within the Catholic Church, the time had finally come for the Pope himself to make an official statement regarding evolution.

Direct Statements from the Pope Concerning Evolution

That statement came in 1950 when Pope Pius XII wrote an encyclical entitled *Humani Generis*. In that encyclical “Pius XII conceded that the evolutionary origin of the human body offers an interesting hypothesis that Catholics can explore.”¹⁸ However, the document also “makes plain the pope’s fervent hope that evolution will prove to be a passing scientific fad, and it attacks those persons who ‘imprudently and indiscreetly hold that evolution...explains the origin of all things.’”¹⁹ These two points are clearly found in the following excerpt from *Humani Generis*.

The Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter - for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God.

However, this must be done in such a way that the reasons for both opinions, that is, those favorable and those unfavorable to evolution, be weighed and judged with the necessary seriousness, moderation and measure, and provided that all are

¹⁶ http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus.html para. 15 (site last visited Feb. 10, 2016)

¹⁷ Blancke, 358

¹⁸ Ibid, 366

¹⁹ Doug Linder, *The Vatican's View of Evolution: The Story of Two Popes* (2004)

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/vaticanview.html> (site last visited Feb. 4, 2016)

prepared to submit to the judgment of the Church, to whom Christ has given the mission of interpreting authentically the Sacred Scriptures and of defending the dogmas of faith.

Some however, rashly transgress this liberty of discussion, when they act as if the origin of the human body from pre-existing and living matter were already completely certain and proved by the facts which have been discovered up to now and by reasoning on those facts, and as if there were nothing in the sources of divine revelation which demands the greatest moderation and caution in this question.

For the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. Now it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own.²⁰

While this encyclical is most certainly not a glowing endorsement of evolution, it does seem to reveal that “the Pope could live with evolution, so long as the process of ‘ensouling’ humans was left to God.”²¹ These provisional statements from Pope Pius XII further encouraged those in the Catholic Church who were trying to find ways to reconcile the theory of evolution with Catholic doctrine. Enthusiasm for this movement would continue to grow for the next several decades.

No doubt, Vatican II also played a large role with regard to the liberty that the church felt it had in interpreting Scripture. “The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is widely regarded as the most significant event for the Catholic Church since the Reformation in the 16th century. Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council to update the Church and restore the unity of all Christians.”²² Some feared that Vatican II would cause too much change in the church; perhaps even similar to the change the Reformation produced. However, “the majority of

²⁰ http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html (site last accessed Feb, 5, 2016)

²¹ Linder

²² *The Second Vatican Council: An Explanation* www.vatican2voice.org/91docs/leaflet_1A4.pdf (Last accessed Feb. 6, 2016)

Catholics welcomed the opportunity of change; the opportunity to take down barriers and grapple with the challenges facing the world.”²³

Vatican II resulted in many changes in the Catholic Church, such as the liturgy being conducted in the language of the people and the Catholic Church’s way of speaking about people of other religions. This ecumenical movement in the Catholic Church “created an environment charitable to the theories of Catholic evolutionists... who had been silenced by the Vatican in the 1910s and 1920s, but whose writings had become highly popular in Catholic intellectual circles.”²⁴ In this way Vatican II led to an increase within the Catholic Church of those who accepted the theory of evolution. The subsequent popes would continue to speak favorably concerning evolution.

On October 22, 1996, Pope John Paul II gave an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. An extended look at that address reveals just how favorably the Pope was speaking toward evolution.

I am delighted with the first theme which you have chosen: the origin of life and evolution—an essential theme of lively interest to the Church, since Revelation contains some of its own teachings concerning the nature and origins of man. How should the conclusions reached by the diverse scientific disciplines be brought together with those contained in the message of Revelation? And if at first glance these views seem to clash with each other, where should we look for a solution? We know that the truth cannot contradict the truth. (Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*) However, in order better to understand historical reality, your research into the relationships between the Church and the scientific community between the 16th and 18th centuries will have a great deal of importance.

In his encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950), my predecessor Pius XII has already affirmed that there is no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of the faith regarding man and his vocation, provided that we do not lose sight of certain fixed points.

For my part, when I received the participants in the plenary assembly of your Academy on October 31, 1992, I used the occasion—and the example of Galileo—to draw attention to the necessity of using a rigorous hermeneutical approach in seeking a concrete interpretation of the inspired texts. It is important to set proper limits to the understanding of Scripture, excluding any unseasonable interpretations which would make it mean something which it is not intended to

²³ *The Second Vatican Council: An Explanation*

²⁴ Blancke, 367

mean. In order to mark out the limits of their own proper fields, theologians and those working on the exegesis of the Scripture need to be well informed regarding the results of the latest scientific research.

Taking into account the scientific research of the era, and also the proper requirements of theology, the encyclical *Humani Generis* treated the doctrine of "evolutionism" as a serious hypothesis, worthy of investigation and serious study, alongside the opposite hypothesis...Today, more than a half-century after the appearance of that encyclical, some new findings lead us toward the recognition of evolution as more than a hypothesis. The convergence in the results of these independent studies—which was neither planned nor sought—constitutes in itself a significant argument in favor of the theory.²⁵

By quoting his predecessors words, ‘the truth cannot contradict the truth,’ Pope John Paul II pointed out how the Catholic Church interprets Scripture; this interpretation mimics the skeptical view which had been held by the modernists less than a century ago. This is evident when he stated that ‘proper limits’ must be in place concerning our understanding of Scripture; these limits are set by the ‘latest scientific research.’ In the same vein, the International Theological Commission, under the chairmanship of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “declared that ‘even the outcome of a truly contingent natural process can nonetheless fall within God’s providential plan for creation,’ which suggests that even a purely naturalistic account of evolutionary processes is considered compatible with Catholic doctrine.”²⁶ This was not the first time Cardinal Ratzinger spoke in favor of evolution and a non-literal interpretation of Genesis.

During the Lenten season of 1981, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave four homilies on creation in the *Liebfrauenkirche*, the cathedral church of Munich in Germany. In his first homily, he discussed the principles which he uses when interpreting Scripture. The following is Nicanor Austriaco’s explanation of Cardinal Ratzinger’s homily.

He begins by recalling the opening words of the Sacred Scriptures that highlight the creative action of God “in the beginning.” However, he goes on to ask the question that lies at the heart of the creationist debate: Are these words true? Do they count for anything? In order to answer these questions, he suggests three criteria for interpreting the Genesis text: the distinction between form and content in the creation narrative, the unity of the Bible, and the hermeneutical importance of Christology... First, he proposes that the exegete ‘must distinguish between the form of portrayal and the content that is portrayed.’ He must keep in mind that the Bible is, first and foremost, a religious book and not a natural science textbook

²⁵ <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP961022.HTM> para. 2, 3, 4 (Last Accessed Feb. 15, 2016)

²⁶ Blancke, 367

Thus, Cardinal Ratzinger concludes that Genesis does not and cannot provide a scientific explanation of how the world arose...In other words, the Catholic exegete is called to respect the text as it is. He is called to read Genesis as its human author wished it to be read, not as a scientific treatise, but as a religious narrative that communicates profound truths about the Creator.”²⁷

Cardinal Ratzinger also preached in these Lenten homilies that the account of Genesis was written in response to the Babylonian creation myth. “Here, the human author of the sacred text used images familiar to their pagan contemporaries to refute the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation account that claimed that the world was created when Marduk, the god of light, killed the primordial dragon.”²⁸ Similarly, “when they refer to the sun and the moon as lamps that God has hung in the sky for the measurement of time (cf. Gen. 1:14), the text refutes the divinity of these two great celestial bodies believed to be Babylonian gods.”²⁹ It is quite clear that Cardinal Ratzinger did not follow a literal interpretation of Genesis. Sadly, Cardinal Ratzinger succeeded Pope John Paul II and became Pope Benedict XVI.

With predecessors like these, is it really any wonder that Pope Francis spoke the way he did concerning evolution? Yet, it is disheartening to see a Christian church body ³⁰ which elevates human reason over the text of Genesis. This approach to Scripture differs greatly from that of WELS and other confessional Lutheran church bodies. But which way is right? How should Christians interpret Genesis 1-3? Can the theory of evolution and the reliability of Scripture stand together? To find these answers, we must look at the Hebrew text itself.

²⁷ Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, *Reading Genesis with Cardinal Ratzinger* Homiletic and Pastoral Review Copyright © 2008 Ignatius Press, 2

²⁸ Ibid, 3

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ At the beginning of “Why Confessional Lutherans Believe that Genesis 1-3 Describes Real History” John Brug reveals that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and any church that uses the Evangelical Catechism must also be recognized as a group that elevates reason over Scripture. Brug quotes the Evangelical Catechism as saying, “The fact that two different stories of creation (Genesis 1 and Genesis 2) were allowed to stand together in the Bible suggests that the question of how God created the world is not a vital question for faith. The Bible does not require us to have a particular theory of creation. None of the biblical creation stories are historical reports. Instead they talk about the relationship between God, human beings, and the world, using language of symbols and image. Adam and Eve, though personified as individuals in the story, are not necessarily individual persons, but representatives of humanity...The creation of a woman from the rib of the man is not meant to be taken literally. The narrator is making the point that human beings can enter relationships which have no parallel in the animal world.” (John F. Brug “Why Confessional Lutherans Believe that Genesis 1-3 Describes Real History. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File 1)

The Hebrew Text

In this section we will take a closer look at several sections which have puzzled interpreters throughout the years. A careful study of the opening chapters of Genesis in its original language will help us to understand what God intended to teach us through his Word. The Hebrew text will be included in sections which make specific reference to a Hebrew word. All English translations that follow are my own, unless a footnote states otherwise. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how a literal interpretation of Genesis is the clearest and best way to understand the Hebrew text.

Genesis 1:1-5

¹ בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:
² וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתְּהָ תֵהוֹ וְבָהוּ וְחָשׁ? עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרֵיחַ אֲ? הַיָּם מְרֻחָפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:
³ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר:
⁴ וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיִּבְרַךְ אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחָשׁ?:
⁵ וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחָשׁ? קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: פ

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering upon the face of the waters. ³ God said, "Let it become light," and it became light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. There was evening and morning day one.

Some translators have wondered how the opening three verses of Genesis are to be connected and understood. The traditional translation, which is the one I offered above, takes verse 1 to be its own independent clause. However, others have suggested that verse 1 is a dependent clause, subordinate to the verses that follow. Some take verse 2 as the main clause and translate the opening verses as, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep"³¹ Other translators agree that verse 1 is a temporal clause, but understand verse 2 as a parenthetical statement and say the main clause is verse 3. Their translation would sound something like, when God began to

³¹ Carl J. Lawrenz, *A Commentary on Genesis 1-11* Northwestern Publishing House Milwaukee, Wisconsin 2004, 43

create the heavens and the earth (since the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep) he said, “Let there be light.”

Lawrenz admits that verse 1 can be a temporal clause since בראשית could be a construct. “Yet if verse 1 were a temporal clause dependent on verse 2, then the verb in this main clause should precede the subject. The main clause should begin ותהי הארץ or היתה הארץ (cf. Jer. 26:1; Hos. 1:2).”³² Cassuto agrees with Lawrenz that the word order in verse 2 is not what we would expect if verse 2 were supposed to be the main clause. He also points out that if verse 3 were meant to be the main clause we would expect היתה to be omitted from verse 2.³³

“Furthermore, if verse 1 is taken to be a temporal clause...The earth as described in verse 2 would antedate God’s creative activity. The opening verse of Genesis would then be made to teach a dualism according to which matter as well as God is eternal.”³⁴ The use of ברא in connection with בראשית leads to the understanding that the making of heaven and earth were *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, created from nothing. “The *creatio ex nihilo* is explicitly corroborated and Hebrews 11:3; it is also implicit in the statements of Exodus 20:11a; 1 John 1:1-3; Psalm 146:6; Acts 17:24; Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Revelation 10:6.”³⁵ For this reason, interpreters must be careful that they do not make Scripture say something when it really does not.

There is another indication that suggests verse one is not a temporal, dependent clause. There is an accent mark on בראשית which reveals more about its relationship with the rest of verse one. “The Masoretes understood the word to be absolute, for they accented the word with the disjunctive accent called ‘*tiphcha*’ which is normal for words in the absolute state, rather than with a conjunctive accent, which is normal for words in the construct case.”³⁶ This strong disjunctive accent suggests that בראשית stands alone and that verse one is not subordinate to the

³² Lawrenz, 44

³³ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* Central Press, Jerusalem 1961, 19-20 (cf. 1 Sam. 3:2-4)

³⁴ Lawrenz, 44

³⁵ *Ibid*, 36

³⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, Michigan 1990, 107 (However, Hamilton also notes that there are instances when some disjunctive accents are used with words that clearly are in construct. Cf. Jer. 26:1, 27:1, 28:1, 49:34)

following verses. It is likely for these reasons “all the ancient versions translate the word as an absolute and the whole verse as an independent clause.”³⁷

For these reasons, Cassuto concludes “that the first verse is an independent sentence that constitutes a formal introduction to the entire section, and expresses at the outset, with majestic brevity, the main thought of the section: that in the beginning, that is at the commencement of time, in the remotest part that the human mind can conceive, God created the heavens and the earth.”³⁸ From these verses, we see the amazing power of God as he creates the heavens and the earth. He spoke and light came into existence. Yet, some have wondered about the relationship between that light and the eventual creation of the sun, moon, and stars. This topic will occupy our time in the next section.

Genesis 1:14-19

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי מְאֹרֶת בְּרַקִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה וְהָיוּ לְאֹתוֹת
וּלְמוֹעֲדִים וּלְיָמִים וּשְׁנָיִם:
וְהָיוּ לְמְאֹרֶת בְּרַקִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן:
וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֶת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־הַמְּאֹר
הַקָּטָן לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים:
וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרַקִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ:
וּלְמַשֵּׁל בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וּלְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשׁ וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי: פ

¹⁴ God said, "Let there be light-bearers in the firmament of the sky to separate the day from the night and let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. ¹⁵ Also, let them be light-bearers in the firmament of the sky to shine upon the earth. So it happened. ¹⁶ God made the two great light-bearers; the greater light-bearer to govern the day and the lesser light-bearer to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God placed them in the firmament of the sky to shine upon the earth; ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night and to separate the light and the darkness. God saw that this creation was good. ¹⁹ There was evening and morning day four.

These verses are included in our study of the Hebrew text, not because the Hebrew is difficult to translate, but because of the seeming discrepancies that arise. After reading this section, one particular question immediately comes to mind; how was there light on day one if

³⁷ Hamilton, 107

³⁸ Cassuto, 20

the sun had not been created until day four? Or to say it another way, what is the relationship between the light from day one and the creation of the light-bearers' on day four? "Did this divine command merely reconstruct heavenly bodies already created in the rough at the beginning so that they might now serve the earth in various ways as lights? Or were they wholly new creations?"³⁹ In a thought connected with this, Matthews writes that the expression 'let there be' probably indicates a new creative act.⁴⁰ He points to verse 3 and verse 6 as clear examples of creative acts from the immediate context. A closer look at the Hebrew text reveals more clues concerning the relationship between the light on these two days.

First of all, in Genesis 1:3 God created אור, light. In these verses we read that God created מְאֹרֹת, luminaries or light-bearers.⁴¹ These verses also give us more understanding concerning the words 'day' and 'night.' When God created אור on day one, he separated the light from the darkness. The light he called יוֹם, day, and he called the darkness לַיְלָה, night. When God created מְאֹרֹת on day four, he commanded the luminaries to separate the הַיּוֹם from the הַלַּיְלָה. Comparing the use of 'day' and 'night' in verse 3 and verse 14, Lawrenz writes,

Note the article...By these articles, day and night are spoken of as already known and existing entities...When we are told that God formally named them, these terms occur without articles as new entities...Now we are told that God's word called heavenly lights into existence henceforth to perpetuate on earth these light and darkness periods which had already been functioning since the first day...Together, in their regular succession now by means of heavenly lights, these light and darkness periods would also continue to give the earth days in the wider sense which would be identical with the first three.⁴²

These verses teach us that day and night, which were continuing entities, would henceforth be governed by the two luminaries; the sun and the moon. It would appear, therefore, that the luminaries were created for the light and the darkness, and not the other way around; that is to say that light is only the result of the sun and moon. Along these lines, Cassuto writes, "It is manifest that the night exists even without the presence of the moon and stars. Similarly, according to the view reflected here, the sun is not the cause of daytime, for the latter is to be

³⁹ Lawrenz, 61

⁴⁰ Kenneth A Matthews, *The New American Commentary Vol. 1A Genesis 1-11:26* Broadman & Holman Publishers 1996, 153

⁴¹ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴² Lawrenz, 61-62

found without the former...the sun's light would naturally augment the already-existing daylight, but this would form its third function."⁴³

Since this topic involves the all-powerful God, we really have no reason to doubt his account of the creation of the world. With clear language, God tells us that he created light on day one. On day four he created light-bearers which served in more detailed capacity than the light of day one. What was the relationship between the light and the light-bearers? "Throughout those first three days God caused light to shine upon the earth from some other source without recourse to the sun; but when he created the luminaries He handed over to them the task of separation, that is, he commanded that one should serve the day and the other should serve the night."⁴⁴

Genesis 1:31-2:3

³¹ God saw everything he made and, behold, it was very good. There was evening and morning day six. ¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their array. ² God completed all the work which he did on day seven, so on day seven he rested from all his work. ³ God blessed day seven and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work which he created by making it.

The word 'day' can be understood in a few different ways. When a young man says to his sweetheart, "I think about you day and night," we understand the use of day to mean only the light portion, in contrast to the darkness, of a 24 hour period. If that young man went on to say, "day by day I am falling more in love with you," we would understand that in this context day is referring to an entire 24 hour period. This understanding is also expressed in our days of the week. Finally, when a now old man says to his bride of 50 years, "Do you remember how back in the day we said we would see the world together?" we understand that day is referring neither to just a portion of a 24-hour period, nor is it referring to an entire 24-hour period. Instead, we recognize this use of day is very general. It could refer to a moment in time as well as a much longer period of time. Since this is the case, how are we to understand the use of day in the account of creation? In connection with this question, some have looked to Psalm 90:4, "A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night," (NIV) in order to help them interpret the word 'day.' In response to this, Brug writes,

⁴³ Cassuto, 43-44 (By third function Cassuto means the function which God gave the luminaries in verse 15.)

⁴⁴ Ibid, 44

It is sometimes argued that "day" can refer to a period of time, "in the day of the dinosaurs" or "in the day when God made heaven and earth" (Genesis 2:4). This may be true in many languages, including Hebrew, but the language of Genesis 1 very clearly eliminates this possibility. Six times it says that the days of creation were made up of an evening and a morning, which together made one day. Furthermore, when "days" are numbered, they are regular days not eras. How could the account be any more emphatic in declaring that the days of creation were normal days, not long periods of time?⁴⁵

We find more evidence for this understanding of the length of days from the occasions when Moses directly alludes to the creation account. In Exodus 20, God spoke his ten commandments to the people. In that account God said,

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Exodus 20:8-11⁴⁶

God himself points to the six days of creation as a model of labor for his people; this model included a day of rest each week. This “hallowing of the seventh day presupposes the literal character of the six days.”⁴⁷ It would be rather unfit for God to compare his creation week with our week if the actual time frame for both were not the same. However, if they encompass the same amount of time then the comparison would carry much more weight. “All of this ought to remove every uncertainty about the nature and length of the creation days. They were what is commonly called ‘normal days,’ approximately 24 hours in length.”⁴⁸

Genesis 2:4-9; 16-17

אֱלֹהִים תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת יְהוָה אֵי הַיָּם אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם:⁴
 וְכָלֹּ שְׂיִחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יְהִיָּה בְּאֶרֶץ וְכָל־עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִצְמַח כִּי־אֵי הַמַּטֵּר יְהִיָּה אֵי הַיָּם
 עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אִין לַעֲבֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה:

⁴⁵ Brug, 3

⁴⁶ Also see Exodus 31:17

⁴⁷ Jack P. Lewis, *Historical Survey of Interpretation* JETS 32/4 December, 1989, 443

⁴⁸ Lawrenz, 62

⁶ וְאֵד יַעֲלֶה מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת־כָּל־פְּנֵי־הָאֲדָמָה:
⁷ וַיִּצְרֹף יְהוָה אֶת־הָאָדָם עֵפֶר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ
חַיָּה:
⁸ וַיִּטֵּעַ יְהוָה אֶת־הַיִּם גֵּן־בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׂם שֵׁם אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר:
⁹ וַיִּצְמַח יְהוָה אֶת־הַיִּם מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־עֵץ נֹחַמֵד לְמִרְאָה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹ? הַגֵּן
וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע:
¹⁶ וַיִּצַּו יְהוָה אֶת־הַיִּם עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגֵּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל:
¹⁷ וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע? א תֹּאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אָכַלְ? מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. ⁵ When every shrub of the field was not yet on the earth and every herb of the field had not yet sprouted—for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and mankind did not yet exist to work the ground—⁶ waters went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the earth. ⁷ The LORD God formed the man from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living creature. ⁸ The LORD God planted in the east the garden in Eden and there he put the man which he had formed. ⁹ Then the LORD God caused every tree which is pleasing to look at and good for food to sprout from the ground. The tree of life was in the middle of the garden as well as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, from every tree in the garden you may surely eat, ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat from it, for on the day you eat from it you will surely die.

This section begins the תולדות of the heavens and the earth. “The *toledot* rubric is best taken as a binding device or hinge verse and always refers to what follows, though it does allude to the preceding so as to create a linkage between two sections.”⁴⁹ Verse 4 is not a summary of the creative work found in Gen. 1:1-2:3, but rather, it is a heading for a particular section of the history which God saw fit to relate to his people. Brug says about the use of תולדות in Scripture,

The first eleven chapters, which report the early history of the world, lead directly into the early history of Israel as reported in Genesis 12-50. The other books of the Pentateuch and the other historical books of the Old Testament continue this same story. These books trace the story of God's plan of salvation from Eden to Egypt, to Jerusalem, to captivity in Babylon, and back to Jerusalem again. This history of the plan of salvation is then resumed and completed in the Gospels and Acts. Events from Genesis to Acts form one connected history.

⁴⁹ Matthews, 114

The story of Genesis flows as one uninterrupted story from Adam and Eve, through Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the patriarchs of Israel. Nothing in the text indicates that we are to understand any of these characters as mythical or symbolic characters.⁵⁰

Critics like to treat Genesis 1 and 2 as two independent interpretations of creation which contradict each other. The two chapters, however, are two stages of one report. Genesis 1 serves as the introduction to the whole book of Genesis by briefly summarizing the six days of creation. Genesis 2 begins the first of ten "accounts" (Hebrew—*toledoth*) which make up the book of Genesis. This first "account," made up of chapters 2-4 of Genesis, tells about the creation and development of the human race.

After Genesis 2-4 gives us this basic information, Genesis 5:1 begins the second "account" which traces the human race from Adam to Noah. The other eight "accounts" continue the story of salvation up to the time of Israel's entry into Egypt. The rest of the books of the Old Testament carry the story up to the time of Christ.⁵¹

Throughout the Old Testament, תולדות was used to recount the history of God's people. This narrative flows from one generation to the next. These accounts point directly to the patriarchs, whose existence is by no means in doubt; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were real people. Since this formula is used to reveal real, historical people and events, we have no reason to expect that the use of תולדות in Genesis 2 is somehow relating less historical information. Since the patriarchs actually existed and since the actual details of their lives are recorded in Scripture for us, the events of Genesis 1-3 ought to be understood as actual history as well.

However, the use of תולדות does not explain the apparent discrepancies in the account of creation that follows in Genesis 2. For instance, if God commanded that the land "produce vegetation" (Gen. 1:11 NIV) on day three, before he had created mankind, how can chapter two say that man was formed when "no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up?" (Gen. 2:5 NIV) This clear contradiction becomes much less clear when the Hebrew text is examined more carefully.

For instance, in Genesis 1:11 God said דשא, vegetation, and עשב מזריע זרע, seed-bearing plants, but in Genesis 2:5 God records that the שיה השדה, shrub of the field, and the עשב השדה, plant of the field, had not yet sprouted. Although we see עשב in both instances, Lawrenz reminds

⁵⁰ Brug, 2

⁵¹ Ibid, 4

us that “these עֵשֶׂב came into existence on the third day by divine fiat as full-grown plants bearing seed after their kind. They’re coming into existence is not presented as having been in any way contingent either on previous rain or on human cultivation. In fact the concept of the cultivated field...does not come up at all in connection with the creation of the vegetation on the third day.”⁵² On this same topic, Cassuto writes,

What is meant by *the שִׂיחַ siah of the field and עֵשֶׂב esebh of the field* mentioned here? Modern commentators usually consider the terms to connote the *vegetable kingdom as a whole*; thence it follows that our section contradicts the preceding chapter, according to which vegetation came into being on the third day.

All interpretations of this kind introduce something into the text that is not there, in order to create the inconsistency. When the verse declares that these species were missing, the missing is simply that *these* kinds were wanting, but *no* others.⁵³

“All this makes it quite unlikely that Moses is speaking in 2:5,6 of things which were still missing at a time before the third day but which were to a large extent modified and supplied by the end of that day.”⁵⁴ Through our close look at the Hebrew, we can conclude that Genesis 2:5 does not discredit the vegetation spoken of on day three.

Genesis 2:18; 21-24

¹⁸ The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make for him a helper as his complement. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man and he was asleep. He took one of his ribs and closed the place with flesh. ²² Then from the rib which he took from the man the LORD God made the woman and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, "This one this time is bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh. This one will be called woman since out of man this one was taken. ²⁴ On account of this a man will leave his father and his mother and he is united to his wife. Then they become one flesh.

These verses are significant because of the handful of times this account is referenced as historical fact in the New Testament. When the Jews came to Jesus with a question concerning marriage, Jesus directed their attention to this account.

⁵² Lawrenz, 98

⁵³ Cassuto, 101 (The italic are the author's, not my own)

⁵⁴ Lawrenz, 98

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. Matt. 19:3-6 NIV⁵⁵

Jesus himself pointed back to the creation account as a model for marriage which still applied to the Jews of his day and still remains true for us. Jesus’ response indicated that this model should have been obvious to those who approached him with this marriage question. Essentially, Jesus told them to look back to the very first example of a God-pleasing union between a man and a woman. By Adam’s own admission, his wife shared his flesh and blood; the two were truly one.

A man who would divorce his wife is like a man who hates his own body. This point is found in Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it...For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” (Eph. 5:25-31 NIV)⁵⁶ Since both Paul and Jesus are willing to point back to the creation of man and woman as a model for marriage in our lives, we too should feel comfortable accepting this account as a true, historical model for us.

Genesis 3:1-6, 14-15

¹ The serpent was craftier than every other living creature of the field which the LORD God made. He said to the woman, "Is it true that God said you must not eat from every tree in the garden?" ² The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat. ³ But from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden God said, "You must not eat from it and you must not touch it, lest you will die." ⁴ And the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. ⁶ The woman saw that the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eyes. The tree was also desirable to make her wise so she took from its fruit and she ate. She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate.

⁵⁵ Also see the parallel account in Mark 10:1-12

⁵⁶ Paul also used the image of the two becoming one flesh to rebuke men who were engaging in sexual immorality with prostitutes. See 1 Cor. 6:12-20

¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you did this, you are cursed among all cattle and among all the creatures of the field. On your belly you will move and you will eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵ I will place hostility between you and the woman, between your offspring and between her offspring. He will crush your head and you will crush his heel.

Are Christians actually supposed to believe that a serpent spoke to Eve and deceived her? The absurdity of this idea has led many to depart from the literal interpretation of these verses. Some have suggested that we read chapter three in the same way that we read Aesop's fables. They contend, "Why should we be disturbed about a serpent speaking? We expect that sort of thing in religious parables and in didactic fables and think nothing of it."⁵⁷ In response to this idea, Lawrenz writes,

Yet Genesis 3 does not bear the marks of a religious parable or of a didactic fable. This is evident as we consider the larger and the closer context...its carefully structured ten תולדות and preceding introduction. It is apparent also in the account of this chapter itself. A didactic fable has a clearly discernible, or even expressly stated, moral attached to it. None is attached to this account. Instead, man's fatal action in this account has lasting consequences for all mankind. This is not true of actions in parables and fables.⁵⁸

If we are not supposed to interpret this account as a parable or a didactic fable, then others have suggested we still see an actual temptation in this account. However, they suggest a temptation slightly different from what is recorded in Scripture. This is how Cassuto suggests we should interpret the temptation scene.

The dialogue between the serpent and the woman is actually, in a manner of speaking, a dialogue that took place in the woman's mind, between her wiliness and her innocence, clothed in the garb of a parable. Only in this way is it possible to understand the conversation clearly; otherwise it remains obscure.

By interpreting the text in this way, we can understand why the serpent is said to think and speak; in reality it is not he that thinks and speaks but the woman does so in her heart.⁵⁹

In response to such an interpretation, Lawrenz writes, "how did Eve, who was created without sin, come to have evil thoughts if they were not first addressed to her from the outside through an agent of evil?" and ultimately such an interpretation, "only raises additional questions in its futile

⁵⁷ Lawrenz, 130

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Cassuto, 142-143

attempt to explain matters to the satisfaction of human reason.”⁶⁰ It is also important to remember that “the text tells us the serpent spoke. Yet serpents do not speak...Still Moses is content throughout the account of the fall to speak of this rational, morally accountable but wicked tempter who approached Eve in terms of the serpent, the beast that the tempter used as his vehicle.”⁶¹ If the serpent had not actually tempted Eve, it would not make sense that God would punish the serpent. Yet the text clearly indicates that the serpent was punished for his role in tempting Eve to sin.

The New Testament also clearly points to the serpent as the one who led to Eve to sin. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:3 NIV) John also alluded to the devil as the serpent in Revelation.⁶² We have no reason to doubt that the serpent was in fact the true culprit who tempted Eve to sin. Genesis 3 is a record of real events which happened to real people with very real consequences. Scripture makes this point clearly; just as clearly as the text of Genesis does.

From these numerous examples we conclude that the clearest and best way to understand the Hebrew text is by a literal interpretation of Genesis 1-3. The Hebrew text itself is clear and the rest of Scripture confirms the account of the creation and fall into sin. Now that we have a clearer understanding of the text, we will take a look at how some of the earliest sources interpreted Genesis 1-3.

Early Interpretations of Genesis

This section of the paper will offer insight from two of the earliest translations of the Hebrew text, one in Greek and the other in Aramaic. Next, we will look at interpretations from Philo, Josephus, and Augustine. In this section we will see how these earliest sources wrestled with their interpretation of Genesis 1-3 as well as what outside factors may have led them to their conclusions.

The Septuagint

⁶⁰ Lawrenz, 131

⁶¹ Ibid, 128

⁶² See Rev. 12:9, 20:2

“The first translation of the Scriptures into another language is the Greek Septuagint, dating from the third and second centuries B.C. Not only is it the oldest, but it is also one of the most valuable of the translations from antiquity.”⁶³ The Septuagint proved to be a faithful translation which brought the word of God into the common language of the day. It became the Bible for the early Christian church and was often quoted by the New Testament writers. Therefore, it is beneficial to look at how the Septuagint translated, and therefore interpreted, the opening chapters of Genesis.

In Genesis 1:1-3 we read ¹ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. ² ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος, καὶ σκότος ἐπάνω τῆς ἀβύσσου, καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος. ³ καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς Γενηθήτω φῶς. καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς.

¹ In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. ² But the earth was unseen and unfurnished, and darkness was over the deep, and the Spirit of God brought himself over the water. ³ And God said, “Be light, and it became light.

As stated previously during our look at the Hebrew text, here we clearly see that the translators of the Septuagint understood verse 1 to be an independent sentence. The Septuagint also reveals that the translator had no difficulty translating the creation of light on day one and the creation of lights on day four. In fact, the Septuagint follows the Hebrew text very closely up until Genesis 3:15, where we read, “καὶ ἔχθραν θήσω ἀνὰ μέσον σου καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τῆς γυναίκος καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ σπέρματός σου καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτῆς, αὐτός σου τηρήσει κεφαλὴν, καὶ σὺ τηρήσεις αὐτοῦ πτέρναν.” And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed, he will watch against your head, and you will watch against his heel. While τηρέω does maintain the animosity between the woman’s offspring and the snake it does lose the crushing finality of a verb like הָשָׂה. Overall, the Septuagint maintains the same truths that were taught in the Hebrew text. However, not all translations would prove to be so faithful.

The Targums

“The Targums are interpretive renderings of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures...into Aramaic. Such versions were needed when Hebrew ceased to be the normal medium of

⁶³ Bruce M. Metzger, *Important Early Translations of the Bible* Bibliotheca Sacra 150 (January-March 1993): Copyright © 1993 Dallas Theological Seminary, 36

communication among the Jews.”⁶⁴ After the Hebrew Scriptures were read aloud in the synagogue a paraphrase was spoken in Aramaic. “At first the oral Targums were a simple paraphrase in Aramaic, but eventually they became more elaborate and incorporated explanatory details inserted here and there into the translation of the Hebrew text.”⁶⁵ Eventually these Aramaic paraphrases were written down. “Two officially sanctioned Targums, produced first in Palestine and later revised in Babylonia, are the Targum of Onkelos on the Pentateuch and the Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets, both of which were in use in the third century of the Christian era.”⁶⁶

The Septuagint translation and interpretation followed the Hebrew text closely. “But the Targums differ in that they are interpretive...to an extent that far exceeds the bounds of translation or even paraphrase.”⁶⁷ Because the Targums depart so far from the Hebrew text, “Rabbi Judah (2nd century A.D.) declared with paradoxical vehemence, ‘He who translates a biblical verse literally is a liar, but he who elaborates on it is a blasphemous.’”⁶⁸ As we look at the interpretations and explanations found in the Targum Onkelos, we will determine which verses are helpful and which versus are blasphemous.

We see how freely Targum Onkelos explains and interprets the Hebrew Scripture already in the opening verses. In its description of day one, the Targum recounts how “the Lord divided between the light and the darkness. And the Lord called the light Day; and He made it that the inhabitants of the world might labour by it: and the darkness called He night; and He made it that in it the creatures might have rest.”⁶⁹ It is clear that the writers of the Targum interpreted the light on day one as a real, physical light upon the face of the earth. Even though Targum Onkelos also asserts that “the earth was vacancy and desolation, solitary of the sons of men, and void of every animal,”⁷⁰ the Targum still recognized that a physical light was created on day one for the benefit of the creation that was still to come.

⁶⁴ Metzger, 40

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Targum Onkelos <http://targum.info/pj/pjgen1-6.htm> (Last accessed on Feb. 3, 2016)

⁷⁰ Ibid

While this Targum displays a useful interpretation concerning light on day one, not all passages from the Targum are quite so helpful. For example, when we look at the light-bearers that were created on day four Targum Onkelos explains,

And let them be for luminaries in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth. And it was so. And the Lord made two great luminaries; and they were equal in glory twenty and one years, less six hundred and two and seventy parts of an hour. And afterwards the moon recited against the sun a false report; and she was diminished, and the sun was appointed to be the greater light to rule the day; and the moon to be the inferior light to rule in the night, and the stars. And the Lord ordained them unto their offices, in the expanse of the heavens, to give forth light upon the earth, and to minister by day and by night, to distinguish between the light of the day and the darkness of the night. And the Lord beheld that it was good. And it was evening, and it was morning, Day the fourth.⁷¹

This particular interpretation adds several details to the narrative which are rather unusual. Although the creation of the ‘two great luminaries’ is clearly spoken of as taking place on day four, apparently that day encompassed a timeframe significantly longer than twenty-four hours. Also, the sun and moon are personified with personalities that clash. Some have suggested that the purpose of these new details was “to inculcate a lesson on the sin and punishment of an envious and calumnious temper.”⁷² However, attributing personalities to the sun and moon is very common in ancient near eastern religions. For instance, “the Babylonian poem,” *Enuma Elish*, “presents the luminaries and stars to us as the ‘likeness’ of the gods...endowing them with personality and mind and will.”⁷³ This would appear to be a clear example of how the writers of the Targums were influenced by ancient near eastern religions. Cassuto suggests that “in the age of the Talmudic sages idolatry had long ceased to be a source of danger to Israel, and consequently they saw no further necessity for undue caution in regard to mythological themes, nor the need to obliterate all references to them.”⁷⁴ No matter how you try to explain the inclusion of these details in the Targums, it is hard to understand what they add to our understanding of the fourth day.

In addition to these interpretations, the Targums offers several other interesting interpretations regarding the creation of humans and the command God gave to Adam and Eve.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² J. W. Etheridge, *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch* London 1862

⁷³ Cassuto, 43

⁷⁴ Ibid

Yet, there is only one more section which we will look at in this paper. This is an interpretation of Genesis 3:15, when God curses the serpent and offers good news for the woman and her offspring.

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between the seed of thy son, and the seed of her sons; and it shall be when the sons of the woman keep the commandments of the law, they will be prepared to smite thee upon thy head; but when they forsake the commandments of the law, thou wilt be ready to wound them in their heel. Nevertheless for them there shall be a medicine, but for thee there will be no medicine; and they shall make a remedy for the heel in the days of the King Meshiha.⁷⁵

While we might not agree with the idea that mankind, by keeping the commandments of the law, will be able to crush the serpent's head, this section is interesting because it suggests that the writers of the Targums understood that this verse was connected with the promised Messiah. Thus, we see how the Targums offers some helpful insight as to how the Hebrew was interpreted and explained in Aramaic. However, the Targums also offer some interpretations which only leave us with more questions.

Philo

“Philo was an Alexandrian Jew who lived from around 15–10 BC to AD 45–50.”⁷⁶ While at times Philo's work could be described as clearly Jewish, in other places the reader will notice his tendency to speak about the significance behind certain numbers as well as the many similarities to the Platonic thinking of his day. All these factors played a role in how Philo handled the interpretation of Scripture. Philo did not deny a literal interpretation of Scripture, but he did express his view that “the literal interpretation is for those who are unable to see an underlying deeper meaning.”⁷⁷ Although Philo did not highly value a strict, literal interpretation of Scripture, he did express the highest praise of Moses and believed he was the author of Genesis. Concerning Moses and his account of creation, Philo wrote,

Of other lawgivers, some have set forth what they considered to be just and reasonable...while others, investing their ideas with an abundance of amplification, have sought to bewilder the people... But Moses, rejecting both of

⁷⁵ Targum Onkelos <http://targum.info/pj/pjgen1-6.htm> (Last accessed on Feb. 3, 2016)

⁷⁶ Justin Marston, *Jewish Understandings of Genesis 1-3* Science & Christian Belief, Vol 12, No. 2, 129

⁷⁷ Thomas Finan & Vincent Twomey *Philo and the Fathers' Fearghus O Fearghail in Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers* Dublin 1995, 46-47

these methods...made the beginning of his laws entirely beautiful, and in all respects admirable, neither at once declaring what ought to be done or the contrary, nor...inventing fables himself or adopting those which had been invented by others.

Accordingly no one, whether poet or historian, could ever give expression in an adequate manner to the beauty of his ideas respecting the creation of the world; for they surpass all the power of language, and amaze our hearing, being too great and venerable to be adapted to the senses of any created being.

Moses, who had early reached the very summits of philosophy, and who had learnt from the oracles of God the most numerous and important of the principles of nature...says that the world was made in six days, not because the creator stood in need of a length of time...but because the things created required arrangement; and number is akin to arrangement; and of all numbers, six is...the most productive...It is fitting therefore, that the world, being the most perfect of created things, should be made according to the perfect number, namely, six.⁷⁸

This section gives us a clear idea of Philo's method for exegesis. Although Philo holds "the Torah with the utmost regard as being divinely inspired in its author Moses,"⁷⁹ at the same time, "he believes that the true purpose of the passage is to convey metaphysical truths to the mind of the reader."⁸⁰ In other words, he believes that the text was never intended to be understood literally. Rather, the span of days was a method Moses used to teach us amazing truths about God's creation by using numbers. Concerning the six days and time, Philo writes,

It is quite foolish to think that the world was created in six days or in a space of time at all. Why? Because every period of time is a series of days and nights, and these can only be made such by the movement of the sun as it goes over and under the earth: but the sun is a part of heaven, so that time is confessedly more recent than the world. It would therefore be correct to say that the world was not made in time, but that time was formed by means of the world, for it was heaven's movement that was the index of the nature of time.⁸¹

Philo believed that time could only exist with the motion of the sun and moon and reasoned that no discernable amount of time had elapsed during the first three days. This would coincide with his belief that everything was created simultaneously by God, not over a period of six days.

⁷⁸ C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* Hendrickson Publishers, 1993 p. 3-4 (De Opificio Mundi 1,2, 8, 13, 14)

⁷⁹ Marston, 130

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Lewis, 434-435 (Legum Allegoriae, I. 2)

Since the ‘days’ of Genesis are not to be understood literally, Philo gave us his insight as to how readers should interpret the details of Genesis.

In connection with the days of creation, Philo confirmed what was created on each day and reiterated his belief that the order of creation is not necessarily important because everything was created at the same time. Yet, on each particular day “Philo describes at length all the properties of that number, and how suited the number is for whatever was created on that day.”⁸² An example of Philo’s method can be found in connection with the fourth day.

And next the heaven was embellished in the perfect number four, and if anyone were to pronounce this number the origin and source of the all perfect decade he would not err. For what the decade is in actuality, that the number four, as it seems, is in potentiality, at all events if the numerals from the unit to four are placed together in order⁸³ they will make ten, which is the limit of the number of immensity, around which the numbers wheel and turn as around a goal.

For the four elements, out of which this universe was made, flowed from the number four as from a fountain. And in addition to the four elements the seasons of the year are also four, which are the causes of the generation of animals and plants, the year being divided into the quadruple division of winter, and spring, and summer, and autumn.⁸⁴

This example clearly demonstrates Philo’s obsession with the significance of the number attributed to each creation on each day. “This may seem rather strange to modern readers, but in the heyday of the Pythagoreans and other Greek philosophers...it becomes apparent that Philo viewed this as secular learning or in a sense ‘science’. He was...understanding parts of the language of Genesis 1 to 3 as symbolic to reflect his contemporary ‘science’ in a Jewish perspective.”⁸⁵ Unfortunately, numbers and the mathematical ‘science’ of Philo’s day were not the only driving forces which led him away from the literal interpretation of Genesis.

Philo could not bring himself to understand certain details, such as the two trees in the middle of the garden and the serpent speaking to Eve as literal, historical truths. Concerning these matters Philo wrote,

⁸² Marston, 131

⁸³ $1+2+3+4=10$

⁸⁴ Yonge, 3-4 (De Opificio Mundi 47, 52)

⁸⁵ Marston, 131

These statements appear to me to be dictated by philosophy which is symbolical rather than strictly accurate. For no trees of life or of knowledge have ever at any previous time appeared on the earth, nor is it likely that any will appear hereafter. But I rather conceive that Moses was speaking in an allegorical spirit...It is said that the old poisonous and earth-born reptile, the serpent, uttered the voice of a man. And he on one occasion coming to the wife of the first created man, reproached her... And she, without any inquiry, prompted by an unstable and rash mind, acquiesced in his advice and ate of the fruit and gave a portion of it to her husband. And this conduct suddenly changed both of them from innocence and simplicity of character to all kinds of wickedness⁸⁶ ... Now these are no mythical fictions, such as poets and sophists delight in, but modes of making ideas visible, bidding us resort to allegorical interpretation guided in our renderings by what lies beneath the surface.⁸⁷

Some have compared Philo's allegorical interpretation of the Genesis account with Plato's Republic. "Much of The Republic is concerned with the interaction of the mind and the body, and drawing analogy to society. Philo appears to be reading Platonic philosophy into the Genesis narrative, thereby constructing another level of meaning whilst still accepting the literal/historical one (as many of the Rabbis did with such passages)."⁸⁸ While it can be useful to read Philo, we must conclude that much of his interpretation of Genesis is guided by the mathematical 'science' as well as the philosophy of his day. Philo allowed his worldly learning to interpret Scripture. However, there was another prominent Jew at this time who held to a much more literal understanding of Genesis.

Josephus

"Josephus, the Jewish historian, was born in A.D. 37 of a priestly Jewish family. He was well-educated, and followed the Pharisaic form of Judaism. Josephus wrote both to justify his own conduct and to commend what was most attractive in Judaism to the Romans. We depend on Josephus for most of our knowledge of the New Testament background."⁸⁹ His account of *The Antiquities of the Jews* gives us insight as to how Josephus interpreted the opening chapters

⁸⁶ Yonge, 3-4 (*De Opificio Mundi* 154, 156)

⁸⁷ Marston, 132

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 133

⁸⁹ William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* Hendrickson Publishers Peabody, Massachusetts 1987

of Genesis. At the beginning of this work, Josephus declares his purpose and motivation for writing this history.

Those who undertake to write histories do not, I perceive, take that trouble on one and the same account, but for many reasons...for some of them apply themselves to this part of learning to show their skill in composition, and that they may there in acquire a reputation for speaking finely; others...in order to gratify those that happened to be concerned in them...But others there are, who, of necessity and by force, are driven to write history, because they are concerned in the facts, and so cannot excuse themselves from committing them to writing, for the advantage of posterity.

As I proceed, therefore, I shall accurately describe what is contained in our records, in the order of time that belongs to them...and this without adding anything to what is therein contained, or taking away anything therefrom.⁹⁰

“After explaining his methodology, Josephus launches into the Creation account. He quickly established that he considers Moses’ account to be quite literal. He comments, ‘And this was indeed the first day’ and ‘in just six days the world, and all that is therein, was made.’ Josephus gives no indication that he considers these words to be enigmatic or allegorical.”⁹¹

Josephus is also perfectly comfortable with the text about a serpent who talks. In fact, it would appear that he believed at least a few animals could talk when he wrote that “while all the living creatures had one language, at that time the serpent...showed an envious disposition, at his supposal of their living happily, and in obedience to the commands of God...persuaded the woman, out of malicious intention, to taste of the tree of knowledge.”⁹² Josephus seemed convinced that the account of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis is an accurate, historical account which was worth retelling to the nations.

This was not just an opinion that Josephus strongly believed himself, but he reported that this was the view that was historically held by all Jews.

Throughout his writings, Josephus notes any Jewish sect that holds a different view from the mainstream position he records. Though he speaks of differences in doctrine between Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots, he records not even

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 27-28

⁹¹ Frank Luke, *Josephus says, ‘Genesis means what it says!’* <http://creation.com/josephus-says-genesis-means-what-it-says#txtRef13> (Last accessed Feb. 16, 2016)

⁹² Whiston, 30

a single dissenting Jewish voice on these key interpretations of Genesis 1–11. Clearly, for Josephus, if there were any dissent, it was not even worth mentioning, because he had shown how the meaning was unambiguous.⁹³

As a result of his careful study of Scripture and his knowledge of Jewish history, we can confidently conclude that the Jewish nation historically held to a literal interpretation of the creation account in Genesis.

Augustine

“As a young man in Carthage he had been an auditor in the Manichean religion, and because of this experience he had become deeply aware of the need to refute the dualism of the Manichees⁹⁴ and to defend the reliability of the Old Testament against their attacks.”⁹⁵ Shortly after his conversion⁹⁶, Augustine wrote two books against the Manichees. In this work Augustine tried to comment on the book of Genesis according to its plain, literal meaning. In his own words Augustine wrote,

I wanted without delay either to refute their aberrations or to direct them to seek in the books which they hated the faith taught by Christ and the Gospels. At that time I did not see how all of Genesis could be taken in the proper sense, and it seemed to me more and more, or at least scarcely possible or very difficult, for all of it to be so understood.

But not willing to be deterred from my purpose, whenever I was unable to discover the literal meaning of the passage, I explained its figurative meaning as briefly and as clearly as I was able... I was mindful, however, of the purpose which I had set before me in which I was unable to achieve, that is, to show how everything in Genesis is to be understood 1st of all not in the figurative but in the proper sense.⁹⁷

Having been dissatisfied with this first commentary on Genesis, Augustine continued to write concerning the book of Genesis until 401 A.D. when Augustine wrote *De Genesi ad Litteram*

⁹³ Luke

⁹⁴ The dualism of the Manichees is the idea that both light and darkness are eternal. This was used to explain evil in the world. God did not create evil. Instead, it has always existed just as God has always existed.

⁹⁵ John Hammond Taylor, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* New York, N.Y.: Newman Press, 1982, 1

⁹⁶ Augustine wrote about the Manichees, “Thus I fell among men, delirious in their pride, carnal and voluble, whose mouths were the snares of the devil... Still they cried, “Truth, Truth,” and were forever speaking the word to me. But the thing itself was not in them. Indeed, they spoke falsely not only of thee--who truly art the Truth--but also about the basic elements of this world, thy creation.” (Confessions book 3, chapter 6)

⁹⁷ Augustine, *De Genesi Contra Manichaeos libri duo* 8.2.5 (All portions of Augustine’s work come from John Hammond Taylor’s translation)

Libri Duodecim.⁹⁸ In this work, Augustine “is careful to distinguish what is of the faith from what is based on human reason and to recognize the difference between what is established for certain and what is merely a hypothesis or theory.”⁹⁹ Therefore, a study of this book should give us a pretty clear picture of how Augustine interpreted the opening chapters of Genesis.

In all the sacred books, we should consider the eternal truths that are taught, the facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicted, and the precepts or councils that are given in the case of a narrative of events, the question arises as to whether everything must be taken according to the figurative sense only, whether it must be expounded and defended also as a faithful record of what happened. No Christian will dare say that the narrative must not be taken in a figurative sense. For St. Paul...explains the statement in Genesis, and they shall be two in one flesh, is a great mystery in reference to Christ and the church.¹⁰⁰

One of the most difficult issues that Augustine wrestled with was the creation of light on day one and the luminaries on day four. We read how he wrestled to understand if the light on day one was to be understood as spiritual or material, physical light.

If, therefore, it was spiritual light that was created on the first day, did it perish in order that night might follow? But if it was corporal, what is the nature of such a light?¹⁰¹

Why, then, was the sun made to rule the day and shine upon the earth if that other light was sufficient to make the day and was even called the Day? Did that light illumine the higher regions far from the earth and out of sight from here, so that there was need for a sun by which day might shine upon the lower regions of the universe? Again, one might say that the brightness of day was increased by the addition of the sun, supposing that there had been a day illumined by the previous light but less brilliant than it now is.¹⁰²

But before the appearance of the sun, in what sort of cycle could three days and nights have past in succession? Even if there existed the light which was first created, and even if we assume that it was a corporal light, it is difficult to discover any solution to propose for this problem.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ This title means “The Literal Meaning of Genesis: a Commentary and Twelve Books”

⁹⁹ Taylor, 7

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 19

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim* 1.10

¹⁰² Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim* 1.11

¹⁰³ Ibid 1.12

If it was spiritual light that was made when God said, “let there be light”... this supposes, of course, that spiritual creatures already existed and were intended by the word “heaven,” where Scripture says, in the beginning God created heaven and earth, and that this means not the material heaven but the immaterial heaven above it.

But how are we to understand the evening and the night that follow upon the light? Surely there were not sinners already existing and foolish creatures falling away from the light of truth, whom God would separate from creatures remaining in the light.

This is to give an allegorical and prophetic interpretation, a thing which I did not set out to do in this treatise. I have started here to discuss secret Scripture according to the plain meaning of the historical facts, not according to future events which they foreshadow.¹⁰⁴

Here we see the great difficulty with which Augustine wrestled with the understanding of light on day one. How did one day pass to another day, how did the light become darkness, without the movement of the sun? Ultimately, Augustine determined that “as to the actual existence of spiritual light in a spiritual creature, our faith leaves no doubt; as to the existence of material light... A light which could have been followed by night, there will be nothing in such a supposition contrary to faith until unerring truth gives lie to it.”¹⁰⁵ Although Augustine was content to accept both interpretations, he was hesitant to completely endorse the position which held that the light of day one was physical. He resisted that interpretation because he did not want to make Christianity sound foolish.

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world... Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 1.17

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 1.19

on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason?¹⁰⁶

Augustine was deeply concerned about what message the unbelieving world would receive. He wanted to make sure that Christians spoke only what Scripture actually says, what the authors actually intended to say, and nothing more. This is not to say that the resurrection of the dead and eternal life are simple concepts for the unbelieving world to understand. However, Augustine argued that if unbelievers perceive Christians as fools in the realms of rational, observable truth, then how will they ever possibly believe those Christians when they speak about the gospel of our God?

Augustine had much the same attitude toward another major question that he struggled with. He believed that God created everything simultaneously based on his understanding of Sirach 18:1.¹⁰⁷ But how could everything be created simultaneously if Eve was created from Adam's rib? Augustine recognized that "these events could happen only in successive periods of time. They could not, therefore, have come about in the manner in which all things were created together."¹⁰⁸ Therefore, he sought to explain how both could be true. Augustine concluded that

In accordance, therefore, with the original work of creation, in which God made all things together, he created potentially and in their causes works from which he rested on the seventh day...It cannot be said that the male was made on the sixth day in the female in the course of days following. On the sixth day it is explicitly said, *male and female he made them, and he blessed them*...First they were created in potency through the word of God and inserted seminally into the world when he created all things together, after which he rested from these works on the seventh day...Later the man and woman were created in accordance with God's creative activity as it is at work throughout the ages and with which he works even now; and thus it was ordained that in time Adam would be made from the slime of the earth and the woman from the side of her husband.¹⁰⁹

Augustine reasoned that God could create the idea of male and female humans on the sixth day which would allow him to maintain what is recorded in Sirach 18. He then concluded that God actually, physically created Adam and Eve at different times sometime after the seventh day

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim* 1.19

¹⁰⁷ Augustine had to rely on his Latin translation of this text which read *Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul*. (The one who lives in eternity created everything at the same time.) This seems to be a poor translation of the Greek which said 'Ο ΖΩΝ εις τὸν αἰῶνα ἔκτισε τὰ πάντα κοινῇ.' He who lives forever created all things in common (RSV)

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim* 6.2

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim* 6.5

when he rested from all his labor. Here we see Augustine's desire to clear up any confusion which might lead some to find contradictions in Scripture. Augustine himself writes, "In our efforts according to our limited ability we try with God's help to see that no absurdity or contradiction may be thought to be present in sacred Scripture to offend the mind of the reader; for he might think that events narrated by Scripture are impossible and then either give up his faith or not approach the faith."¹¹⁰

Some may find it frustrating that Augustine does not give too many definitive answers to these difficult questions. He would respond by saying,

"I have learnt that a man is not in any difficulty in making a reply according to his faith which he ought to make to those who try to defame our holy Scripture. When they are able, from reliable evidence, to prove some fact of physical science, we shall show that it is not contrary to our Scripture. But when they produce from any of their books a theory contrary to Scripture, and therefore contrary to the Catholic faith, either we shall have some ability to demonstrate that it is absolutely false, or at least we ourselves will hold it so without any shadow of a doubt."¹¹¹

It is clear that in *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim* Augustine sought to present the plain, literal meaning of scripture while also trying to remove any contradictions which might be found within the text. In all his efforts, we see that Augustine held the truth of Scripture above everything else.

Conclusion

We have taken a close look at the Hebrew text of Genesis 1-3 as well as some of the earliest interpretations of Genesis so that we may better understand how we should interpret what is recorded in Scripture. However, some may wonder if it even matters how we interpret the opening chapters of Genesis. Does it matter if we understand the creation account literally or can there be room for evolution? Does a decision have to be made one way or the other? It would appear that hesitancy to answer this question is what drove the Catholic Church to where it stands today. "H. L. Mencken expressed admiration for how Catholics handled the evolution issue: [The advantage of Catholics] lies in the simple fact that they do not have to decide either for Evolution or against it. Authority has not spoken on the subject; hence it puts no burden

¹¹⁰ Ibid 5.8

¹¹¹ Ibid, 1.21

upon conscience, and may be discussed realistically and without prejudice.”¹¹² Today, Catholics are free to believe in evolution, the creation account recorded in Genesis, or a mixture of the two.

However, such freedom in the interpretation of Scripture has led some Catholics to deny several truths that are taught in the opening chapters of Genesis. For instance, Raymond C. Backes, whose “training was mostly in Catholic theology,”¹¹³ wrote *An Allegorical Reading of Genesis 1:1-11:26*. In the preface he shares a concern similar to Augustine’s in which “the treasure trove of Scripture...is lost or rejected as being untenable because it is so unbelievable when viewed and interpreted from a strictly historical viewpoint.”¹¹⁴ He contends that no one will believe such a bizarre, literal interpretation of the accounts in Genesis. “Why must the story of Adam and Eve and their fall be seen as an allegory, and not as history? It describes the invisible God in anthropomorphic terms. Serpents, like the one that tempted Eve, don’t talk, nor did they ever not crawl on their bellies...A tree of knowledge of good and evil is obviously allegorical.”¹¹⁵ Along with his rejection of the account of mankind’s fall into sin, Backes also rejects ‘original sin.’ Instead, he asserts that evil “is simply an inevitable by-product of creating man ‘in His image and likeness’ by endowing mankind with intelligence and free will.”¹¹⁶ His conclusion of the accounts in Genesis is that

The truths that the authors were attempting to teach by means of the Genesis allegory are valid. Basically, these truths are that there is only one God; God is good; God is the creator of all else that exists; man is created to be like God in that he, unlike brute animals, has intelligence, free will and creativity; woman is equal in dignity to man, there is much evil in the world, not because God created it, but because God created mankind with free will, which has as an inevitable side effect that man, given his concupiscence, often chooses the evil rather than the good.¹¹⁷

If Adam and Eve did, in fact, enjoy an idyllic existence and lost it by an offence against God, what of the promises of a Messiah that have been interpreted as having been made to mankind as being fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross? Did this longed for Messiah restore the utopian existence that was lost in

¹¹² Linder, (He is quoting H. L. Mencken on Religion by S. T. Joshi page 163)

¹¹³ Raymond C. Backes, *An Allegorical Reading of Genesis 1:1-11:26* Copyright 2013, 2

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 12-13

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 15

¹¹⁷ Backes, 23

the sin of Adam and Eve? No! Does a child regain it in baptism? No! Did Jesus restore it when he died on Calvary? No!¹¹⁸

By his own blasphemous words, Backes has rejected what Scripture clearly teaches because it does not make rational sense to him. Thus we see one example of how the rejection of the clear, plain meaning of Genesis can lead to a rejection of many other truths that are taught in Scripture. Brug warns that “when we begin to choose which parts of the Bible are reasonable to believe, what doctrine is safe from attack? When the church changes its doctrine of creation to make it acceptable to the world, how can it preserve the doctrine of the cross, which is the greatest offense of all to the world (1 Corinthians 1)?¹¹⁹ We can never remove the stumbling blocks that might keep people from believing what God teaches in Scripture because the entire focus of Scripture is a stumbling block. Instead, we must maintain our persistence in the clear, plain meaning of Genesis 1-3.

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¹¹⁸ Ibid, 25

¹¹⁹ Brug, 5

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