

Creationism & the Early Church:

A Summary

Strangely enough it was Roger Forster and Paul Marston who first interested me in the early church's understanding of Genesis. Their misinterpretation of the church fathers in support of the cause of theistic evolution stirred me into action. So, with the omniscience that comes from a whole year of early church history lectures I started my research. Early drafts of my manuscript clearly indicate my intention - to demonstrate that the early church fathers were forerunners on the modern young earth creationists. As time passed this began to change and I began to gain a greater appreciation for the writings of the fathers' themselves. The final result is not a wholesale endorsement of the young earth creationist position, but I hope, an accurate summary of diversity of opinion that existed during the formative centuries of Christianity.

The early Christians started with the same biblical evidence as we have today. Though it has to be said that their high view of Scripture led them to treat every word in the Bible as a statement about Christ - a practice that led to the virtually universal use of allegory to unlock the deeper meaning of the text. Contrary to popular belief, the early church did not have any great special insight into the cultural background of the Bible. The rift between Church and Synagogue had meant that by the middle of the second century there was little dialogue between Jew and Christian. This had serious implications for the study of the Old Testament in particular as very few of the early fathers knew any Hebrew at all. Instead they relied on the "inspired" Greek translation - the Septuagint. This translation - like all translations - had its limitations and errors. One of the more interesting problems it caused was to change the shape of the ark in the writings of Philo and Origen from an box into a pyramid! Language also divided the church into (Latin) West and (Greek) East, making theological dialogue more difficult and confusing.

It has to be said that the doctrine of creation did not rank high amongst the early church's priorities. When it was freed from the threat of persecution it was the doctrine of the Trinity that went to the top of the agenda. The threat of heresy dictated the theological timetable to a great extent. To this end the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* proved to be a useful way of refuting the teachings of the Gnostics and so it was quickly defined and accepted. The concern for orthodoxy had another consequence that is relevant to our present interest in the church fathers. In the early centuries theologians worked hard to formulate a comprehensive world view based on the revelation that God had provided in the Scriptures. Some of their speculations were later ruled to be outside the bounds of orthodoxy and rightly rejected. Nevertheless it was through these speculations that the boundaries of orthodoxy were defined and in that respect they were positive achievements. Sadly, those early Christians who engaged in such work (especially Origen of Alexandria) were condemned posthumously and as a result few of their works survive. For this reason we lack some of the most valuable works of the early church on the very subject on which we are interested and are limited to gleaning what we can from incidental references in surviving works. As a result anyone interested in the early teaching on Genesis is faced not only with a jigsaw puzzle, but several

puzzles mixed together with many pieces missing. Some of the fathers (notably Augustine) have left us a large amount of surviving works. From these it is possible to reconstruct not only their doctrine of creation, but also trace how this doctrine developed through their lifetime. We must therefore assume that the process of development was also evident in the writers whom we know little about. All this is to for warn the reader of the difficulties involved in such a study. It is not to indicate that such a study is impossible or profitless.

Appeals to Christian tradition have been considered important in settling doctrinal disputes since the early days of the church. While the danger of passing on a mistake was also recognised as a possibility the fact that something had been believed for centuries carried some weight in theological debate. Today appeals are made to the early church in support of everything from deliverance to homosexuality and a number of writers have attempted to find for their own view of Genesis in the early church. Arthur Custance argued that Origen believed in the Gap Theory, William G.T. Shedd that the church fathers accepted the day-age theory, while Charles Hummel cites Augustine as a supporter of the Framework Hypothesis. All of these interpretations are wrong. They all fail because the writers have neglected to get to grips with the theology of the church fathers they are quoting. As a result quotations are taken out of context and are totally misleading. It is only by careful background research can these erroneous theories can be answered.

If the church fathers do not solve the difficulties of Genesis for us they do at least allow us a fresh perspective on the debate. We are not the first to struggle with these texts or to be ridiculed by non-believers for taking them literally or be tempted reinterpret them to make them more acceptable. Their writings illustrate the tension that exists today between those who accept the “literal” meaning and those who prefer a more spiritual or even “scientific” view. Our answers to the questions such as “Where did Cain get his wife?” and “How did Noah get all those animals into the ark?” have already been asked by the generations of Christians that went before us. If they teach us nothing else it is that the solution to these complex questions will not come through a head count from church history but only by letting the text of Genesis speak to us in its own terms.
