



RETRIEVING
AUGUSTINE'S
DOCTRINE
of CREATION

Ancient Wisdom for
Current Controversy

Gavin
Ortlund

EXCERPT



Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation *Ancient Wisdom for Current Controversy*

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How might premodern exegesis of Genesis inform Christian debates about creation today? Pastor and theologian Gavin Ortlund retrieves Augustine's reading of Genesis 1–3 and considers how his premodern understanding of creation can help Christians today, shedding light on matters such as evolution, animal death, and the historical Adam and Eve.

Augustinian Theology for the Current Creation Debate

How might Augustine's doctrine of creation influence the current creation debate? Here are three possibilities.

First, Augustine helps us wonder at sheer createdness. Creation is not a necessity. It reflects the generosity of God. As Augustine prays, "You created, not because you had need, but out of the abundance of your own goodness." Related to this, creation is, for Augustine, an emotional doctrine. He engages it at a deeply existential level. Specifically, he holds that the human soul was made for God, and thus every facet of human existence is dynamically oriented toward God. At every moment and in all that we do, we are constantly upheld by God, relating to God, and in need of God. He is the constant fact with which all existence has to do. Life and happiness are fully and only from him. As Augustine writes, "Even when all is well with me, what am I but a creature suckled on your milk and feeding on yourself, the food that never perishes?"

Augustine's vision of creaturely dependence on God extends not only to the human soul but to the entire created universe. The whole world is reverberating with imperfection, longing to share with the angels in divine immutability—like a piece of pottery that has been constructed but has not yet gone through the firing and glazing stages. It awaits its final confirmation in God. Augustine may as well have prayed, "You have made all creation for yourself, and it will find no rest until it rests in you." This is why the Confessions ends with Genesis 1, and why Genesis 1:1-2 sets Augustine's heart throbbing.

Augustine's reminder of the miracle of creatureliness makes it more difficult to take this doctrine for granted, or to put all our focus on simply how it happened. Creation is not a speculative topic but vitally concerns human happiness. Even secular people involved in the conversation may be intrigued by Augustine's insights into the craving of the human heart.

Second, Augustine's humility concerning the doctrine of creation encourages irenicism, particularly in the relation of theology and (what we would call) science. Now, this is not to say that Augustine is unwilling to debate about creation. He is deeply concerned to affirm the goodness of creation, for example, in response to Manichaean errors. We feel from Augustine the importance of creation and its foundational significance for the doctrines of sin and redemption. He is always willing to reject overreaching claims from philosophers, particularly when they threaten orthodoxy.

At the same time, within the rule of faith, Augustine is remarkably circumspect. His great concern is to avoid rashness (*temeritas*). He has enormous respect for the work of philosophers and medici, and is horrified at anti-intellectual dismissals of genuine discovery. He insists on the complete trustworthiness of Scripture, but remains keenly alert to his fallibility as an interpreter. He works hard to harmonize biblical texts with each other and with other fields of knowledge. He often functions with approximate or provisional views. He is willing to reconsider his claims.



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Augustine's presence in the current creation debate would encourage a more complicated view of the relation of Scripture and science, and more care in relating them. I can well imagine Augustine at the table, holding up his hands in protest, urging caution, listening, and patience—or, to use his terms, calling for less "obstinate wrangling" and more "diligent seeking, humble asking, persistent knocking."

In both of these first two points—Augustine's expansive vision of creation and his humble method of engaging it—he may remind us that the most important aspects of the doctrine of creation are not those typically disputed among Christians, but those held in common (such as creation ex nihilo). To put it colloquially, he might help us major on the majors, and minor on the minors.

Third, Augustine helps us to appreciate the complexity of interpreting Genesis 1. Having felt Augustine's anxiety over this passage, and having traced the development of his views throughout his five commentaries, it will be more difficult to rebuke all those who can't see its obvious "plain meaning." Augustine may prompt us to deeper hermeneutical considerations when he suggests that the days function as an act of divine accommodation, "as a help to human frailty . . . to suggest sublime things to lowly people in a lowly manner by following the basic rule of story-telling." He will certainly complicate our terminology, since he regards a "literal" interpretation of Genesis 1 as concerning historical referentiality without excluding allegorical meaning or various kinds of figurative language. Some of his views on Genesis 1 may prompt quizzical looks, like his claim that the ordering of events is according to angelic knowledge. Yet the influence of Augustine's exegesis of Genesis 1, particularly through the medieval era, discourages us from simply writing him off as an eccentric. Recall that Andrew Brown calls Augustine's interpretation "the defining statement with which every medieval and Renaissance commentator on Gen. 1:1–2:3 would wrestle."

In the current creation debate, the vigor of Augustine's rejection of twenty-four-hour days will certainly be felt. For Augustine, "it can scarcely be supposed" that light turned on and off on days one to three before the creation of the sun; it is "beyond a shadow of doubt" and "limpidly clear" that Genesis 2:4-6 confirm non-ordinary days; it is "the height of folly" to read day seven in a literalistic way. If all this fails to convince, there remains the challenge of squeezing the events of day five into twenty-four hours: "Here, surely, anyone slow on the uptake should finally wake up to understanding what sort of days are being counted here."

The force of these rebukes is partially explained by the fact that Augustine associates literalism with the Manichaeans. Yet his views still undermine the claim that all rejection of twenty-four-hour days in Genesis 1 is motivated by scientific discovery. If we appeal to twenty-four-hour days as the "plain reading," we must reckon with the towering fact that the greatest theologian of the early church found the opposing view equally "plain." This would seem, at the very least, to encourage more space for legitimate disagreement concerning the interpretation of Genesis 1.

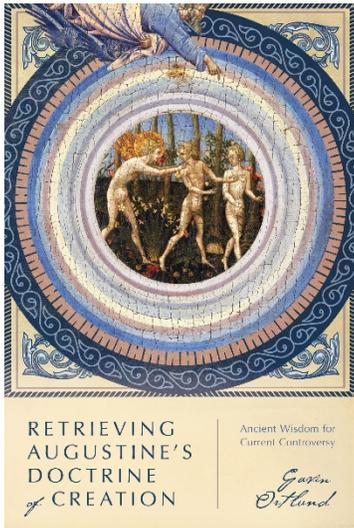
—Adapted from the conclusion, "Recapping Augustine's Influence on the Creation Debate"



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Gavin Ortlund (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is senior pastor at First Baptist Church of Ojai in Ojai, California. He was previously a research fellow for the Creation Project at the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the author of *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals*, and *Anselm's Pursuit of Joy*.

The Relevance of Augustine's Hermeneutic for Today

"Like almost all the church fathers, Augustine was fixated on Genesis 1–3, which he rightly saw as the key to the Christian worldview. Dr. Ortlund takes us back to the man and his beliefs, at once so distant from and yet so near to our own concerns. Modern readers will be challenged by Augustine's insights, and by entering into dialogue with him, they may find answers to the dilemmas they confront. An exciting book on a key topic for our times."

—**Gerald Bray**, research professor of divinity, Beeson Divinity School at Samford University

"We need pastors like Gavin Ortlund, and we need books written by pastors like Gavin Ortlund! His opening chapter on humility sets the stage for a book that is contextually responsible, academically sound, and pastorally motivated. I highly recommend this book as a rewarding and promising retrieval of Augustine's doctrine of creation for the good of the church."

—**Craig D. Allert**, professor of religious studies, Trinity Western University

"As debates about creation, evolution, and the historical Adam come to a crucial new juncture among evangelicals today, I can hardly imagine a better discussion partner from the church's tradition than Augustine, with his unwavering commitment to the truth of Scripture, his fearless willingness to pursue difficult questions, and his humble refusal to give rash and hasty answers. Gavin Ortlund gives us a well-rounded account of what Augustine's exegesis of Genesis brings to the table."

—**Phillip Cary**, professor of philosophy at Eastern University

"This remarkable book offers a finely textured yet accessible interpretation of Augustine's views on creation, at the same time relating his thought to contemporary issues in a way that is creative, responsible, and compelling. I commend this book with enthusiasm to any Christian in search of insight into debates about creation and science, to both scholars and students interested in Augustine's thinking on creation, and to all those who seek a first-rate model of humble, rigorous, and faithful theological scholarship for the sake of the church."

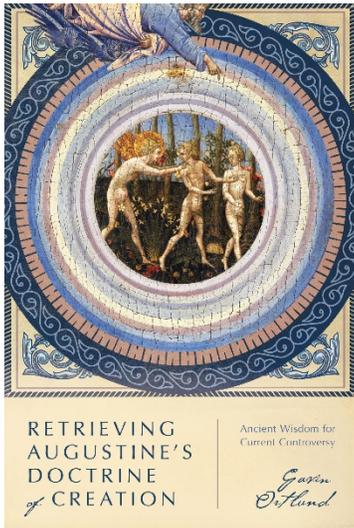
—**Han-luen Kantzer Komline**, Western Theological Seminary



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"What can the ancient bishop Augustine of Hippo contribute to contemporary debates regarding creation, the age of the earth, and evolution? A lot, as it turns out. Readers will find Gavin Ortlund's masterful study of Augustine's doctrine of creation to be a smart, humble, and immensely helpful exercise of theological reflection on a most vexing question."

—**Scott Manetsch**, editor of the *Reformation and the Irrepressible Word of God*, professor of church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"What do we who live in the post-industrial revolution twenty-first century have to learn about creation from a fifth-century North African bishop? As it turns out, quite a lot. First and foremost, Augustine helps us learn how to think, not only what to think. In *Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation*, Gavin Ortlund invites us into a conversation with one of the greatest minds of late antiquity to explore together the fundamental distinction between 'nature' and 'creation'; the former being the idolatrous attempt to perceive our reality as independent, while the latter restoring what Ortlund terms 'a holistic framework for how to live as God's creatures in God's world.' This is a book that needs to be read slowly, for neither the topic nor the transformative effect can be rushed. And there is no better interlocutor than Augustine to help us move from our autonomous, self-referential idolatry to the Creator of all, whose image we bear. Ortlund has done us a great favor. Tolle, lege!"

—**George Kalantzis**, professor of theology and director of the Wheaton Center for Early Christian Studies

"People from all sides of the church's discussion on origins have cherry-picked quotations from Augustine to bolster their views, without digging in to his actual doctrine of creation. In so doing, we attempt to cast Augustine in our own image. Ortlund has done us all a service by presenting a much more comprehensive understanding of Augustine's thought on creation and retrieving his voice from across the centuries. I predict that Ortlund's treatment of Augustine will also be disappointing to different kinds of people—those looking to him merely to prop up their own theories. He gives us a more complex, sophisticated, and surprising Augustine—one that makes me want to read more Augustine . . . and more from Ortlund."

—**J. B. Stump**, vice president of BioLogos

"Gavin Ortlund's careful interpretive and critical reading of Augustine concerning Genesis and in particular human origins is a remarkably relevant contribution to the current, heated debate concerning the historical Adam. Contemporary investigators will find illuminating and thought-provoking insights in this important study."

—**William Lane Craig**, research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology and Houston Baptist University



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