

Fundamentalists often make it a test of Christian orthodoxy to believe that the world was created in six 24-hour days and that no other interpretations of Genesis 1 are possible. They claim that until recently this view of Genesis was the only acceptable one—indeed, the only one there was.

The writings of the Fathers, who were much closer than we are in time and culture to the original audience of Genesis, show that this was not the case. There was wide variation of opinion on how long creation took. Some said only a few days; others argued for a much longer, indefinite period. Those who took the latter view appealed to the fact “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8; cf. Ps. 90:4), that light was created on the first day, but the sun was not created till the fourth day (Gen. 1:3, 16), and that Adam was told he would die the same “day” as he ate of the tree, yet he lived to be 930 years old (Gen. 2:17, 5:5).

Catholics are at liberty to believe that creation took a few days or a much longer period, according to how they see the evidence, and subject to any future judgment of the Church (Pius XII’s 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* 36–37). They need not be hostile to modern cosmology. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “[M]any scientific studies . . . have splendidly enriched our knowledge of the age and dimensions of the cosmos, the development of life forms, and the appearance of man. These studies invite us to even greater admiration for the greatness of the Creator” (CCC 283). Still, science has its limits (CCC 284, 2293–4).

JUSTIN MARTYR

“For as Adam was told that in the day he ate of the tree he would die, we know that he did not complete a thousand years [Gen. 5:5]. We have perceived, moreover, that the expression ‘The day of the Lord is a thousand years’ [Ps. 90:4] is connected with this subject” (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 81 [A.D. 155]).

THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH

“On the fourth day the luminaries came into existence. Since God has foreknowledge, he understood the nonsense of the foolish philosophers who were going to say that the things produced on earth come from the stars, so that they might set God aside. In order therefore that the truth might be demonstrated, plants and seeds came into existence before the stars. For what comes into existence later cannot cause what is prior to it” (*To Autolytus* 2:15 [A.D. 181]).

“All the years from the creation of the world [to Theophilus’ day] amount to a total of 5,698 years and the odd months and days. . . . [I]f even a chronological error has been committed by us, for example, of 50 or 100 or even 200 years, yet [there have] not [been] the thousands and tens of thousands, as Plato and Apollonius and other mendacious authors have hitherto written. And perhaps our knowledge of the whole number of the years is not quite accurate, because the odd months and days are not set down in the sacred books” (ibid., 3:28–29).

IRENÆUS

“And there are some, again, who relegate the death of Adam to the thousandth year; for since ‘a day of the Lord is a thousand years,’ he did not overstep the thousand years, but died within them, thus bearing out the sentence of his sin” (*Against Heresies* 5:23:2 [A.D. 189]).

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

“And how could creation take place in time, seeing time was born along with things which exist? . . . That, then, we may be taught that the world was originated and not suppose that God made it in time, prophecy adds: ‘This is the book of the generation, also of the things in them, when they were created in the day that God made heaven and earth’ [Gen. 2:4]. For the expression ‘when they were cre-

ated’ intimates an indefinite and dateless production. But the expression ‘in the day that God made them,’ that is, in and by which God made ‘all things,’ and ‘without which not even one thing was made,’ points out the activity exerted by the Son” (*Miscellanies* 6:16 [A.D. 208]).

ORIGEN

“For who that has understanding will suppose that the first and second and third day existed without a sun and moon and stars and that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? . . . I do not suppose that anyone doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance and not literally” (*The Fundamental Doctrines* 4:1:16 [A.D. 225]).

“The text said that ‘there was evening and there was morning’; it did not say ‘the first day,’ but said ‘one day.’ It is because there was not yet time before the world existed. But time begins to exist with the following days” (*Homilies on Genesis* [A.D. 234]).

“And since he [the pagan Celsus] makes the statements about the ‘days of creation’ ground of accusation—as if he understood them clearly and correctly, some of which elapsed before the creation of light and heaven, the sun and moon and stars, and some of them after the creation of these we shall only make this observation, that Moses must have forgotten that he had said a little before ‘that in six days the creation of the world had been finished’ and that in consequence of this act of forgetfulness he subjoins to these words the following: ‘This is the book of the creation of man in the day when God made the heaven and the earth [Gen. 2:4]’” (*Against Celsus* 6:51 [A.D. 248]).

“And with regard to the creation of the light upon the first day . . . and of the [great] lights and stars upon the fourth . . . we have treated to the best of our ability in our notes upon Genesis, as well as in the foregoing pages, when we found fault with those

who, taking the words in their apparent signification, said that the time of six days was occupied in the creation of the world” (ibid., 6:60).

“For he [the pagan Celsus] knows nothing of the day of the Sabbath and rest of God, which follows the completion of the world’s creation, and which lasts during the duration of the world, and in which all those will keep the festival with God who have done all their work in their six days” (ibid., 6:61).

CYPRIAN

“The first seven days in the divine arrangement contain seven thousand years” (*Treatises* 11:11 [A.D. 250]).

VICTORINUS

“God produced the entire mass for the adornment of his majesty in six days. On the seventh day, he consecrated it with a blessing” (*On the Creation of the World* [A.D. 280]).

LACTANTIUS

“Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six-thousandth year is not yet complete. . . . Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says, ‘In thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day [Ps. 90:4]’” (*Divine Institutes* 7:14 [A.D. 307]).

BASIL THE GREAT

“‘And there was evening and morning, one day.’ Why did he say ‘one’ and not ‘first’? . . . He said ‘one’ because he was defining the measure of day and night . . . since twenty-four hours fill up the interval of one day” (*The Six Days Work* 1:1–2 [A.D. 370]).

AMBROSE OF MILAN

"Scripture established a law that twenty-four hours, including both day and night, should be given the name of day only, as if one were to say the length of one day is twenty-four hours in extent. . . . The nights in this reckoning are considered to be component parts of the days that are counted. Therefore, just as there is a single revolution of time, so there is but one day. There are many who call even a week one day, because it returns to itself, just as one day does, and one might say seven times revolves back on itself. Hence, Scripture appeals at times of an age of the world" (*Hexaemeron* [A.D. 393]).

AUGUSTINE

"It not infrequently happens that something about the earth, about the sky, about other elements of this world, about the motion and rotation or even the magnitude and distances of the stars, about definite eclipses of the sun and moon, about the passage of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, of fruits, of stones, and of other such things, may be known with the greatest certainty by reasoning or by experience, even by one who is not a Christian. It is too disgraceful and ruinous, though, and greatly to be avoided, that he [the non-Christian] should hear a Christian speaking so idiotically on these matters, and as if in accord with Christian writings, that he might say that he could scarcely keep from laughing when he saw how totally in error they are. In view of this and in keeping it in mind constantly while dealing with the book of Genesis, I have, insofar as I was able, explained in detail and set forth for consideration the meanings of obscure passages, taking care not to affirm rashly some one meaning to the prejudice of another and perhaps better explanation" (*The Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 1:19–20 [A.D. 408]).

"With the scriptures it is a matter of treating about the faith. For that reason, as I have noted repeatedly, if anyone, not understanding the mode of divine eloquence, should find something about these mat-

ters [about the physical universe] in our books, or hear of the same from those books, of such a kind that it seems to be at variance with the perceptions of his own rational faculties, let him believe that these other things are in no way necessary to the admonitions or accounts or predictions of the scriptures. In short, it must be said that our authors knew the truth about the nature of the skies, but it was not the intention of the Spirit of God, who spoke through them, to teach men anything that would not be of use to them for their salvation" (ibid., 2:9).

"Seven days by our reckoning, after the model of the days of creation, make up a week. By the passage of such weeks time rolls on, and in these weeks one day is constituted by the course of the sun from its rising to its setting; but we must bear in mind that these days indeed recall the days of creation, but without in any way being really similar to them" (ibid., 4:27).

"[A]t least we know that it [the Genesis creation day] is different from the ordinary day with which we are familiar" (ibid., 5:2).

"For in these days [of creation] the morning and evening are counted until, on the sixth day, all things which God then made were finished, and on the seventh the rest of God was mysteriously and sublimely signalized. What kind of days these were is extremely difficult or perhaps impossible for us to conceive, and how much more to say!" (*The City of God* 11:6 [A.D. 419]).

"We see that our ordinary days have no evening but by the setting [of the sun] and no morning but by the rising of the sun, but the first three days of all were passed without sun, since it is reported to have been made on the fourth day. And first of all, indeed, light was made by the word of God, and God, we read, separated it from the darkness and called the light 'day' and the darkness 'night'; but what kind of light that was, and by what periodic movement it made evening and morning, is beyond the reach of

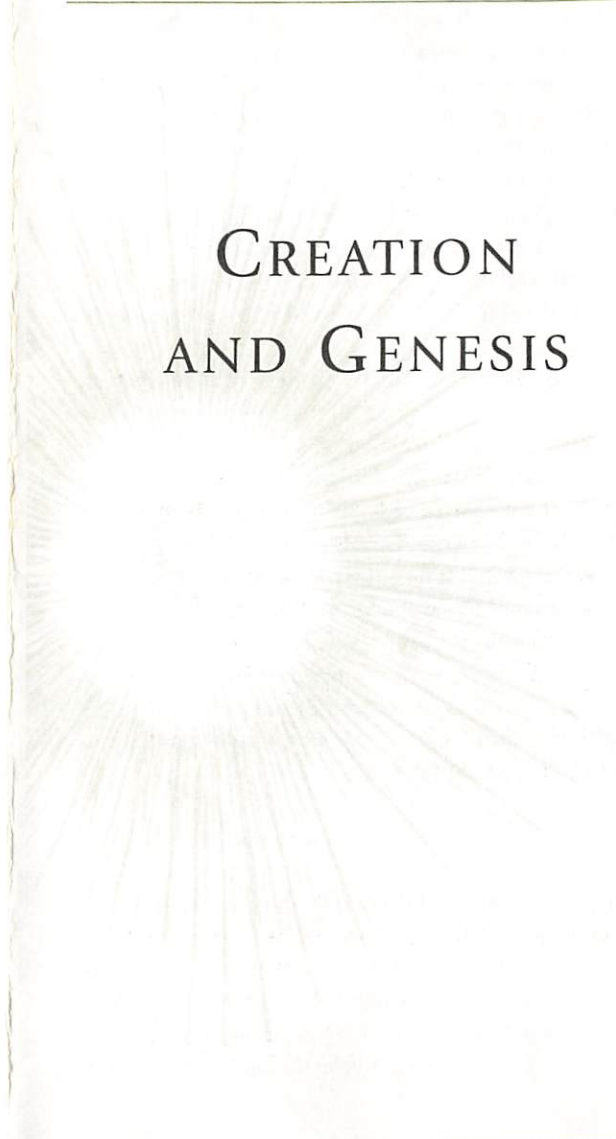
our senses; neither can we understand how it was and yet must unhesitatingly believe it" (ibid., 11:7).

"They [pagans] are deceived, too, by those highly mendacious documents which profess to give the history of [man as] many thousands of years, though reckoning by the sacred writings we find that not 6,000 years have yet passed" (ibid., 12:10).

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