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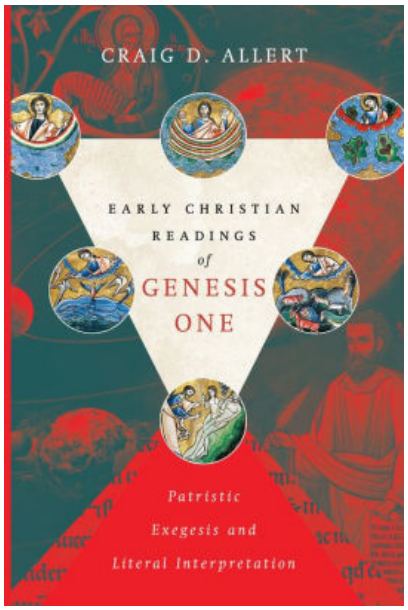

Craig D. Allert

Early Christian Readings of Genesis One: Patristic Exegesis and Literal Interpretation

BioLogos Books on Science and Christianity

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A long-running feature of American Christianity has been polarized disagreement over the nature of human origins, perhaps best popularized in the national imagination by the 1955 film *Inherit the Wind*, which memorialized the debate over evolution and the Bible in the famous Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. Nearly one hundred years after the Scopes trial, the ghosts of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy continue to haunt evangelical Christianity in the United States, with Ken Ham's Creation Museum and Ark Encounter receiving plenty of scientific ridicule (and plenty of tourist dollars) for their modern channeling of the spirit of William Jennings Bryan.

In *Early Christian Readings of Genesis One: Patristic Exegesis and Literal Interpretation*, Craig D. Allert, an associate professor of religious studies at Trinity Western University, enters this debate over creation and evolution from the lens of patristic biblical interpretation. As he states in the book's introduction, he aims "to give a window into the strange new world of the church fathers and how they understood creation themes in Gen 1" in light of how "creation science advocates decontextualize and prooftext the early leaders of the church to show that they read Scripture and understood Gen 1 no differently than they themselves do today" (3). As a patristics scholar and author of a carefully argued monograph on Justin Martyr, Allert is well qualified both to contest these

irresponsible interpretations of the church fathers as well as present a positive analysis of the fathers' readings of Gen 1.

Writing for the "evangelical world" of which he is a part (3), Allert assumes little prior knowledge of the fathers or their importance, and accordingly in the book's first chapter he introduces readers to the fathers and their role in the construction of early Christian theology, with special attention to their efforts in developing the rule of faith and setting the canon of the New Testament. Allert, drawing especially on the work of Christopher Hall and D. H. Williams, is especially eager to combat the so-called fall paradigm and restitutionist views of Christian history, instead calling on his readers to adopt a "reform approach" that takes a more open (albeit still critical) posture toward what all of Christian history has to teach us today (35).

In chapter 2, Allert is particularly concerned with how advocates of creation science have engaged in prooftexting from patristic sources such that the church fathers are "being misused and misappropriated" (93). Allert dissects and rejects the appeal to the fathers made by creation scientists such as Louis Lavallee, Hugh Ross, and James Mook on account of the generalizations, misrepresentations, and faulty assumptions that characterize their writings. Allert heaps particular scorn upon Ken Ham for his utilization of what philosopher James K. A. Smith has called a hermeneutic of "immediacy"; as Allert explains, cleverly turning the tables on Ham, "Taking Ham's advice to clear our minds and volitionally put aside influences is not only impossible, it (perhaps unwittingly) becomes an attempt to overcome our humanity, which actually ends up devaluing God's creation" (76). It is, of course, precisely this use and abuse of the fathers that calls into creation the rest of this work, which seeks to make the case for a more nuanced and responsible reading of the fathers.

Chapter 3 takes up the distinction between "literal" and "allegorical" as precisely one of these areas in which the fathers need to be read in a more nuanced way. Again singling out James Mook for appealing to fathers who ostensibly read the Scriptures in a "literal" way, Allert demonstrates that Mook and other advocates of the grammatical-historical method in fact have more in common with proponents of the historical-critical method insofar as both appeal to authorial intent, whereas the writers of the New Testament and other early Christian literature instead consistently sought a deeper reading of Scripture. Following a brief examination of Paul's use of the Old Testament, Allert draws extensively on the work of Frances Young to introduce relevant aspects of ancient rhetorical training and distinguish Antiochene and Alexandrian forms of mimesis. Allert then transitions to exploring how the conflicting interpretations of Origen and Eustathius on 1 Sam 28 serve as evidence "that the traditional distinction between Antioch and Alexandria along the lines of literal/historical versus allegorical reading cannot be applied here, at least in the

way it has been traditionally understood" (153), insofar as "it was not necessarily allegory that Eustathius objected to but rather the type of allegory that destroyed textual coherence" (157).

Having provided this "necessary foundation" (161), Allert in chapter 4 turns to the specific question of whether Basil of Caesarea was in fact a literalist, as is sometimes claimed by creation scientists. While in the previous chapter Allert already deconstructed the general notion of there having been ancient practitioners of the modern grammatical-historical method, his concern here is to focus specifically on the right interpretation of key passages in Basil's *Hexaemeron* that seem to suggest a reading of Gen 1 in line with that of modern creation scientists. Allert begins by identifying examples of Basil's use of figurative or allegorical interpretation across all of his writings as well as specifically within the *Hexaemeron*. As a result, those passages in the *Hexaemeron* that appear to reject allegory are better understood as an attack on a particular form of allegory that "has no connection with the true spiritual meaning of Scripture," which for Basil is the mystery of Christ (197). Thus when Basil insists on letting Scripture "be understood as it has been written" (*Hex.* 9.1), it "is not a call to attend to a literalistic attachment to the text but rather a call to attend to the purpose of Scripture," here identified as moral exhortation (198). Allert argues that, given the potential attraction of Basil's audience to Manichaean allegorical interpretation of the creation account, Basil strategically decided to limit his own allegorical interpretation of this passage in this particular instance.

The next three chapters examine patristic approaches to some of the major interpretive issues related to the biblical creation account. First, chapter 5 traces the development of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* through a contextual exploration of the writings of Theophilus of Antioch, Ephrem the Syrian, and Basil of Caesarea, concluding that this doctrine "was established in direct opposition to certain philosophical and scientific views that encroached on God's providence, sovereignty, and eternality" (228). Then, in chapter 6 Allert unpacks how these same three early Christian writers interpreted the days of Gen 1, devoting an extended aside to the development of the idea of Sunday as an eighth day of creation that looks backward to the first day when God originally created the heavens and the earth and looks forward from the standpoint of the resurrection of Christ to God's eschatological work of re-creation. Finally, chapter 7 examines Augustine's interpretation of Gen 1, exploring how Augustine's distinction between time and eternity answered critics of the Christian doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* and how his figurative reading of the creation account points readers to the work of the eternal Word of God in creation.

While these three chapters contain carefully argued readings of selected church fathers on these particular subjects, they feel largely disconnected from the rest of the book,

interrupting the flow of its argument. In his overview of the book, Allert posits that this thematic approach will be helpful insofar as "seeing how some fathers approached and discussed issues that have become important in the contemporary creation/evolution debate may allow us to learn from another Christian perspective" (5). That being said, in these chapters Allert does not make explicit reference to the debate over creation and evolution, nor does he synthesize what we are to learn from this other perspective (or, more often, a variety of very distinct patristic perspectives). For instance, Allert abruptly concludes his chapter on "The Days of Genesis" by quoting the end of one of Basil's homilies; even a few pages devoted to summarizing continuities and discontinuities across the three writers examined in the chapter and suggesting what modern Christians could learn from these writers would go a long way toward fulfilling the promise of the introduction. The closest Allert comes to this is when he writes that "Basil does not consider these passages of Scripture [Job 38:6; Ps 74:4 LXX; Ps 23:2 LXX] as scientific (literal) descriptions of the nature and form of the heavens, and bringing this up in his homilies on the six days of creation may serve as an important lesson for us" (246). Allert then transitions right back into his reading of Basil without further exploration of the implications of this claim or justification for why this particular element of patristic interpretation should be adopted by Christians today. This section, therefore, while consisting of clear exegesis of early Christian interpretations of Gen 1, ultimately feels disconnected from the rest of the book, a problem that even a modest amount of reframing and additional synthesis could have corrected.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by returning to Basil of Caesarea. Having established in chapter 4 that Basil cannot be understood as an ancient champion of modern literal interpretation, Allert puts forward Basil's own interpretation of the creation narratives as an example of how the fathers were less concerned with reading Gen 1 for its "literal description of creation" as they were with developing a "deeper reading" that points humans back to their created purpose of seeing and contemplating God (315). In using this text to call his audience to emulate Moses in this way, Basil demonstrates that "the history *behind* the text does not concern Basil, but the *theologia* behind it does" (324); thus the appeal of creation scientists to Basil does the venerable Cappadocian a major injustice. While this insight does begin to take up Allert's promise to help us "reconsider how the biblical creation account can function in the life of a Christian by looking at what Basil emphasizes in his interpretation of the creation of humanity" (6), a more extensive concluding synthesis would have generated, as in the case of the previous set of chapters, a more compelling argument and a more nuanced application to present-day debates over creation and evolution.

In sum, this book does an excellent job of articulating a more responsible means of reading the church fathers and describing some of the most significant early Christian

readings of Gen 1. Allert has a talent for taking the writings of other patristics scholars such as Frances Young and Paul Blowers and making their ideas accessible to a broader audience. Where the book is less successful, though, is in its internal coherence; as detailed above, Allert misses key opportunities to synthesize his presentation of different fathers' approaches to the Genesis creation narratives or to draw connections between the two parts of the book. Even the addition of a true concluding chapter would have gone a long way toward unifying the book's argument. Furthermore, given that fundamentalist creation scientists are something of an easy target for academics, perhaps some of the book could have been better spent interacting with advocates of intelligent design or theistic evolution, as the reader is left wondering if Christians from these perspectives have also conscripted the fathers in defense of their positions, for good or for ill. This omission is even more surprising given that this book is part of the BioLogos Books on Science and Christianity series, which seeks to "present an evolutionary understanding of God's creation," and as such Allert misses an opportunity to bring the fathers in dialogue with alternative attempts at reconciling science and faith. Indeed, while American fundamentalists such as William Jennings Bryan or Ken Ham may make easy targets for informed scholarship, it is ultimately that larger and more mature project of reconciling biblical Christianity with the scientific study of human origins to which this book makes an important, if not fully realized, contribution.