

# Coming to Grips with the Early Church Fathers' Perspective on Genesis

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By Dr. John Millam

Understanding early Jewish and Christian interpretations of Genesis' opening chapters has been a passionate pursuit of mine for the last five years. This is a very difficult and complex topic, but one that can yield important insights into the contemporary debate over the age of the earth. Given my background, a friend asked me to review *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, a new young-earth creationist book edited by Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury.

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The book is a collection of 14 scholarly articles written by different authors defending modern young-earth creationism, namely a calendar-day (or 24-hour-day) view, recent creation, global flood, and no animal death before the Fall. In the first chapter, James Mook covers how the early church fathers dealt with Genesis 1, Noah's flood, and the age of the earth. Since the subject matter corresponds to an area I have studied intently, I will limit my response to just this chapter. The central question I am trying to address in this article series is whether or not the church fathers lend valuable support to modern young-earth creationism as argued by Mook.<sup>1</sup>

## A Little Background

While my actual academic background is in chemistry, I became interested in patristics (the study of early church fathers) after reading *The Genesis Debate*, which presents three different views of the creation days side-by-side. J. Ligon Duncan III and David W. Hall support a 24-hour day (young earth) view; Hugh Ross and Gleason L. Archer defend a day-age (old earth) view; and Lee Irons and Meredith G. Kline argue for the framework hypothesis. Each pair of authors appeals to the church fathers' writings to support their own positions; yet their analysis of the material clearly contradicts their opponents'.

So, who is right? This question was very frustrating for me because there are so few resources available to help resolve it. Feeling deadlocked, I focused on other things until I eventually came across *Creation and the Early Church*, Robert Bradshaw's lucid and well-documented introduction to this difficult topic. What I found so refreshing and educational about Bradshaw's work was that rather than simply cataloging the church fathers according to their interpretations, he analyzed the complex history and undercurrents behind their views. I appreciated his work despite the fact that he wrote from a young-earth view and was refuting old-earth creationists' claims about the church fathers. I also greatly valued his refreshing honesty, such as his

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1. In this work, the term "church fathers" is being defined in a broad sense to include church leaders and influential writers, not just theologians. "Early church" is used here to refer to the period after the Apostles (starting c. AD 90) until the death of Augustine in AD 430.

acknowledging that the early church fathers held to a “diversity of opinion” with respect to Genesis 1–11.<sup>2</sup>

Bradshaw’s study reinvigorated my interest in the patristic view of Genesis. It did much to correct and clarify my thinking, but there was still much more to research. I soon realized that the only way to fully appreciate what these ancient figures taught was to wade through the original writings and study their historical context for myself. Moreover, it soon became clear that I also needed to include early Jewish writings in my study. The church was birthed in a Jewish context, so some of these works helped shape the church fathers’ thinking.

The current scope of my research includes more than thirty early Jewish sources and fifty church fathers and so covers the majority of the relevant extrabiblical writings up to the fifth century. While the bulk of my research is first-hand reading, I do still read whenever possible what young-earth creationist writers have to say to insure that I don’t overlook relevant information and to counter-balance my own old-earth perspective.

### Problems with Old-Earth Use of Early Church Fathers

Mook begins his essay by criticizing those who argue that the early church fathers supported the notion of “deep time” (i.e., an old earth) and other modern theories. He identifies:

1. William G. T. Shedd as claiming that some of the early church fathers taught a day-age view;
2. Henri Blocher as writing that Augustine held to a view similar to the framework hypothesis; and
3. Arthur Custance as claiming that Origen held to the gap theory.<sup>3</sup>

Mook’s rejection of these specific claims as inaccurate is justified. This kind of misuse of the patristic writings to support old-earth creationism is a common complaint echoed by other young-earth creationists, including Bradshaw.

Mook also takes aim at Dr. Hugh Ross’ claims on this subject. Ross’ earliest statements claim that Irenaeus, Origen, Basil, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas taught that the creation days were long periods of time, which Mook rejects as incorrect.<sup>4</sup> In later books, Ross has backed away from many of those claims but still argues that Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and several others taught that the days of creation were 1,000 years each. Mook concludes that while Ross become more nuanced in his claims, he remains substantially wrong.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Robert I. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, last updated January 25, 1999, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Contents.htm>, summary.

3. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” in *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, eds. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 24.

4. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 25–26.

5. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 26.

Unfortunately, few old earth creationists have written about the church fathers and what little they have written is often poor quality (with Stanley Jaki as a notable exception).<sup>6</sup> This scarcity of solid resources is part of what motivated me to research this issue for myself.

Based on my own research, no early church father taught any form of a day-age view or an earth older than 10,000 years. In fact, the first people that I can clearly identify as teaching the old-earth view are Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet in the late seventeenth century. This seems like a fatal blow to old-earth creationism and a strong vindication of Mook's position but closer examination shows otherwise.

## Problems with Young-Earth Use of Early Church Fathers

While Mook has many valid criticisms of old-earth creationists' use of the church fathers, what of his own claims? Do the fathers really support his young-earth view? Does he accurately represent their positions?

Mook does an admirable job of documenting specific claims made by individual fathers (and thus avoiding the trap that many old-earth creationists often fall into), but he fails to look deeper at the underlying factors that helped mold their interpretations. Instead, he presents an extremely one-sided analysis of the biblical and non-biblical factors shaping the fathers' interpretations in order to support his own desired conclusion. Sadly, I have found this to be a very common flaw in the young-earth usage of the patristics (with Bradshaw as a noteworthy exception). Consequently, most attempts to use the church fathers by both old-earth *and* young-earth creationists are seriously flawed, just in different ways.

The simplest and most important example of Mook's poor analysis is that he fails to grapple with the patristic fathers' linguistic dependence. These men were almost entirely dependent upon Greek and Latin translations of the Old Testament rather than the actual Hebrew in which Genesis was written. As Bradshaw documents in detail, none of the church fathers were fluent in Hebrew until Jerome and Theodore of Mopsuestia in the late fourth century.<sup>7</sup> (Prior to that, only Origen and possibly Eusebius in the third century seem to have actually studied Hebrew, but neither was fluent.)

A deficient knowledge of Hebrew is probably the single most important factor leading to a young-earth misunderstanding of Genesis (see [here](#) for previous articles on this issue). This problem has continued to play a significant role even in our own time.

Mook acknowledges that the church fathers were largely ignorant of Hebrew, but he relegates this critical observation to a mere footnote.<sup>8</sup> He does not discuss the implications this ignorance poses for their interpretations. Greek and Latin are very similar to each other but very different from ancient Hebrew. So even a "literal" interpretation based on either of these languages will not necessarily represent a literal understanding of the original Hebrew.

6. Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages*, (London: Thomas More Press, 1992). He covers more than 15. Jewish and Christian writers throughout church history, which is the broadest review of any of my sources. Unfortunately, this great breadth means that he does not have the room to provide the level of detail I need for my study.

7. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 1, table 1.1.

8. James Mook, "The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth," 37-45.

Ironically, Mook does apply this principle selectively to dismiss Augustine's non-calendar-day interpretation on the basis of Augustine's dependence on a Latin translation of Genesis.<sup>9</sup> If Augustine's Latin-based interpretation is suspect, then should not the views of the fathers mentioned by Mook be questioned for their dependence on Greek? This inconsistency undercuts the objectivity of his analysis.

The main interest in the church fathers stems from the assumption that they were closer in language and culture to the Bible's writers. While that is largely true for the New Testament (written in Greek), the early church lacked a clear understanding of Hebrew and the Jewish culture of the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Bradshaw asserts: "Given this evidence, I think it is fair to conclude that at least in its knowledge of Hebrew modern Christian scholarship has the edge over the church of the third and fourth centuries." Unfortunately, this omission is not the only flaw in Mook's analysis.

### The Early Church Divided

It is well-acknowledged that the church fathers were by no means unified on how to understand the creation days. Even Mook recognizes that Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine rejected a calendar-day view, believing instead that everything was created instantly. For completeness, we should include Hilary of Poitiers and the Jewish scholar Philo who believed likewise, even though Mook does not discuss them.

These facts carry two important consequences for Mook's point. First, there was genuine disagreement in the early church over how to best understand the days of creation, with a small but significant number rejecting the idea that they were "ordinary" days. Second, the church allowed for charitable disagreement on this point and did not view it as an issue of orthodoxy. Recognition that Augustine was the single most influential theologian of the early church further challenges Mook's position by demonstrating that opposition to a calendar-day view cannot be dismissed as a mere fringe position.

Mook responds to this challenge by dividing the church fathers into two camps: the "literalists" and the "allegorists." In the former, he includes Lactantius, Victorinus, Ephrem the Syrian, and Basil, all of whom he claims taught a 24-hour days view.<sup>11</sup> In the second camp, he places Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine.<sup>12</sup> (Hilary and Philo, whom I mentioned earlier, also belong to this group.) While Mook lists Ambrose among the allegorists, he is quick to point out that Ambrose largely followed Basil with respect to Genesis 1. So for Mook's purpose's, Ambrose can be treated as being among the literalists.

The implication of all this is that Augustine and company's creation views should be dismissed because—according to Mook—they did not interpret Genesis literally. That would support Mook's conclusion by effectively removing any early church opposition to a calendar-day view.

9. James Mook, "The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth," 38.

10. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 1.

11. James Mook, "The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth," in *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, eds. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 29–32. Mook lists Theophilus, Methodius, Epiphanius of Salamis, and Cyril of Jerusalem as all teaching that the creation days were ordinary days, but did not specify the days as 24-hours long.

12. *Ibid.*, 32–38.

## Allegory vs. Allegorical Interpretation

To understand what is meant by allegorical interpretation, we need to draw a clear distinction between that and plain allegory. Allegory is a figurative or symbolic representation referring to a meaning other than the literal one. Certain passages of Scripture contain allegory, as well as other figures of speech, which can be understood using the normal rules of interpretation. For example, Paul uses an allegory based on Hagar and Sarah (Galatians 4:21–31) to illustrate why the Galatians should not listen to the Judaizers.

Allegorical interpretation, on the other hand, involves looking for a symbolic or figurative meaning *beyond or instead of* the literal/historical one. One extreme example comes from Philo, where he interprets allegorically the cherubim guarding the entrance to Eden (Genesis 3:24) as representing the two hemispheres of heaven (*On the Cherubim* 7–8). The key difference between allegory and allegorical interpretation is that for the former the meaning is found in the text itself while the latter looks beyond the text and relies heavily on the ingenuity of the interpreter.

## Historical Background on Allegorical Interpretation

Allegorical interpretation of Scripture first gained prominence among the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, starting around the second century BC. (Philo of Alexandria, whom I mentioned earlier, is the most prominent example of this group.) Alexandria represented one of the largest Jewish communities living outside of Israel; it was also a major center of Greek learning. The Jews there were caught between engaging the surrounding Greek culture and remaining faithful to their own.

In three different ways allegorical interpretation played an important role in helping the Hellenistic Jews find a balance between these two different worlds. First, it provided a way to apply Scripture passages to the audience's non-Jewish context. Second, it allowed writers to comment on Greek ideas not directly discussed in Scripture. In the example I mentioned earlier, Philo used the cherubim as a springboard to write about the nature of the heavens. Third, some parts of Scripture seemed meaningless or even absurd to a Gentile audience. Allegorizing them would help blunt those objections.

It was in Alexandria that this mode of interpretation eventually crossed over into Christianity. Alexandria was a major intellectual center for early Christendom with an important catechetical school located there and of which both Clement and Origen served as headmasters in their day. Allegorical interpretation served a similar purpose in the early church as it had among the Hellenistic Jews because they too were surrounded by Greco-Roman culture. Even more, the early church—including all of the church fathers—was itself almost entirely non-Jewish with little knowledge of the Hebrew language or Jewish culture.<sup>13</sup> So, the Old Testament as plain Jewish history would have had little meaning to the church fathers or their listeners.

Origen was the leader in popularizing allegorical interpretation. Even more, he codified it in his three-fold method of interpretation (*First Principles* 4.1.11–13). In his system, interpretation occurred on three different levels paralleling the tripartite nature of man (body, soul, and spirit). The first level of interpretation is the “body” representing the plain literal (obvious) meaning;

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13. In contrast, the apostolic church (c. 30–90 AD) had been primarily Jewish in composition and centered in Jerusalem. The change over from Jewish to Gentile adherents occurred very rapidly between about AD 70–150.

followed by the “soul” consisting of moral principles; and lastly the “spirit” representing the deeper meaning that is brought out by allegorical interpretation. When the plain literal (“body”) interpretation seemed absurd, it indicated that the reader needed to look beyond it using allegorical (“spiritual”) interpretation. While this mystical approach may seem extreme or unnecessary, it did serve to apply the text to people’s current situations and concerns. Today, we might call this method “contemporary application.”<sup>14</sup>

The early church saw the entire Old Testament as being about Jesus Christ. Every detail—not just specific prophecies—could be viewed as serving as a type or symbol of Jesus Christ. Along with a variety of other nonliteral devices, allegorical interpretation served as a way to uncover hidden Christological meanings. For example, scriptural references to wood were sometimes seen as prefiguring the cross of Christ. Most of the church fathers (not just the allegorically inclined ones) viewed the Old Testament through a Christological lens. We see this, for example, in Hilary of Poitiers’s *Homilies on the Psalms*, where he views the psalms as primarily being about Jesus Christ and so downplays their original historical context.<sup>15</sup>

Allegorical interpretation went on to dominate the theology of the Middle Ages. It was the Protestant Reformers who ultimately rejected it in favor of a literal (i.e., plain meaning) approach. They likewise specifically rejected Augustine’s instantaneous creation view even though they were deeply indebted to him in most other areas. I wholeheartedly agree with the Reformers on these points. If allegorical interpretation is therefore to be rejected, does this invalidate Augustine’s challenge to the calendar-day interpretation and, therefore, lend credibility to Mook’s thesis that the church fathers were predominantly young-earth creationists? No, it does not.

### Legitimate (non-allegorical) concerns

While we should not follow the specific interpretations of the allegorical fathers, they do provide some valuable insights into Genesis 1 that are worth considering. In particular, they identified at least three scriptural arguments that seem to rule out the idea that the creation days could be ordinary solar days.<sup>16</sup>

1. **Nature of the first three creation days.** If the Sun, Moon, and stars were not created until the fourth creation day (as popularly understood by the church fathers), then what was the nature of the first three creation “days”?<sup>17</sup> How could they be ordinary solar days if the Sun did not yet exist? This question provoked more discussion and disagreement among the early church fathers than any other part of Genesis 1. Philo, Origen, and Augustine saw this as clear proof that at least the first three days could not be ordinary

14. Robert I. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, last updated January 25, 1999, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Contents.htm>, chapter 1. Bradshaw comes from a young-earth perspective but provides a well-documented and balanced look at the early church.

15. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series vol. 9 (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 235.

16. The allegorists were not the only ones to identify these problems. Celsus, a critic of Christianity, made use of these verses to try to discredit Genesis. Origen wrote *Against Celsus* to respond to the skeptic’s claims.

17. This belief that the Sun, Moon, and stars were created for the first time on creation day four is a common error due to a lack of understanding of the original Hebrew. For a detailed explanation, see Rodney Whitefield, “The Fourth ‘Day’ of Genesis,” <http://www.creationingenesis.com/TheFourthCreativeDay.pdf>.

days.<sup>18</sup> (A detailed discussion of the fourth creation day and its implications for the days of creation can be found in chapter 7 of *A Matter of Days* by Hugh Ross.)

2. **Genesis 2:4.** This verse uses the words “in the day” (KJV) to summarize all of the preceding events described in Genesis 1. This usage seems to equate the “six days” of Genesis 1 with a single day, which caused considerable confusion in the early church. One way that some fathers resolved this apparent contradiction was to view the days as being instantaneous periods.<sup>19</sup> Today, we understand “in the day” in this verse to refer to an indeterminate period of time (covering all the events of Genesis 1) and, therefore, longer than 24 hours.
3. **Seventh day is not closed out.** Each of the first six days is closed out with the phrase, “And there was evening, and there was morning—the X-th day” (NIV). This phrase is conspicuously absent from the seventh creation day, which indicates this “day” is still ongoing and so spans a time much longer than an ordinary solar day.<sup>20</sup> Psalm 95:11 and Hebrews 4:1–11 further support the idea that we are still in the seventh day.<sup>21</sup> At a minimum, this contradicts a simple calendar-day view where each day is a natural day.

So what are we to conclude from this? First, the fathers who used allegorical interpretation did have at least three significant scriptural reasons for rejecting a calendar-day interpretation. Second, it was issues like these three that led them to read Genesis allegorically because a calendar-day view seemed impossible to them. Third, recognition that the days of creation need not—or even should not—be understood as simple solar days is a tradition going back as far as Philo in the first century.

## Hermeneutics in the Early Church

Now let’s consider those whom Mook has deemed “literalists,” namely Lactantius, Victorinus, Ephrem the Syrian, and Basil.<sup>22</sup> Mook asserts these four taught that the creation days were normal 24-hour days. So, if these fathers interpreted Genesis “literally,” then does that mean theologians today should interpret it the same way?

Over the last decade, both young-earth and old-earth creationists have written many books and articles purporting to demonstrate how the patristics support their own creation view. Typically, both camps present the ancient leaders’ interpretations as isolated quotes or simplistic caricatures. This tactic makes everything seem so neat and clear. Reading the original writings in their entirety, however, completely shatters overly simplistic understandings of the church fathers. Studying these august figures in their original historical context is critical to piecing together a more complete picture of what they believed and, more importantly, to understanding how they arrived at their conclusions.

18. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretations* 1.2; *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things* 34. Origen, *Against Celsus* 6. 60–61; *First Principles* 4.1.16. Augustine, *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 4.26.43, in *The Patristic Understanding of Genesis*, eds. William A. Dembski, Wayne J. Downs, and Fr. Justin B. A. Frederick (Riesel, TX: Erasmus Press 2008), 428.

19. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretations* 1.8; *Questions and Answers in Genesis* 1.1. Clement of Alexandria *Miscellaneous* 6.16. Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.50, 60. Augustine, *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 4.27.44.

20. Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.59; 6.61. Augustine, *Confessions* 13.51.

21. Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), 81–83.

22. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” in Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, eds., *Coming to Grips with Genesis* (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 29–32.

Having read much of the original writings for myself, I was surprised at how differently the church fathers interpreted the Old Testament compared to how most people would understand it today. Some of the fathers' conclusions seem illogical or even bizarre by modern standards. Robert Bradshaw recognized this as well. In his study of the early church, Bradshaw provides an important discussion of early church hermeneutics and how it differs from today.<sup>23</sup> Though Bradshaw views this subject from a young-earth perspective, he takes a well-balanced approach to the topic of early church hermeneutics. (I'll provide only a limited summary here. See Bradshaw's work for additional information.)

The key reason the church fathers often interpreted Scripture differently than we do today is because they saw the Old Testament as being primarily Christological. According to Gerald Bray, "Christians generally believed that the Old Testament spoke about Jesus Christ, not merely prophetically but in types and allegories which the Spirit revealed to Christians."<sup>24</sup> They employed typology and other nonliteral devices to allow them to see Jesus in these passages and, hence, connect Scripture to their current situation. The literal/historical meaning would correspondingly have been treated as secondary (not surprising since straight Jewish history would have had little meaning to non-Jewish Christians.) All the church fathers interpreted in this fashion, albeit to different degrees.

For example, Justin Martyr saw references to trees or wood in the Old Testament, e. g., the tree of life in Eden (Genesis 2:9), the Oak of Mamre (Genesis 13:18; 14:13), the staffs of Moses and Aaron, and the floating wood of Elisha (2 Kings 6:1-7) as prefiguring the cross of Christ. Origen added several more examples, such as the cedarwood that played a part in the ritual cleansing of lepers (Leviticus 14:1-7) and the wood that made the bitter water sweet (Exodus 15:22-27) to this list and other church fathers provided still more. So, it seems that almost any piece of wood mentioned in the Old Testament could be viewed as prefiguring the cross of Jesus. Water, particularly Noah's flood, was likewise seen as prefiguring baptism.

Numerological association was another commonly used tool in interpretation. A simple example is the popular notion of the "eighth day."<sup>25</sup> Given that creation occurred in seven "days," the eighth was taken as symbolizing the new creation. This idea was established when the fathers saw parallels to Jesus Christ being raised on the eighth day (i. e., the first day of the second week) and even babies being circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12). Even more important, the church fathers viewed the eighth day as marking the beginning of the new creation after seven "days" of one thousand years each. (This eschatological idea was also based on numerical association—see below.)

In some cases, numerological arguments were taken to the extreme. For example, in the apocryphal *Epistle of Barnabas*, Abraham's 318 servants (Genesis 14:14) are interpreted as

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23. Robert I. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, last updated January 25, 1999, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Contents.htm>.

24. Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 50.

25. Ironically, part of the impetus for the "eighth day" is a misreading of the headers of Psalms 6 and 12. The Hebrew reads *sheminith*; the word's meaning is uncertain but most modern translations understand it to be a musical term. The early church fathers, however, followed the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate, which rendered it "on the eighth."

prefiguring the cross of Christ.<sup>26</sup> This is done by first interpreting 318 as 300+10+8. Next, the numbers 10 and 8 are seen as denoting the letters “I” and “H” (the initials for Jesus) and 300 is denoted by “T,” which resembles a cross.<sup>27</sup>

While we may be confused and surprised by these examples of “spiritual” rather than literal interpretation, it did not come from a low view of Scripture. The church fathers held a high view of Scripture—seeing even the most minute details as pointing toward Jesus Christ. We must understand that the plain historical/literal interpretation would have had little meaning to the fathers and their non-Jewish audience. By using non-literal association, they could connect it to their own lives.

So the “literalists” shared the same need for a meaning beyond the simple literal as the allegorists, whom I described last week, did. Most importantly, the literalists often employed nonliteral devices. In fact, the distinction between the literalists and allegorists is, at times, more an issue of degree than kind. Mook’s crisp delineation between the two groups is, therefore, rather misleading. In sum, simply because the literalists did not resort to allegorical interpretation, it does not necessarily follow that they always interpreted Scripture literally.

### Victorinus’ Numerology

Victorinus of Pettau (late third century) is cited by Mook (and many others) as teaching that the creation days were specifically 24-hours long. This is based on the surviving fragment of his treatise, *On the Creation of the World*. Mook supports his conclusion with a short quote from Victorinus’ work, which I will include verbatim to show what details Mook does and does not include.<sup>28</sup>

Even such is the rapidity of that creation; as is contained in the book of Moses, which he wrote about its creation, and which is called Genesis. God produced that entire mass for the adornment of His majesty in six days; on the seventh to which He consecrated it... In the beginning God made the light, and divided it in the exact measure of twelve hours by day and by night...

This passage seems to be one of the strongest declarations in the early church that the days of creation were 24-hour periods—but a full reading paints a different picture. Victorinus’ primary focus is numerical association—not an attempt to correctly interpret Genesis 1. For example, the fourth creation day he associates with the four elements, four seasons, four Gospels, four rivers in Eden (Genesis 2:10-14), four living creatures around God’s throne (Revelation 4:6-9), etc. He makes frequent use of the number seven (the key number in Genesis 1), relating it to at least twenty other occurrences throughout Scripture. Twenty-four also held great significance for him as found in the final paragraph of *On the Creation of the World* (which Mook does not quote).

The day, as I have above related, is divided into two parts by the number twelve—by the twelve hours of day and night... Therefore, doubtless, there are appointed also twelve angels of the day and twelve angels of the night, in accordance, to wit, with the number

26. The *Epistle of Barnabas* was popular in the early church, in part because its author was misidentified as being the biblical Barnabas.

27. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 1.

28. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 29–30.

of hours. For these are the twenty-four witnesses of the days and nights which sit before the throne of God...

We see that Victorinus' emphasis on a day as 24-hours is just a numerological parallel to the 24 elders (or angels) that surround the throne of God (Revelation 4:4). Subdividing a day into exactly two 12-hour periods is likewise driven by numerical symbolism because the actual length of daytime varies considerably with location and season. In no case is Victorinus specifically trying to address the nature of the Genesis days.

Mook's use of Victorinus to support a calendar-day view shows deficient scholarship and selective quoting. Clearly, Victorinus is far from being a literalist (according to how we use that term today). So he actually does more to undercut Mook's 24-hour day interpretation than he does to support it.

### Hippolytus' Chronological Symbolism

Mook lists Hippolytus of Rome (third century) as defending the idea that human history would last exactly 6,000 years. Here, I'll focus on a related point where Hippolytus teaches that Jesus was born in the year 5500 from creation (*Commentary on Daniel*, Fragment 2.4–6). However, Hippolytus did not derive this value from adding up the ages in Scripture (although he may have borrowed that estimate from others who did). Instead, his argument rests on an allegorical interpretation of three different Bible verses.

First, he interprets Revelation 17:10 ("Five [kings] have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come") as referring allegorically to millennia, hence suggesting that Christ lived between the fifth and sixth millennia. Second, he views the sum of the Ark of the Covenant's dimensions (5 1/2 cubits in Exodus 25:10) as marking 5 1/2 millennia to Christ. (The Ark was commonly seen as a Christological symbol.) Third, he interprets the words "now is the sixth hour" (John 19:14), as corresponding to a half day or 500 years (i. e., half of a millennial "day"). In all three cases, Hippolytus' arguments are highly nonliteral.

### "Literal" Hebrew

There is an even broader and more significant problem that applies to all of the church fathers—they did not know Hebrew. This is critical because ancient Hebrew is very different from Greek and Latin. The church fathers were dependent upon Greek and Latin translations, which affected how they interpreted Genesis. So, it is rather misleading to refer to Basil and company as literalists when their interpretation was not, in fact, based on the actual Hebrew. This same problem exists today where commentators rely heavily on English translations.

### Allegorists/Literalists Conclusions

Mook draws a sharp line between the allegorists and literalists among the church fathers. In reality, this distinction is blurry. When it came to the Old Testament, all the early church fathers used an assortment of nonliteral modes of interpretation to varying degrees.<sup>29</sup> In the end, even the so-called literalists weren't always literal and were not following ancient Hebrew. As a

29. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 1.

consequence, we would be better served by reexamining Genesis 1 in its original Hebrew rather than relying on the interpretation of the early church fathers.

The creation week as a pattern for human history is another key example of typological (nonliteral) association that came to dominate the early church's thinking about the age of the earth.

### Patristics Were Young Earth Creationists?

Since the church fathers were clearly divided on the interpretation of the days of creation, Mook shifts his focus to the age of the earth, where he can show that there was widespread agreement among the church fathers that the earth is very young (less than 6,000 years old). Many of the fathers, including allegorical interpreters, taught this specific view. (By my own research, none of the fathers taught an old earth.<sup>30</sup>) Mook concludes, "Allegorical interpreters among the fathers were especially remarkable in resisting the old-earth theories of their day."<sup>31</sup> Mook sees this agreement between the allegorists and those he deems "literalists" as proof that the church was united in rejecting the idea that the earth is billions of years old. Taken together, Mook's evidence seems to lend strong support for viewing the fathers as young-earth creationists.

As if that is not enough, Mook then plays his ultimate trump card: "Another strong proof of the young-earth creationism of the Church fathers is their sex/septa-millennial view that the earth was less than 6,000 years old."<sup>32</sup> This refers to a popular belief among the fathers that Jesus Christ would set up his millennial kingdom on the six thousandth year after creation.<sup>33</sup> Those holding to this framework would have had to believe the world was less than 6,000 years old; hence, Mook's claim that the patristic fathers were young-earth creationists. Surely, this is an open-and-shut case. Or is it?

### Creation-Week Pattern for Human History

What Mook names the sex/septa-millenary construct, I prefer to call the creation-week pattern for human history. This view posits that the creation week of Genesis 1 serves as a template for God's plan for humanity. God created the world in six "days" (regardless of the nature of those "days"), so human history would also span six "days," each 1,000 years long, based on Psalm 90:4 ("...a thousand years in your sight are like a day...").<sup>34</sup> Taken together, all of post-creation

30. Let me offer two minor caveats. First, Origen actually wrote that the "world is not yet ten thousand years old, but very much under that" (*Against Celsus* 1.19) but this statement can be understood as being consistent with a 6,000-year framework. Second, Philo (a Jewish scholar not discussed by Mook) is unique in rejecting attempts to date the origin of the world (*Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.1). While this leaves open the possibility that he would be open to an old-earth, there is no actual evidence to suggest that he actually was. John Millam, "The Genesis Genealogies," *Reasons To Believe*, accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.reasons.org/files/non-staff-papers/The-Genesis-Genealogies.pdf>.

31. James Mook, "The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth," in Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, eds., *Coming to Grips with Genesis* (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 32.

32. *Ibid.*, 39.

33. *Ibid.*, 38–48.

34. Justin Martyr (*Dialog with Trypho*, A Jew 81) and Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 5.23.2) are sometimes mistakenly cited as teaching long creation days on the basis of equating "day" with a thousand years. This is a common error and we see it, for example, in Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004), 43. A day as a thousand years was never applied to the creation days themselves, only to post-creation history.

history would encompass exactly 6,000 years. This would be followed by a seventh millennial “day” (paralleling the Sabbath rest) that the church identified with Christ’s millennial kingdom. After this is the start of the “eighth day,” which marks the inauguration of the new creation.<sup>35</sup> Mook documents that at least eight fathers seem to have taught this millennial framework.<sup>36</sup> Robert Bradshaw, a young-earth creationist, also provides an extensive discussion of this view and includes additional names.<sup>37</sup>

The exact origin of this model is uncertain but it seems to have arisen in Jewish circles perhaps a century or two before Jesus’ time. It’s likely that this model developed, at least partially, out of the apocalyptic ferment of the time. With Israel under the control of the Greeks and later the Romans, apocalyptic literature emphasized God’s sovereign control over all things—including history. Having a clear formula for when God would act on behalf of his people encouraged faithfulness amid such chaotic times.

This particular six-thousand-year framework was popular among Jewish rabbis, who further subdivided it into three 2,000-year periods: the *age of chaos*, the *age of the law*, and the *age of the Messiah*.<sup>38</sup> To put this in context, some early Jewish sources placed creation around 4000 BC.<sup>39</sup> Using that as a start point, the age of the law would have begun with Abraham around 2000 BC and the Messiah would inaugurate the messianic age in the early first century. For the apocalyptic writers of the first and second century BC living under foreign domination, the promise of the Messiah coming soon to rescue them was enormously encouraging. Thus, this framework was popular even though it was not derived from a literal interpretation of Scripture.

Christians later adopted this model. Since the church used the Greek Septuagint instead of the Hebrew text, they generally thought creation occurred around 5600–5500 BC.<sup>39</sup> The church then used the creation week framework to predict Christ’s return on the six thousandth year (rather than his coming on the four thousandth, as the Jewish rabbis had taught). The seventh millennium (paralleling the Sabbath rest) was identified with Jesus’ millennial kingdom. All of this had important eschatological implications because it predicted that the end times would be around the fourth century.

Starting with Eusebius in the fourth century, the date for creation was revised to around 5200 BC, pushing Christ’s return back three hundred years. Apparently, this was done to cool

35. The idea of the “eighth day” seems to be drawn mainly from a misunderstanding of the headers of Psalms 6 and 12. The Hebrew word *sheminith* is likely a musical term but was translated “eighth” in the Greek Septuagint as used by the church fathers. In addition, Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week could also be viewed as an eighth day (i.e., the first day of the second week) and so prefigured the new creation on the eighth day.

36. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 40–48. According to my own study, 11 out of the 50 church fathers and 2 out of the 30 Jewish sources taught this framework. John Millam, “The Genesis Genealogies.”

37. Bradshaw, chapter 3, table 3.2.

38. Bradshaw, chapter 3.

39. There were a number of attempts to date back to creation using the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11. The ages at fatherhood in these genealogies as given in the Greek Septuagint were noticeably older than the actual values given in the Hebrew text. Using the Septuagint, the early church arrived at distinctly different estimates compared to Jews following the Hebrew. In the end, these age estimates are not rigorous and rely on a lot of assumptions, and are, therefore, should not be used in attempts to determine the age of the earth. For complete documentation and analysis, see John Millam, “The Genesis Genealogies.”

eschatological fervor.<sup>40</sup> As time went on, age estimates continued to be adjusted to stay within the six-thousand-year framework. In his own research, Bradshaw writes, “For the purposes of our present study the important point to note is that it was ecclesiastical concern over eschatology rather than arguments that the world was more ancient that caused these changes.”<sup>40</sup>

In the fifth century, Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation restored the ages at fatherhood (in the Genesis genealogies) given in the Hebrew text. So as the Vulgate became accepted, dates for creation subsequently shifted to around 4000 BC. Following the Jewish model, scholars placed Jesus’ first coming around the four thousandth year, but this placed his second coming in what was then the far future (around 2000 AD).

Not surprisingly, the creation-week pattern waned in popularity during the Middle Ages, since it no longer predicted Christ’s return as imminent. Interestingly, James Ussher and John Lightfoot revived this pattern in the mid-seventeenth century by assigning 4004 BC as the date for creation. That date is no accident because it placed Jesus (c. 4 BC) exactly four thousand years after Adam. Its popularity was assured because Christ’s second coming would again be expected to be only a few centuries away.

## Analysis

Much of this discussion may seem to provide Mook with substantial support for his claim that the fathers were young-earth creationists. However, a closer examination reveals a more complex story.

- **Nonliteral origin.** Scripture does not teach the chronological framework or the idea of the world lasting just 6,000 years. Instead, this model is based on typological comparison rather than a literal one. (Ironically, Mook does acknowledge that the creation-week pattern involves “typological interpretation” but does not admit this fact makes the framework nonliteral.)<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the use of Psalm 90:4 to equate a day to a millennium is not hermeneutically justified and is, therefore, not a literal interpretation.<sup>42</sup> While the Bible certainly does teach that Jesus will return, it does not in any way affirm this particular eschatological model.
- **Popular tradition only.** Mook appeals to the fact that this 6,000-year model was widely held (by at least 8 fathers) as strong support for his contention that the fathers were young-earth creationists. But popularity does not determine truth. Many popularly held beliefs are later rejected. For example, many of the early church fathers taught that Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 were written about Satan, but Martin Luther and later theologians correctly pointed out that these passages refer primarily to the kings of Babylon and Tyre.<sup>43</sup>

40. Robert I. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, last updated January 25, 1999, chapter 3, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/Contents.htm>.

41. James Mook, “The Church Fathers on Genesis, the Flood, and the Age of the Earth,” 39.

42. Psalm 90:4 is clearly a simile (a comparison using “like” or “as”) to illustrate that that which we would consider a very long period of time (a thousand years) is to God like a brief period of time (a day or a watch in the night). Nothing in this or any other passage remotely suggests that we can *equate* a solar day to a millennium.

43. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, chapter 8.

- **Emphasis on eschatology.** The creation-week framework set up an absolute timeline for understanding history (past and future). If one was able to date backward to creation, then one could work forward to determine when certain key events would happen. For the church, this meant a way to predict Christ's return, while for the Jews it pointed to the coming of the Messiah. Lactantius—one of the fathers Mook mentions—went so far as to incorporate this idea into his discussion on the end times (*The Divine Institutes* 7.14–25). Historically, we see that both this model and the age estimates were flexed to achieve the desired goal—a sense of immanence for the next step in God's plan.<sup>44</sup>
- **Constrained interpretations of Genesis.** Mook focuses on the fact that even the allegorical interpreters (e. g., Origen and Augustine) taught that the world was young. For him, that suggests that the age of the earth was the pivotal issue. What he misses is that this framework (which is just human tradition) prevented any church father from even considering the earth to be older than 6,000 years. In other words, no one could hold that the creation days were long periods of time or that there might be significant gaps in the Genesis genealogies because that would not fit within this millenary construct and, thus, would be perceived as denying Christ's return.<sup>45</sup> So, for those who rejected a calendar-day interpretation of Genesis 1, there was no room to even consider a position other than instantaneous creation. The patristic fathers' failure to teach an old earth should not be construed to mean this idea is incompatible with Scripture.

## Conclusion

Mook devotes many pages to documenting the creation-week pattern for human history (or sex/septa-millenary construct) and its popularity among the church fathers. For him, it is the crowning argument for his claims of early young-earth creationism. The irony is that while many indeed saw the earth as young, the view was driven primarily by human tradition. It is incorrect, therefore, to conclude that the young-earth view in the early church is grounded on a literal interpretation of Genesis—in fact quite the opposite. As such, the popularity and consistency of young-earth creationism in the early church is almost entirely artificial and so should not be construed as supporting *modern* young-earth creationism. We would be better served by reassessing Genesis 1–11 for ourselves rather than relying on the early church for direction on this issue.

## Was the age of the earth considered vital to Christian orthodoxy in the early church?

While the days of creation, the age of the earth, and the extent of Noah's flood were subjects of popular speculation in the early church, they were never treated as *critical* issues. First of all, not

44. The creation-week framework changed and evolved over time, as has already been described. (1) Jewish rabbis, following the Hebrew values in Genesis 5 and 11, placed the Messiah's coming in the four thousandth year. (2) Early church fathers (first three centuries), following the Septuagint values, held that Jesus would return on the six thousandth year. (3) Church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries suggested a younger age for the earth to postpone expectations of Jesus' return. (4) Later theologians, following the Vulgate (and hence the Hebrew values), restored the idea of the Messiah coming on the four thousandth year and placed his return on the six thousandth.

45. John Millam, "The Genesis Genealogies," *Reasons To Believe*, accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.reasons.org/files/non-staff-papers/The-Genesis-Genealogies.pdf>.

one of these topics was included in any of the early church creeds. In fact, no prominent church doctrinal statement or confessions of faith discussed any of these controversial issues prior to the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup>

Second, not one of these three issues was ever listed as part of the “rule of faith” (Latin *regula fidei*), which was a statement of key doctrine. Third, most of the discussion about the age of the earth and the flood occurred as secondary points or illustrations rather than primary topics. The age question was concerned mainly with apologetics, not a literal reading of Scripture. (To be fair, some important works regarding Genesis have been lost, so my statement only applies to the works that still exist.) Fourth, the church was clearly divided on the nature of the creation days, but those rejecting a calendar-day interpretation were never condemned as heretical.

As a matter of contrast, there was only one doctrine related to creation that was considered essential—creation *ex nihilo* (or “creation out of nothing”). It was explicitly taught by many individuals and included in key creeds and doctrinal statements (as I document here). Creation *ex nihilo* does not in any way require a recent beginning—only that there was a definite beginning to matter in the finite past. So, the early church fathers clearly required a creationist view but not specifically a young-earth view.

### **Did any of the early Jewish or Christian writers teach that the days of creation were long periods of time? Or that the earth was older than 10,000 years?**

To the best of my knowledge, none of the church fathers taught an old earth. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus are sometimes put forward as teaching that the days of creation were a thousand years each and so holding to a type of day-age view. Further investigation, however, shows that the “day as a thousand years” formula was only applied to post-creation history, not the days of creation themselves. Other people have claimed to even find proponents of the framework hypothesis and gap theory among the church fathers but this is not correct and represents poor scholarship. According to my research, the first people to clearly teach that the earth is old were Sir Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet in the late seventeenth century. So, on this point, Mook seems correct (and Bradshaw agrees). Nevertheless, that is only part of the story.

It is incorrect to assume that this absence of an early old-earth interpretation represents a definite rejection of the position as unbiblical. It was not rejected, *per se*, it simply was never considered for the following reasons. First, the fathers’ reliance on Greek and Latin translations of Genesis meant they read Scripture as far more narrow and precise than the text actually is. Second, the creation-week pattern for human history—a popular eschatological tradition—ruled out any possibility of considering a world older than 6,000 years. Taken together, these circumstances show that the early presence of young-earth creationism and the absence of an old-earth view

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46. The closest any important creedal statements come to dealing with the days of creation is one curious statement that God created the world “in the space of six days” found in the Irish Articles (1615) and Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). This phrase only declares the days were real periods of time—not instantaneous—but do not define their duration. It was primarily intended to reject Augustine’s instantaneous creation interpretation. See William S. Barker, “The Westminster Assembly on the Days of Creation: A Reply to David W. Hall,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 62 (2000): 113–20.

resulted from faulty understanding and human tradition rather than a solid interpretation of Genesis.

### Were the church fathers young-earth creationists?

There is evidence that at least 12 fathers believed the earth to be less than 6,000-years old in their own day and so in that limited sense can be considered young-earth creationists.<sup>47</sup> The real question, however, is whether or not this meaningfully supports the claims of Mook and other modern young-earth creationists. The answer to that is a strong “no” for two reasons. The first is that the patristics’ understanding of the age of the earth and the days of creation was driven by a variety of concerns other than Scripture, as I described under the previous question. The second is that modern young-earth creationism is a package that contains a lot more than the simple claims made by the early church fathers. In other words, simply finding a popular belief in a young world among early Christian writers is insufficient to support modern young-earth creationist claims.

To clarify this latter point, it is important to delineate modern young-earth creationism from its ancient counterpart. The most important difference is that the modern variety generally elevates the age of the earth and related issues to the level of Christian orthodoxy—not merely a private interpretation. That is a very marked contrast to the early church. The second distinction is that modern young-earth creationism generally teaches that creature mortality began at the Fall and so was not present in the original creation. In other words, there was no animal death prior to sin being introduced by Adam and Eve.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, this issue is usually treated as essential doctrine. Scripture, however, is silent on this point. So it is not surprising that the early church fathers wrote almost nothing on pre-Fall animal death. They certainly didn’t see it as vital doctrine.

While the church fathers wrote little about animal mortality, they were notably divided on the closely related question of whether Adam and Eve were created mortal or immortal (prior to the Fall). Bradshaw, for example, notes that at least four fathers (namely Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Augustine) taught that the first humans were created mortal.<sup>49</sup> So, while some components of modern young-earth creationism can indeed be traced back to the earliest days of the church, the most critical ones cannot. In fact, modern young-earth creationism really began in the twentieth century and so is, ironically, newer than old-earth creationism, which appeared near the end of the seventeenth century.

### Conclusions

- The early church fathers based their understanding of Genesis on Greek and Latin translations, not the original Hebrew.

47. John Millam, “The Genesis Genealogies,” *Reasons To Believe*, <http://www.reasons.org/files/non-staff-papers/The-Genesis-Genealogies.pdf>.

48. James Stambaugh, “Whence Cometh Death? A Biblical Theology of Physical Death and Natural Evil,” in Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, eds., *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, (Green Forest, AR: Masters Books, 2008), 373–97.

49. Bradshaw, *Creationism and the Early Church*, table 4.2.

- The allegorical interpreters (e. g., Origen and Augustine) did have specific scriptural reasons for rejecting a calendar-day view of Genesis 1. In particular, the creation days could not be solar days if the Sun was not created until the fourth day. Moreover, the seventh creation day is not closed out by the “evening and morning” phrase, so it is considered longer than a 24-hour day.
- Even the so-called “literalist” fathers often relied on nonliteral modes of interpretation in dealing with the Old Testament, such as typology and numerological association.
- The cornerstone of Mook’s proof of young-earth creationism in the early church is a widespread belief among the patristics that human history would last exactly 6,000 years. Ironically, this idea was merely a popular *human* tradition concerned primarily with eschatology—not creation. This model artificially constrained the age of the earth even though the Bible itself does not require it to be so.
- The central issue for the early church was the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, not the days of creation or the age of the earth.