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## Augustine’s Theolog(ies) of Creation: Simultaneous Creation, ‘Seminal Seeds’, and Genesis 1–3

Andrew Brown has rightly noted that Augustine’s *Literal Meaning of Genesis* is the apex of works on Genesis within the Patristic period, holding sway thereafter as well through the medieval and Renaissance periods, from Lombard to Aquinas, from Luther to Calvin, *et cetera*<sup>1</sup>. But is Augustine’s views of creation still relevant today, after the scientific revolution, and especially post-Darwin?<sup>2</sup> Surely, much of his interpretation cannot withstand the onslaught of modernity and its concomitant increase in scientific knowledge. Can it? Perhaps not, but we can still learn from Augustine. It is a modern myth that the scientific revolution alone began—or forced—the church to come up with interpretations that were amenable to the science of their time. Augustine is a prime example of this “wrestling with the Divine”. However, we should not go to Augustine with the hopes of settling the debate on origins and scriptural interpretation. Not simply *should* not, but in fact *cannot*. Augustine erred mightily when he sought to use the bible as a proverbial science textbook. I say this for the following reason: he tried to use Scripture to explain “how” the heavens and the earth were made. “How”, however, is not a theological category, but a scientific one instead. “Why”, on the other hand, would be an apropos question for theology to answer. But this Augustine did not seek. Indeed, he writes, “For now it is our business in the account of Holy Scripture *how* God

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<sup>1</sup> A. Brown, “Augustine’s View of Creation and Its Modern Reception”, in *Augustine and Science*, eds. J. Doody, A. Goldstein, K. Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead once said that Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato; similarly, one might say that Western theology is a series of footnotes to Augustine (cf. D. D. Williams, “The Significance of St. Augustine Today”, in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. R. W. Battenhouse [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 4).

made the universe, not what He might produce in nature or from nature by His miraculous power”<sup>3</sup>.

Augustine’s use of the key terms for hermeneutics and exegesis such as “ad litteram”, “*historia*”, “*similitudo*”, “*allegoria*”, and “*figura*” is at most erratic and inconsistent, which causes immense difficulty in studying his exegesis<sup>4</sup>. Augustine does not offer a consistent definition of literal and figurative interpretation. Also, his view on distinction and relationship between literal and figurative interpretation changes from his earlier to later commentaries. Although we can lift interpretive principles from Augustine’s approach to Scripture, we cannot, however, strike the balance between literality and figurative interpretations based on review of his work(s), for in fact Augustine himself does *not* reach such a balance, though apparently that’s what he sought after (as will become clear later). He is, rather, a walking contradiction at least, and a muddled mess at most, one might say. Indeed, in his first commentary of Gen 1–3, he strikes an allegorical interpretation, and then moves later to a “literal” one. Indeed, in his mature work, written in his mid-fifties, Augustine claims that his interpretation of Genesis 1–3 is “literal”, and not metaphorical, figurative, or allegorical<sup>5</sup>. But then he spiritualizes the meaning of the text? While he admits that the interpretive process of Genesis is fraught with difficulties, he nevertheless takes “stands” on his interpretations. Confused thinking, I assert, is demonstrated by Augustine in his interpretation(s) of Gen 1–3! This paper will make such a statement of my own clearer. Herein, I will stipulate that Augustine’s theology of creation is highly convoluted and even a muddled mess—in fact, impenetrable to the contemporary mind. Indeed, Augustine himself admits as much, later, in his *Retractationes*, stating, “Let those, therefore, who are going to read this book not imitate me where I err, but rather when I progress toward the better. For, perhaps, one who reads my works in the order in which they were written will find out how I progressed while writing”<sup>6</sup>. We would be wise to take heed to his instructions in our own day in stipulating our own theologies, much more in trying to speak of his theology.

Indeed, after recalling what he wrote at the beginning of the second book of Augustine, *A Refutation of the Manichees*, he continues, “Now, however, it has pleased the Lord that after taking a more thorough and considered look at these matters, I should reckon (and not, I think, idly) that I am able to demonstrate how all these things were written straightforwardly in the proper, not the

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, with an Introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 47. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> For Augustine’s usage of these terms, see R. W. Bernard, “*In figura*: Terminology Pertaining to Figurative Exegesis in the Works of Augustine of Hippo” Ph.D. Dissertation (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Young, “The Contemporary Relevance of Augustine’s View of Creation”, in *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et al., 62.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, “The *Retractationes*”, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 60, trans. M. I. Bogan, ed. R. J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 5.

allegorical mode”<sup>7</sup>. Here, Augustine admits that he could not offer a literal interpretation though he wanted to in *De Genesi Contra Manichaeos*. But “Now” he is equipped and able to interpret the text in a proper and literal sense. He views the ability to interpret the creation stories literally as progress. I view it as a backwards movement, in contradistinction to him. Along with McMullin, I contend that Augustine’s *original* interpretation of the Genesis event was indeed the most proper and most accurate one; this other, non-literal, interpretation of the Genesis account was “one that was gradually more or less lost from sight, but one, as it happens, that would have made the appearance of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* seem more culmination, perhaps, than surprise”, McMullin notes<sup>8</sup>. So then, Augustine *was* on the right track. But...

### Brief Overview of Augustine’s Corpus

Augustine’s theologies of creation and the Trinity were significantly influenced by his exegesis of Gen. 1, John 1:1–3, Wisdom of Solomon 11:20<sup>9</sup> and other scriptures, and his ideas resonate with the *hexaemeral* works of Basil and Philo of Alexandria<sup>10</sup>. Augustine’s theology of creation is developed in dialogue with both Manichean and Platonic accounts; indeed, within his theologizing, one finds the shadow of both Manichee and Plato (or, rather, Plotinus’s Neo-Platonic development of Plato’s theses)<sup>11</sup>. Augustine wrote commentaries

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, with introductions, trans. and notes by E. Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City, 2002), 349 (*De Genesi ad litteram*, Bk 8).

<sup>8</sup> E. McMullin, “Darwin and the Other Christian Tradition”, *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 46, no. 2 (2011): 291–92.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Curtis notes that “every reader of medieval Latin texts knows that few Bible phrases were so often quoted and alluded to as the phrase from the Wisdom of Solomon, 11:20” (E. Curtis, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1953), 504).

<sup>10</sup> Y. K. Kim, *Augustine’s Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1–3: From De Genesi Contra Manichaeos to De Genesi ad litteram* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2006), 147.

<sup>11</sup> For this point, see R. Crouse, “*Paucis Mutatis Verbis*: St. Augustine’s Platonism”, in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, eds. R. Dodaro, G. Lawless (London: Routledge, 2002), 37–50; J. J. O’Meara, “Neoplatonism in the Conversion of Augustine”, in *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena*, ed. T. Halton (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 121–31; G. Catapano, “Augustine”, in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. P. Gerson, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2: 552–581. Manichaeism was founded by Mani in the third century and was wide-spread in Augustine’s day, but it was deemed heretical by Christians on varying sides of the fourth century controversies. For this latter point, see: J. J. O’Meara, *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine’s Mind Up to His Conversion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edn. (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2001) 48–49; R. A. Markus, “Life, Culture, and Controversies of Augustine”, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. D. Fitzgerald, 502–503; J. K. Coyle, “Mani, Manicheism”, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. D. Fitzgerald, 520–521. Notably, Coyle says that the mature Augustine viewed Manicheism as “a distortion of Christianity”, but Manichaeans considered themselves Christians. Manichaean theology, which was

on the Genesis creation narratives nearly throughout his life. In fact, according to William A. Christian, few other passages of Scripture intrigued Augustine as much as the first three books of Genesis<sup>12</sup>. His first attempt was a short work wherein he defends Genesis against the Manichees. Indeed, ca. 388 CE, after returning to Africa and before his ordination to the priesthood, he composed *A Refutation of the Manichees*, which was his first Biblical commentary; in this work, Augustine interpreted the creation stories largely in an allegorical manner, “for the weaker brethren and the little ones among us”<sup>13</sup>. Apparently, the “weaker and little ones” were the Manichees, who posited an ultra-strictly literal interpretation of Genesis 1–3<sup>14</sup>. In a reflective moment, Augustine admits about his views he presented earlier in his *A Refutation of the Manichees*, he states:

Now at that time it had not yet dawned on me how everything in them could be taken in its proper literal sense; it seemed to me rather that this was scarcely possible, if at all, and anyhow extremely difficult. So in order not to be held back, I explained with what brevity and clarity I could muster what those things, for which I was not able to find a suitable literal meaning, stood for in a figurative sense. Bearing in mind, however, what I really wanted but could not manage, that everything should first of all be understood in its proper, not its figurative sense<sup>15</sup>.

However, about 5 years later, ca. 393 CE, Augustine did just that in *De Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus*. In this work, Augustine tries to offer a literal interpretation of Genesis 1, not according to its allegorical meaning,

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dualistic, posited the existence of two first principles, and was similar, in ways, to Marcionite and Valentinian views (cf. O’Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 48, 56–57). Notably, Manichaeans could not accept that there is one God who is both good and also the creator of all things, including evil, and hence they posited the existence of a good god and an evil power, with the latter being the source of darkness and evil (Coyle, “Mani, Manicheism”, 521–25). They believed that the good god, or “Father of light”, ruled over the “kingdom of the good”, the other power over the “kingdom of evil”, and these kingdoms were composed of their substances, establishing a dualism between lightness and darkness. Manichaeans thus did not believe in one God who was the sole Creator and first principle and also omnipotent. Their belief that humans were composed, in part, of lightness, the good god’s substance, means that they did not maintain ontological distinctions between God and creation, which runs counter to Augustine’s posit of creation.

<sup>12</sup> W. A. Christian, “The Creation of the World”, in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Battenhouse, 315. Christian further notes that Augustine’s prolific output with regard to the opening chapters of Genesis reflect the fecundity of his mind, an assertion with which I heartily agree (Ibid.).

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, with introductions, trans., and notes by E. Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City, 2002), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, *Augustine’s Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1–3*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, with introductions, translations, and notes by E. Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City, 2002), 349.

but according to its historical signification instead<sup>16</sup>. It is most interesting to realize that Augustine abandoned this work after one book, “under the weight of so heavy a load”, for he seemingly could not—yet—affirm a literal interpretation of Genesis 1–3<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, he stopped this work at Genesis 1:27. Thirdly, Augustine presents a figurative interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis in his last three books (11–13, i.e.) of *The Confessions* (ca. 401 CE), an attempt that combines literal and allegorical interpretations into a seamless argument.

Between 401 and 416 CE, Augustine wrote the completed version of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* in which he interpreted the creation stories, “not according to the allegorical significance, but according to historical events proper”<sup>18</sup>. In this work, Augustine achieves his goal of interpreting the opening chapters of Genesis literally. In fact, according to Edmund Hill, this work is a kind of Augustinian summa on the subject of creation, although Augustine himself noted that this work poses more questions than it answers, and does not solve any questions, *per se*. Further, for whatever answers it gives, not many can be held to be certain<sup>19</sup>. Finally, Augustine turns again to the creation narratives in Books 30–33 of *The City of God*, written ca. 417 CE. Why did Augustine spend so much time on the Genesis creation narratives? Apparently, he viewed the creation narrative to be of primary importance to Christianity. His writings contradict each other, and reflect an ongoing wrestling with the Divine through science, reason, and the text of scripture.

Augustine is convinced that the sacred scripture is written to nourish our souls and that truth is consistent, yet perhaps recondite. In fact, “truth had to be one if it was truth”<sup>20</sup>. Augustine’s interpretative framework, though not his resolution of problems *per se*, provides a useful approach for us today as we seek to meet the challenges of science and faith. Indeed, Augustine interweaves biblical interpretation<sup>21</sup>, an appeal to “right reason”, and a knowledge of contemporary science in his theological reflections concerning creation, which can be summarized as follows:

- God brought everything into being at a specific moment.
- Part of the created order takes the form of embedded causalities which emerge or evolve at a later stage.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, *Augustine’s Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1–3*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, “The Retractions”, trans. M. I. Bogan, ed. R. J. Deferrari, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, “The Retractions”, trans. M. I. Bogan, ed. R. J. Deferrari, 168–69.

<sup>19</sup> S. L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1998), 85.

<sup>20</sup> S. L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> For a hearty examination of Augustine’s approach to these topics, see J. T. Lienhard, “Reading the Bible and Learning to Read: The Influence of Education on St. Augustine’s Exegesis”, *Augustinian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1996): 725. In a related note, “Augustine’s ‘spiritual exegesis’ permits him to take extraordinary liberties with what is often the most obvious meaning of the Scriptural text, something of which he seems at times uncomfortably aware” (R. J. O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968], 156).

- The image of a dormant seed is an appropriate but not exact analogy for these embedded causalities.
- The process of generation of these dormant seeds results in the fixity of biological forms<sup>22</sup>.

### Augustine and *rationes seminales*

In or about the year 400 CE, Augustine described a view of creation in which “seeds of potentiality” were established by God, which then unfolded through time in a virtually incomprehensible set of processes. Of particular interest here, at least interpretatively, is Augustine’s suggestion that God created by potencies (dormant seeds) *and* by process. Augustine’s interpretation of scripture led him to conclude that God created not by producing ready-made plants and animals but by potencies and process. He uses this analogy of seeds, not as literal objects, but as a way to wrestle with “the theologically difficult notion of a hidden force within nature through which latent things are enacted”<sup>23</sup>. The most famous aspect of Augustine’s partial dependence on metaphor, notes Paul Allen in *Augustine and Science*, is his advocacy of a quasi-evolutionary interpretation of the six days of creation<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, derived from his non-literal interpretation of scripture is his idea of the *rationes seminales*, that is, the idea that God made everything in the beginning, but nevertheless allowed all things—especially species, if you will—to develop in their own due time—from “seed”<sup>25</sup>. McMullin summarizes Augustine’s claims, in fact, in this way:

Nature is whole and entire in its own right; the “seeds” of all natural kinds are implanted at the beginning—Augustine argues that the six days of the Genesis

<sup>22</sup> A. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 107.

<sup>23</sup> McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> P. Allen, “Augustine and the Systematic Theology of Origins”. In *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et.al., 13. Caiazza, however, is not comfortable with the assertion that Augustine’s views were in any way a precursor to modern evolutionary theory. Rather, Augustine’s context was theological, not scientific, and his motives were theological (J. Caiazza, “Augustine on Evolution, Time, Memory”, in *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et.al., 115–16). Further, Caiazza notes that due to his heavy dependence on and agreement with Neoplatonist ideas regarding the immutability of forms, a true evolutionary interpretation—with animals and plants truly changing through time perhaps even into other entities—would have never occurred to Augustine (J. Caiazza, “Augustine on Evolution, Time, Memory”, in *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et.al., 120).

<sup>25</sup> Allen, “Augustine and the Systematic Theology of Origins”, 13. Christian would seemingly agree in noting that not all things were created “visibly and actually”, but only “potentially or causally” in these “hidden seeds” (cf. Christian, “The Creation of the World”, in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Battenhouse, 329). It is from these “seeds”, hidden to the naked eye, that the creative activity of God brings forth things from the water according to their own kinds; as such, this creator of seeds is the creator of all things (cf. Ch. J. O’Toole, *The Philosophy of Creation in the Writings of St. Augustine* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1944], 15).

account have to be understood as metaphor—and the corresponding kinds appear when conditions are right. God's purposes are brought about not by intervening (that is by overriding natural causality), but by ensuring that the desired result comes about naturally<sup>26</sup>.

McMullin stipulates, based upon Augustine's theological enterprise, that:

When conflict arises between a literal reading of some Bible text and a truth about the nature of things which has been demonstrated by reliable argument, the Christian must strive to reinterpret the biblical text in a metaphorical way. Since real conflict is impossible between the two sources of truth, revelation and our tested knowledge of the world, the presumption will be that when we are sure of our natural knowledge, the apparent conflicting text of the bible must be read in a way which will eliminate the conflict<sup>27</sup>.

McMullin adds that these seed principles: "function... to explain how one can say *both* that God made all things at the beginning and that the various kinds of things made their appearances only gradually over the course of historic time. And the warrant for it is almost entirely theological"<sup>28</sup>.

These *rationes seminales* resemble "seeds" not because of their form, but because of the potentialities contained within them<sup>29</sup>. As such, *rationes seminales* represent the latent powers of natural development in created things. These "seeds" develop, however, not in a wholly natural manner, but governed by God's providential work instead<sup>30</sup>. The seminal principles, rather, are the cause of the development or growth of a creature and the propagation of creatures and species.

The *rationes seminales* are not simply germ cells or seeds in a literal sense, however, but they are like seeds inasmuch as they "causally explain the positive transformation of things, the actualization of the latent potentialities that exist throughout nature"<sup>31</sup>. They are physical in the sense that they are somehow contained in material things, but they are not understood to be discrete physical units with material forms all their own. Augustine writes, in comparing causal formulae to seeds,

So let us consider the beauty of any kind of tree you like, in its trunk, its branches, its leaves, its fruits. This admirable sight did not of course suddenly spring in-

<sup>26</sup> E. McMullin, "Cosmology and Religion", in *Cosmology: Historical, Literary, Philosophical, Religious and Scientific Perspectives* (New York: Garland, 1993), 587.

<sup>27</sup> E. McMullin, "Introduction", in *Evolution and Creation*, ed. E. McMullin (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>28</sup> McMullin, "Cosmology and Religion", 595.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, *Augustine's Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1-3*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> In this respect, then, they somewhat differ from Plotinus' naturalistic emanation.

<sup>31</sup> J. S. Spiegel, "Augustine, Evolution, and Scientific Methodology", in *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et al., 197-98.

to being in its full stature and glory, but in the order with which we are also familiar. Thus it rose up from its roots, which the first sprig had fixed in the earth, and from there grew all these parts in their distinct forms and shapes. That sprig, furthermore, came from a seed; so it was in the seed that all the rest was originally to be found, not in the mass of full growth, but in the potentiality of its causative virtue... Does anything, after all, sprout or hang from that tree which has not been extracted and brought out from the hidden treasure of that seed?<sup>32</sup>

Causal formulae are similar to seeds in that they contain potentiality within them; however, they are dissimilar in that they do not have bodily forms. This stated, nevertheless, “Seeds do indeed provide some sort of comparison with this, on account of the growths to come that are bound in with them; before all seeds, nonetheless, are those causes”<sup>33</sup>.

James Spiegel points out that Augustine borrows the concept of *rationes seminales* from the Stoics, by way of Plotinus<sup>34</sup>. Augustine’s reasons for this adoption of the terminology from the Stoics was apparently to nuance his interpretation of Gen 1–3. Indeed, he had to proverbially square the biblical datum of creation with certain facts of the physical world as then understood. After all, the creation narrative climaxes with God’s *rest*, not his activity. Are we then to presume that God ends his creative activity? Are things that have been derived from creation since then, *not* themselves, then, God’s creation, because they were not immediately generated by God’s creative activity? For example, if God totally rested his creative activity on the sixth day of creation, is my to-be, but not-yet, born son *not* God’s creation too?

We seem, then, to be forced to either deny the ongoing emergence of new creatures, or deny that God indeed “rested” on the sixth day. Augustine apparently understood the irrationality of such a thought, so his way out of the dilemma was to distinguish between “two moments of creation: one in the original creation when God made all creatures before resting from all His works on the seventh day, and the other in the administration of creatures by which he works even now”<sup>35</sup>. Notably, theologians today also divide the creation(s) of God into two similar categories: “divine creation”, and “divine providence”<sup>36</sup>, thereby affirming that God created things once at the beginning, but also that things which *continue* to be created are also “created by God”. It is in this later case that Augustine’s terminology of the “administration of creatures” applies, and it is thus necessary for him to introduce *rationes seminales* so as to give

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, with introductions, translations, and notes by E. Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City, 2002), 299.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, ed. J. E. Rotelle, 307.

<sup>34</sup> Spiegel, “Augustine, Evolution, and Scientific Methodology”, 195–96.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. J. H. Taylor (New York: Paulist, 1982), 162.

<sup>36</sup> Spiegel, “Augustine, Evolution, and Scientific Methodology”, 197.



God the (proper?) credit also for the creation of things subsequent of the six days in Gen 1–3. Indeed, “According to the division of the works of God described above, some works belonged to the invisible days in which He created all things simultaneously, and others belong to the days in which He daily fashions whatever evolves in the course of time from what” Augustine calls “the ‘primordial wrappers’”<sup>37</sup>.

Augustine develops the *rationes seminales* idea in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, and to a lesser degree in *The Trinity*, and though he mentions it somewhat substantially in these works, the notion is sufficiently vague so as to allow multiple interpretations. It is important to note there is no exact English equivalent with the term *rationes seminales*. Spiegel notes that this phrase is often translated as “seminal reasons”, “causal reasons”, “causal principles”, “causal formulae”, “seminal reasons”, or even “seminal principles”<sup>38</sup>. The term *rationes* itself is a variant of the term *ratio*, which means to reckon or calculate, whereas *seminales* refers directly to seeds or germinal sources<sup>39</sup>. In fact, “seminal principles” is Blowers’ terminology for Augustine’s *rationes seminales*. As Blowers explains these principles, they are about the “propagation” and “historical unfolding” of creatures in “actual creation” (not initial creation)<sup>40</sup>. But I prefer the terminology of “seeds”<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, according to Blowers, Augustine’s discussions of the seminal principles and the capability “to emerge and develop” are “closely associated” with Augustine’s references to Wis. 11.21 and the measure, number, and weight given to creatures by God<sup>42</sup>. So then, the essential idea is that of inherent powers of development with which God endowed creation, so that over the course of time, certain immutable and eternal forms are sequentially and subsequently realized and actualized through natural processes. Augustine explains these *rationes seminales* under several “aspects”:

Under one aspect these things are the Word of God, where they are not made but eternally existing; under another aspect they are in elements of the universe, where all things destined to be were made simultaneously; under another aspect they are in things no longer created simultaneously but rather separately in its

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. Taylor, 183–84.

<sup>38</sup> Spiegel, “Augustine, Evolution, and Scientific Methodology”, 194–196.

<sup>39</sup> Spiegel, “Augustine, Evolution, and Scientific Methodology”, 196.

<sup>40</sup> P. M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2112), 156–159.

<sup>41</sup> I prefer the notion of “seeds” for semantic reasons, mostly. Indeed, the imagery of seeds accurately captures the potency of the “action”, as well as the necessity for some sort of concursus on behalf of the “other”. Seeds themselves may contain within them the “ability” to produce a mighty oak tree, for example, but lest there is a concursus on behalf of nature, the “other”, there will be nothing “grown”. I submit that the same idea applies to the “seeds” of creation, inasmuch as if God did not constantly accompany creation throughout the evolutionary process, the “potential” of these “seeds” would never materialize and become actual.

<sup>42</sup> Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 156.

own due time, made according to their causes which were created simultaneously... under another aspect they are in seeds, in which they are found again as quasi-primordial causes which derive from creatures that have come forth according to the causes which God first stored up in the world<sup>43</sup>.

McGrath describes Augustine's theological movements here as follows: "Augustine's basic argument is that God created the world complete with a series of dormant multiple potencies, which were actualized in the future through divine providence... God must be thought of as creating in that first moment the potencies for all the kinds of living things that would come later, including humanity"<sup>44</sup>. This process of development, Augustine contends, is governed by fundamental laws, which reflect the will of their creator: indeed, "God has established fixed laws governing the production of kinds and qualities of beings, bringing them out of concealment into full view"<sup>45</sup>. Augustine saw three phases of creation: the "unchangeable forms in the Word of God", "seminal seeds" created in the instant of creation, and a later "springing forth" in the course of time.

It is important to point out that Augustine was not a typical anti-Darwinist. He thought, for example, that species were immutable and were not the product of common descent. What is striking about him, however, is his insistence on understanding and incorporating the best available non-theological thinking into our religious views. His thinking changed in some ways in the process, and his writings are somewhat contradictory, confusing, and—dare I say—even confused at points. Over the years he fluctuated between allegorical interpretations and literal views. Apparently he believed, in the end, that God created everything in an instant and that He described it for us as being completed in six normal days for the sake of our comprehension.

### Augustine, Formless Matter, and Simultaneous Creation

According to Rowan Williams in *Augustine Through the Ages*, any contention that God made the world out of preexistent formless matter is inadequate<sup>46</sup>, and "no sense" can be made out of the suggestion—in view of Augustine's writings found in such titles as *The Confessions*, *De fide et symbolo* (2.2), and *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos* (1.55–57)—that God makes "creation" out of preexistent formless matter. When God "creates", he dissipates darkness and inaugurates light, but he does not use an "eternal, uncreated abyss of disor-

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. Taylor, 189.

<sup>44</sup> A. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 102.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. Taylor, 191.

<sup>46</sup> R. Williams, "Creation", in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 251–54.

der”<sup>47</sup>. Instead, the “formlessness” of Gen 1:2 refers not to an imposition of form on shapelessness—for to be entirely and completely without *forma* means to have no existence at all—but instead to the “setting in being of a living system destined to grow toward beauty and order”<sup>48</sup>. Hannah Arendt agrees: “God needs no assistance from anything else in the act of creation as though he were one who did not suffice himself”<sup>49</sup>.

Since “being” is “immutable”, it is simultaneously the ultimate limit of both the farthest removed past and the most distant future. The creator remains forever identically the same, independent of his creation and whatever may happen within it. His eternity is not a different temporal mode, but strictly speaking, no-time. Even his “operations” cannot be temporally understood “in intervals of time”, except that one may say that they are all happening “at the same time (*simul*)”<sup>50</sup>. The universe seen as God’s creation must be understood as containing all things simultaneously, for “God created all things at once”, and they exist in a hidden way just as all those things which in time grow into a tree are invisibly in the very seed and in this sense simultaneous with the whole of creation<sup>51</sup>. Indeed, Augustine takes an unexploited and unexplained idea from Ambrose, and argues that in reality the seven days of creation constitute one day recurring seven times:

The more likely explanation, therefore, is this: these seven days of our time, although all the seven days of creation in name and in numbering, follow one another in succession and mark off the division of time, but those first six days occurred in a form unfamiliar to us as intrinsic principles within the created. Hence evening and morning, light and darkness, that is, day and night, did not produce the changes that they do for us with the motion of the sun. This we are certainly forced to admit with regard to the first three days, which are recorded and numbered before the creation of the heavenly bodies.

Why, then, does the Genesis narrative recount six days of creation and one day of rest?<sup>52</sup> Augustine answers, “The reason is that those who cannot understand the meaning of the text, *He created all things together*, cannot arrive at the meaning of Scripture unless the narrative proceeds slowly step by step”<sup>53</sup>. So then, one may understand that the seven-day scheme in Scripture pertains to the frailty of human understanding, that is, it is an accommodation<sup>54</sup>, and not to

<sup>47</sup> Williams, “Creation”, 251.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Augustine Through the Ages*, 252.

<sup>49</sup> H. Arendt, *Love & Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929), 21.

<sup>50</sup> Arendt, *Love & Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929), 55–56.

<sup>51</sup> Arendt, *Love & Saint Augustine*, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, with introductions, trans., and notes by E. Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City, 2002), 191–92.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, ed. Rotelle, 192.

<sup>54</sup> Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages*, 86.

be taken literally. Indeed, it is the manner in which Scripture speaks “with the limitations of human language in addressing men of limited understanding, while at the same time teaching a lesson to be understood by the reader who is able”<sup>55</sup>. This is an example of the confused thinking that I earlier alluded to with regard to Augustine’s interpretation of Gen 1–3, inasmuch as he here contends that the whole of creation took place in one simultaneous instance, contradicting his own claim to not be specific with regard to his interpretations. In fact, “There can be no mistake that Augustine teaches that God created everything simultaneously in the beginning”<sup>56</sup>. Some things, according to Augustine, were made immediately in full-form, whereas others were made in potential form, inasmuch as the potentiality was only realized with much time passing from the origin of creation.

### Augustinian Views of Creation in *De Genesi ad litteram*

In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine develops the above noted idea in that he uses the terms, alternately, of *rationes causales* and *rationes seminales*. These terms, however, refer to an unfolding of potentiality that was already there—from the beginning. It is not a true “evolution”, i.e. *evolvere* (lit. “unrolling”), *per se*. Indeed, these *rationes* specify the manner in which things—already upon earth—may be acted upon by God. McGrath notes that perhaps the most significant aspect of Augustine’s theology of creation rests upon his usage of the terminology of *rationes seminales* and *rationes causales*<sup>57</sup>. The idea behind Augustine’s postulations of the *rationes* is that God created the world with a series of dormant potencies, which were only actualized in time (i.e. the future) through continued divine providence.

So then, in Augustine’s view within his mature work on the literal interpretation of Genesis, God did not fully create the world with mature plants and animals ready-made, as it were. Augustine flatly rejects such a postulation as being inconsistent with Scripture. Rather, Augustine posits in his mature literal interpretation of Genesis that God created in the primal moments the potencies for all living things that would “evolve” later, including humanity. Augustine illustrates this principle in mentioning the case of a tree growing from a germinal seed:

In the seed, then, there was present invisibly everything that would develop in time into a tree. And we must visualize the world in the same way, when God made all things together, as having all things that were made in it and with it...

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, ed. Rotelle, 196.

<sup>56</sup> D. A. Young, “The Contemporary Relevance of Augustine’s View of Creation”, in *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et al., 65.

<sup>57</sup> McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 101; cf. McMullin, ed. *Evolution and Creation*, 1–58, for a particularly illuminating account of these important Latin terms.

includ[ing] also the beings which the earth produced potentially and causally before they emerged in the course of time<sup>58</sup>.

Notably, Augustine herein does not suggest that these “seeds” are to be understood as physical entities that were embedded within the original creation, unlike how the actual tree seeds lie in the ground. Rather, he seems to have perceived them to be dormant “virtual” potencies, which enabled the world to emerge in its own way and in its own time. These “virtual potencies” were just that: potentialities that could occur, but did not need essentially be evolved. So then, according to the mature Augustine’s *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, God’s creation extends from actualities to potentialities, of which all were “bestowed” into the primal act of creation and origination<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, Augustine writes that “These were made by God in the beginning, when he made the world, and simultaneously created all things, which were to be unfolded in the ages to come. They are perfected... They have, however, just begun, since in them are the seeds, as it were, of the future perfections that would arise from their hidden state, and which would be manifested at the appropriate time”<sup>60</sup>. These processes of development are governed by fundamental laws, for Augustine, which reveal and reflect the will of their creator.

### Augustinian Views of Creation in *The Confessions*

In *The Confessions*, 12.6–13, Augustine interprets the first verse of Genesis to mean that God, in all his majesty and glory, creates by establishing the two extreme cases of creaturely reality. Before God created in the “days” of creation in fact, the Bible tells us that he established the heavens and the earth. So then, independent of temporal succession, apparently, God brings into existence the “heaven of heavens”, which is essentially an “intellectual sphere”, and the earth, which is essentially something approaching pure potentiality or formlessness<sup>61</sup>. For Augustine, an allegorical approach to the seven days of creation is first employed in his early writing, *On Genesis Against the Manicheans*. In this early title, Augustine seeks to bypass Manichean objections to the literal sense of Genesis 1-3, as well as the overtly (overly?) anthropomorphic presentation of God therein. He does this by laying out the seven days of creation as an allegory of the redemptive history of mankind, running from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to David, David to the Exile, and thereafter to the

<sup>58</sup> Augustine, “On the Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 5.23.45.

<sup>59</sup> McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 103.

<sup>60</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 6.11.18.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Augustine Through the Ages*, 253. However, for an excellent brief summary of Augustine’s understanding of unformed matter and for philosophical antecedents, see the valuable comments of Martine Dulaey in *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* 50 (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2004), 50–52.

Advent of Christ<sup>62</sup>. Presumably, Augustine explained the situation in this manner because “words can in no sense express how God made and created heaven and earth and every creature”<sup>63</sup>. This early work shows that Augustine cannot—yet!—concur with a literal interpretation of the text (more on this later). Indeed, “I wanted to see what I could accomplish in the laborious and difficult task of literal interpretation; and I collapsed under the weight of a burden I could not bear. Before completing even one book, I gave up a task that was too much for me”<sup>64</sup>.

Earlier in this work, Augustine deflects the Manichean skepticism about how it is possible to have days “pass” without a veritable sun to mark them (note the sun was created on the third day, according to the Genesis account). Augustine notes, “we are left with the interpretation that in that period of time the divisions between the works were called evening because of the completion of the work that was done, and morning because of the beginning of the work that was to come. Scripture clearly says this after the likeness of human works”<sup>65</sup>. Indeed, for he also writes, “how could there be days before there was time, if time began with the course of lights, which Scripture says were made on the fourth day? Or was this the arrangements set forth according to what human frailty is used to and by the law conveying exalted things to the humble in a humble fashion?”<sup>66</sup> Earlier, in *A Refutation of the Manichees* (ca. 388 CE), Augustine utilizes the seven days as an allegory of the Christian’s spiritual journey, for it unlocks a richness of meaning that transcends the literal narrative<sup>67</sup>. Further, Augustine even employs the imagery of formless matter in this early text. For example, he writes: “So then, the first thing to be made was basic material, unsorted and unformed, out of which all the things would be made which have been sorted out and formed; I think the Greeks call it chaos. This, you see, what we read in another place, as said in praise of God: You have made the world from unformed materials” (i.e., Wis. 11:17)<sup>68</sup>. In this early text, he expounded why the unformed material spoken of in the opening

<sup>62</sup> A. J. Brown, *The Days of Creation: A History of Christian Interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3* (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2014), 46.

<sup>63</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 66.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, from the *Retractationes*, as quoted by J. H. Taylor, “Introduction”, in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman, 1982), 2.

<sup>65</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 69. This statement is akin to a modern interpretation regarding Genesis known as the “Day-Age theory”, but it is not an exact parallel. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Augustine thought such, a millennium before the age of “uniformitarianism” in geology was onset, which means that the laws we can discern today in effect to change the earth, also were in effect in yesteryears (cf. James Hutton and Charles Lyell for this point). Indeed, in uniformitarianism, “the present is the key to the past”. Augustine was, undoubtedly, ahead of his time in this regard (cf. D. Fergusson, *Creation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014], 10).

<sup>66</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *The Days of Creation*, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 47.

verses of Genesis could nevertheless be called “heaven and earth”, by invoking Jesus of Nazareth, noting that the Lord also talks in this way of speaking, when he says: *I will not call you slave any longer, because a slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father* (Jn 15:15)... “not because this had already been done, but because it was most certainly going to be done... So too the material world could be called heaven and earth, from which heaven and earth had not yet been made, but nonetheless was not going to be made from anything else”<sup>69</sup>.

According to McKeough, all creatures were contained potentially in this formless matter; the inherent powers in the formless matter acted under the laws of nature in accordance with the divine command<sup>70</sup>.

### Interpretative Acrobatics Employed by Augustine

In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (ca. 415 CE), Augustine confronts the literal understanding of the Genesis account once more, flirting at first with a plainly literal understanding of creation in six ordinary solar days, considering the first three days of creation in the sun’s absence to be explicable perhaps by means of an intermittent or orbiting light source, much like that which was put forward by his predecessor, Basil<sup>71</sup>. However, he dismisses such, for it is seemingly indefensible, noting: “As for material light, it is not clear by what circular motion or going forth and returning it could have produced the succession of day and night before the making of the heaven called firmament, in which heavenly bodies were made”.

Augustine’s reading of the Latin version of the bible—particularly of Ecclesiasticus 18:1, which reads, “He who remains for eternity created all things at once”, as well as the seemingly “suddenness” of creation in his Latin version of Ps. 32:9—seemingly reinforced Augustine’s instinctive, (Neo-?)Platonist<sup>72</sup> inclination toward understanding the term “day” in Genesis<sup>73</sup>. Indeed, Augustine states further,

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill 46.

<sup>70</sup> M. J. McKeough, *The Meaning of the Rationes Seminales in St. Augustine*. Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America (Washington, DC: 1926), 23.

<sup>71</sup> Notably, Basil held that on the first six days, God did not truly create various beings, but created the power to generate them instead (Kim, *Augustine’s Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1–3*, 146; cf. McKeough, *The Meaning of the Rationes Seminales in St. Augustine*, 22).

<sup>72</sup> Henry Chadwick describes Augustine’s conversion to Christianity as a marriage of Neo-Platonism and Christianity, with the latter transforming elements of the former (H. Chadwick, *Augustine*, ed. K. Thomas [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 25–29). Christian would seemingly agree with Chadwick, noting that there are not “two Augustine’s”, so to speak (i.e. the Neoplatonist and the Christian dogmatist), but only one Augustine instead (cf. Christian, “The Creation of the World”, in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Battenhouse, 323).

<sup>73</sup> Brown, *The Days of Creation*, 47.

In this narrative of creation Holy Scripture has said of the Creator that He completed His works in six days, and elsewhere, without contradicting this, it has been written of the same Creator that He created all things together. It therefore follows that he who created all together also created these six or seven days—or rather the one day, repeated six or seven times... For this Scripture text that narrates the works of God according to the days mentioned above, and that Scripture text that says God created all things together, are both true<sup>74</sup>.

Importantly, it seems as though Augustine “hardened” in his interpretation of Genesis over time. Henry Chadwick would seemingly agree with this point, noting that at first, “Like most ancient writers, Augustine assumes that even matter-of-fact narratives are polyvalent”<sup>75</sup>. However, within the *Literal Meaning of Genesis* text, Augustine notes that the ideal outcome of interpretation is to identify “the meaning intended by the author. But if this is not clear, then at least we should choose an interpretation in keeping with the context of Scripture and in harmony with our faith”<sup>76</sup>. In the conceptual world of Augustine the number six was ideal for expressing the perfection of creation: indeed, “God created all His work in six days because six is a perfect number”<sup>77</sup>. So then, in some sense, Augustine views the narrative in Gen 1–3 as a literary device to portray eternal truths. Even this, however, is a little muddled in Augustine’s works. Indeed, he at once seemingly views the “days of creation” as figurative, but then views the creation of Adam and Eve, and the approximately 6,000-year-old earth as descriptively literal. It is muddled, however. Moreover, at the onset of the *Literal Meaning of Genesis* text, Augustine decides to explain Gen. 1–3 as “a faithful record of what happened”, as well as “according to the plain meaning of the historical facts, not according to future events which they foreshadow”<sup>78</sup>. But how can this be a descriptively literal interpretation—that is, of what really happened, to put words in Augustine’s mouth—if in fact he spiritualizes the meaning of “days” in the text itself?<sup>79</sup> It is a muddled mess. So then, Augustine’s usage of the terminology of “literal” stretches the meaning of the term to where it is unrecognizable, minimizing historical reality. Augustine

<sup>74</sup> Augustine, *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis Against the Manicheans and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, trans. R. J. Teske, Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 4.33.52.

<sup>75</sup> H. Chadwick, “Augustine”, in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. R. J. Coggins, J. L. Holden (London: SCM, 1990), 67.

<sup>76</sup> Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Roland J. Teske, 1.21.41. McGrath agrees, noting, “Augustine understood the term “literal” to mean something like “in the sense intended by the author” (McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 98).

<sup>77</sup> Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. R. J. Teske, 4.7.14. It is interesting to note, in fact, that the number six is the smallest number that is a sum of all its factors (i.e.,  $1+2+3=6$ ).

<sup>78</sup> Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. R. J. Teske, 1.17.34.

<sup>79</sup> For this point of spiritualizing the meaning of the text away, see J. Caiazza, “Augustine on Evolution, Time, Memory”, in *Augustine and Science*, eds. Doody et.al., 119.



says as much, seemingly, noting that “Whoever, then, does not accept the meaning that my limited powers have been able to discover or conjecture but seeks in the enumeration of the days of creation a different meaning, which might not be understood in a prophetic or figurative sense, but literally and more aptly, ... let him search and find a solution with God’s help”<sup>80</sup>. Greene-McCreight, then, rightly refers to the “slippage” in Augustine’s usage of the terminology “literal”<sup>81</sup>.

As we have seen heretofore, Augustine’s use of the key terms for hermeneutics and exegesis such as “ad litteram”, “*historia*”, “*similitudo*”, “*allegoria*”, and “*figura*” is at most erratic and inconsistent, which causes immense difficulty in studying his exegesis<sup>82</sup>. Augustine does not offer a consistent definition of literal and figurative interpretation. Also, his view on distinction and relationship between literal and figurative interpretation changes drastically from his earlier to later commentaries. In *A Refutation of the Manichees*, Augustine does not give a clear explanation of what he does mean by literal interpretation. He seems to have a very strict definition of literal interpretation<sup>83</sup>. He considers a literal interpretation as “tak[ing] everything that is said here absolutely literally”<sup>84</sup>. His understanding of figurative interpretation is quite comprehensive. At first, he seems to regard figurative interpretation as almost synonymous with spiritual interpretation.

Indeed, to interpret the image of God as referring to the internal man where reason and intelligence are found is a spiritual or figurative interpretation, since “in the Catholic school of doctrine the faithful who have a spiritual understanding do not believe that God is circumscribed in a bodily shape”<sup>85</sup>. That is, figurative interpretation includes dealing with spiritual or incorporeal things beyond what the letter sounds like. Figurative interpretation also means to interpret a text as prefiguring something to come. For example, to interpret the seven days of creation as prefiguring the seven ages of human history is a figurative interpretation<sup>86</sup>. Augustine writes, “If, however, no other way is available of reaching an understanding of what is written that is religious and worthy of God, except by supposing that it has all been set before us in a figurative sense and in riddles, we have the authority of the apostles for doing this,

<sup>80</sup> Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. R. J. Teske, 4.28.45.

<sup>81</sup> For the meaning of literal interpretation in *De Genesi ad litteram*, see K. Greene-McCreight, *Ad litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the “Plain Sense” of Genesis 1–3* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 32–49.

<sup>82</sup> For Augustine’s usage of these terms, see R. W. Bernard, “*In figura*: Terminology Pertaining to Figurative Exegesis in the Works of Augustine of Hippo” Ph.D. Dissertation (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985).

<sup>83</sup> See Teske, trans. “Introduction”, *On Genesis*, 17.

<sup>84</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”. In *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 72.

<sup>85</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”. In *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 57.

<sup>86</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”. In *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 62–67.

seeing that they solved so many riddles in the books of the Old Testament in this manner”<sup>87</sup>.

In *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus*, Augustine writes,

So about these words, In the beginning God made heaven and earth, one may inquire whether they are only to taken in an historical sense, or whether they also have some figurative meaning, and how they agree with the gospel, and what the cause is of this book’s beginning in this way. As regards the historical sense, we ask what in the beginning means; that is, whether it is in the beginning of time, or in the beginning, in the very Wisdom of God, because the Son of God actually called himself the beginning<sup>88</sup>.

In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine presents a different view on literal and figurative interpretation. He writes,

So if we take it like this, the making of evening would seem to signify the sin of rational creatures, while the making of morning would mean their restoration. But this is an interpretation on the lines of prophetic allegory, which is not what we have undertaken in this work. We undertook, you see, to talk here about the scriptures according to their proper meaning of what actually happened, not according to their riddling, enigmatic reference to future events<sup>89</sup>.

According to the later Augustine, Genesis is a historical book like 1 and 2 Kings. Thus, to interpret the opening chapters of Genesis in a literal sense is to take the text as history, that is, what actually happened. Stressing the historicity of the account of paradise, he continues,

So then they should pay very close attention to where this assumption of theirs is leading them, and try hard with us to take all these primordial events of the narrative as actually having happened in the way described. Is there anyone, after all, who would not support them as they turned their minds next to working out what lessons these things have for us in their figurative meaning, whether about spiritual natures and experiences or even about events to come in the future?<sup>90</sup>

In this passage, Augustine contends that the literal meaning should be sought first and then the figurative meaning may be drawn. In a similar way, he writes, “What first has to be demonstrated about all the things that are written here is that they actually happened and were actually done, and only after that, if need be, should any lessons be drawn about their further significance”<sup>91</sup>. So then, what he emphasizes is the order of interpretation, that is, literal interpreta-

<sup>87</sup> Augustine, “A Refutation of the Manichees”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 72.

<sup>88</sup> Augustine, “Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 116.

<sup>89</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 183.

<sup>90</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 348.

<sup>91</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 252.

tion first and then figurative interpretation. In these passages, Augustine means by figurative meanings lessons about spiritual nature or events to come in the future.

One may inquire whether they are only to be taken in the historical sense, or whether they also have some figurative meaning, and how they agree with the gospel.

Augustine further notes,

The whole Old Testament Scripture, to those who diligently desire to know it, is handed down with a four-fold sense—historical, aetiological, analogical, allegorical. Don't think me clumsy in using Greek terms, because in the first place these were the terms I was taught, and I do not venture to pass on to you anything else than what I have received. You will notice also that amongst us Latins, there are no words in common use to express these ideas. If I were to attempt a translation of them I might be even clumsier. If I were to use circumlocutions I should be less speedy in my exposition. This only I ask you to believe that, however I stray, I write nothing merely in the interests of a proudly inflated style. In Scripture, according to the historical sense, we are told what has been written or done. Sometimes the historical fact is simply that such and such a thing was written. According to the aetiological sense we are told for what cause something has been done or said. According to the analogical sense we are shown that the Old and New Testaments do not conflict. According to the allegorical sense we are taught that everything in Scripture is not to be taken literally but must be understood figuratively<sup>92</sup>.

### Conclusion

In this essay, we have seen a presentation of Augustine's theolog(ies) of creation through examining his views of "seminal seeds", simultaneous creation, and his interpretive acrobatics with regard to Genesis 1–3. As a concluding thought, I would like to quote Augustine extensively, and note that whereas his initial persuasion on this matter was sound, he nevertheless contradicted it in his own writings, to our corporate detriment. If only he had in truth adhered thoroughly to the comments that follow...

There is knowledge to be had, after all, about the earth, about the sky, about the other elements of this world, about the movements and revolutions or even the magnitude and distances of the constellations, about the predictable eclipses of moon and sun, about the cycles of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, fruits, stones and everything else of this kind. And it frequently happens that even non-Christians will have knowledge of this sort in a way that they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments. Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous, something to be on one's guard against at all costs, that they should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christian literature has

<sup>92</sup> Augustine, "Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis", in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 115.

to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter when they see them to be *toto caelo*, as the saying goes, wide of the mark. And what is so vexing is not that misguided people should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such views and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper basket as so many ignoramuses. Whenever, you see, they catch out some members of the Christian community making mistakes on a subject which they know inside out, and defending their hollow opinions on the authority of our books, on what grounds are they going to trust those books on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, when they suppose they include any number of mistakes and fallacies on matters which they themselves have been able to master either by experiment or by the surest of calculations? It is impossible to say what trouble and grief such rash, self-assured know-all cause the more cautious and experienced brothers and sisters. Whenever they find themselves challenged and taken to task for some shaky and false theory of theirs by people who do not recognize the authority of our books, they try to defend what they have aired with the most frivolous temerity and patent falsehood by bringing forward these same sacred books to justify it. Or they even quote from memory many things said in them which they imagine will provide them with valid evidence, *not understanding either what they are saying, or the matters on which they are asserting themselves* (1 Tim 1:7)<sup>93</sup>.

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## **Augustine’s Theolog(ies) of Creation: Simultaneous Creation, ‘Seminal Seeds’, and Genesis 1–3**

### **Summary**

Are Augustine’s views of creation still relevant today, after the scientific revolution, and especially post-Darwin? Surely, much of his interpretation cannot withstand the onslaught of modernity and its concomitant increase in scientific knowledge. Perhaps not, but we can still learn from Augustine. It is a modern myth that the scientific revolution alone began—or forced—the church to come up with interpretations that were amenable to the science of their time. Augustine is a prime example of this “wrestling with the Divine”. However, we cannot go to Augustine with the hopes of settling the debate on origins and scriptural interpretation. Augustine erred mightily when he sought to use the bible as a proverbial science textbook. In this essay, we will encounter a presentation of Augustine’s theolog(ies) of creation through examining his views of “seminal seeds”, simultaneous creation, and his interpretive acrobatics with regard to Genesis 1–3. Whereas his initial persuasion on this matter was sound, Augustine nevertheless contradicted it in his own writings, to our corporate detriment.

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<sup>93</sup> Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, 186–87.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, literal interpretation, figurative interpretation, historical interpretation, similitude, allegorical interpretation,; theologies of creation, trinity, Genesis.

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