

# Confessing with St Augustine

The Literal Commentary on Genesis

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# Cosmology and Creation in the Ancient World

- Religion orients people in the world by teaching about the *end* (*telos*) or *purpose* of life.
- But to say something about what life is *for* is to say something about what it *is* and *why* it is.
- For that reason, religion and cosmology has always existed together because cosmology is the field of philosophy interested in the order and origins of the universe.



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# Genesis — Covenant Beginnings

- Genesis is a text about the God who covenants with Israel.
- A was driven to this text in order to address the dualism which he had inherited from his time as a Manichee.
- It was something to which he would return again in his Anti-Pelagian writings, in order to demonstrate the dependence of the creature upon God.
- A's platonic influences would also have understood nature as sign for the contemplation of the divine mind.

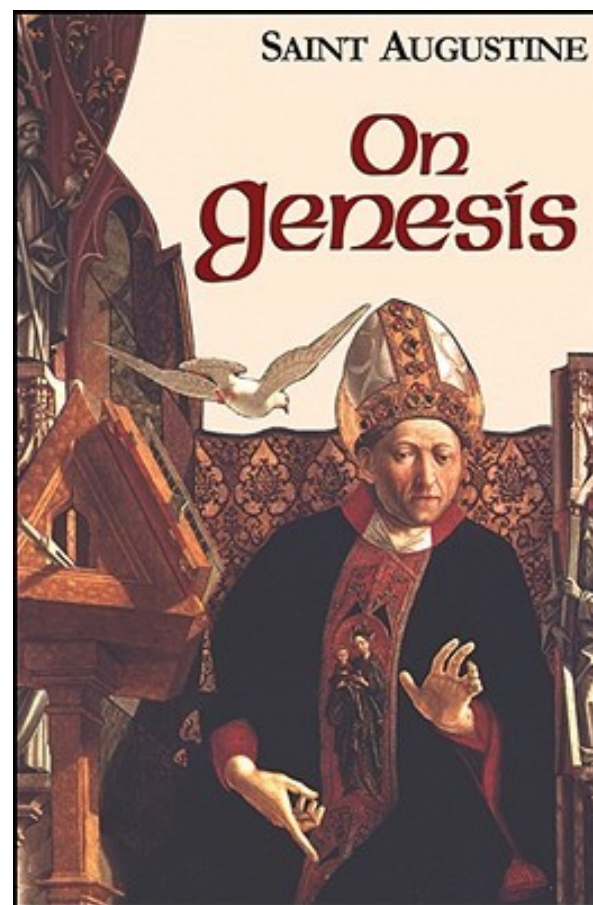


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# Writing (and re-writing) the Genesis Commentary

- *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* (388-389)
- *De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus* (393)
- Books XI-XIII of *Confessiones* (397-401)
- *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-414).

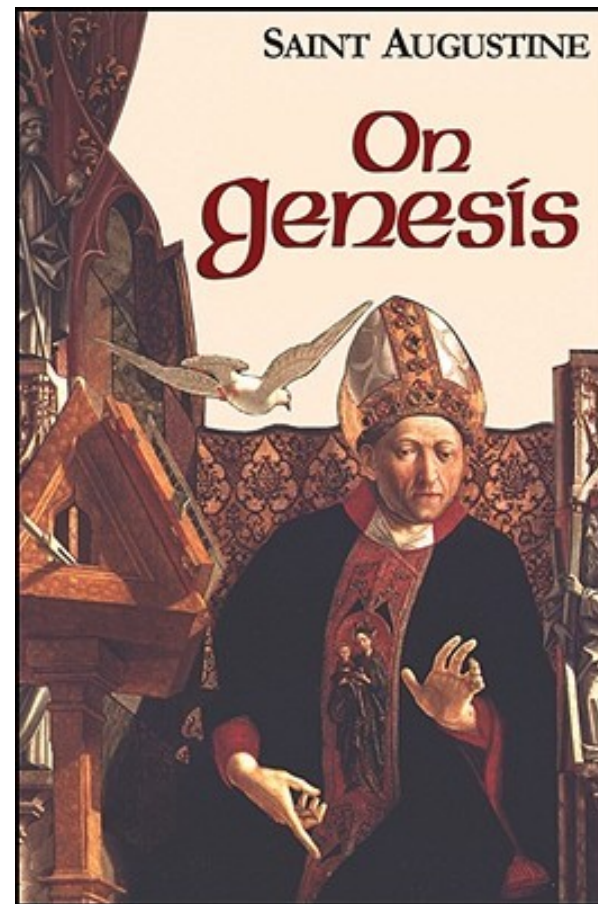


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# The Genre and Sources of the Genesis Commentary

- A “Hexameral” Treatise — writings on the six (*hex*) days (*hēmera*) of creation.
- Philo of Alexandria
- Origen, *De Principiis*
- Basil of Caesarea, *Homilies on the Hexaemeron*
- Ambrose: sermons on the Hexaemeron during Holy Week, 386 (Hill, p. 26).

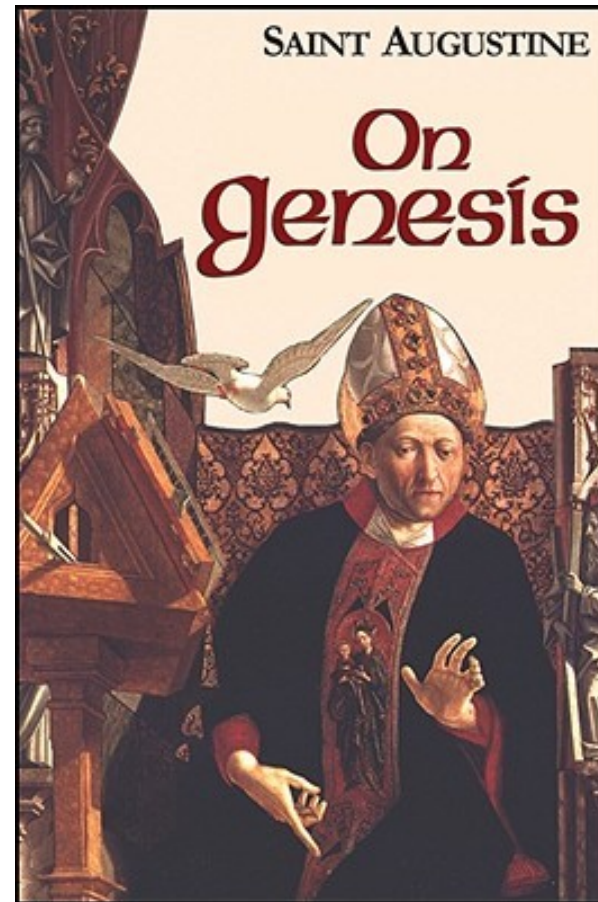


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# *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* (388-389)

- Follows a catechetical form, offering topics and answers adapted to addressing the dualism of Manichaean teachings.
- 7 days as epochs and stages of the spiritual development of humankind (I.23.35-24.41)
  - 1) Creation of light: Infancy (Adam to Noah)
  - 2) Separating water above from below: Childhood (Noah to Abraham)
  - 3) Separating water and dry land: Adolescence (Abraham to David)
  - 4) Creation of the Sun & Moon: Youth (David Line)

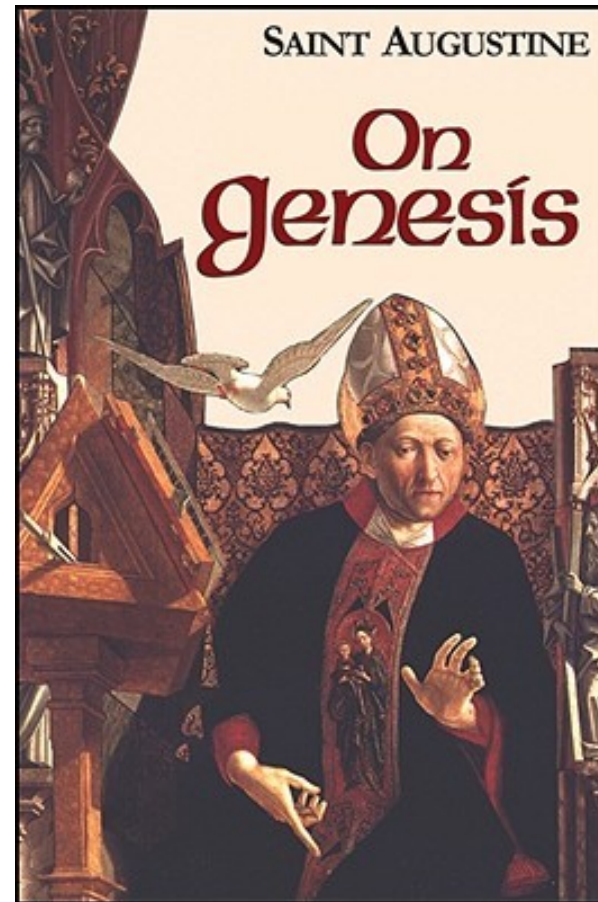


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# *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* (388-389)

- 7 days cont. . . .
  - 5) Creation of fish, birds, animals:  
Adulthood (Exile)
  - 6) Creation of humans in the image of  
God: old age (Christ & the Church)
  - 7) God's rest: Eternity.
- Heretics, “especially the Manichees”  
depicted as the serpent (II.25.38)!
- “It had not yet dawn on me how  
everything in them [passages of Genesis]  
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” (Lit. Comm. on Gen., 8.2.5).

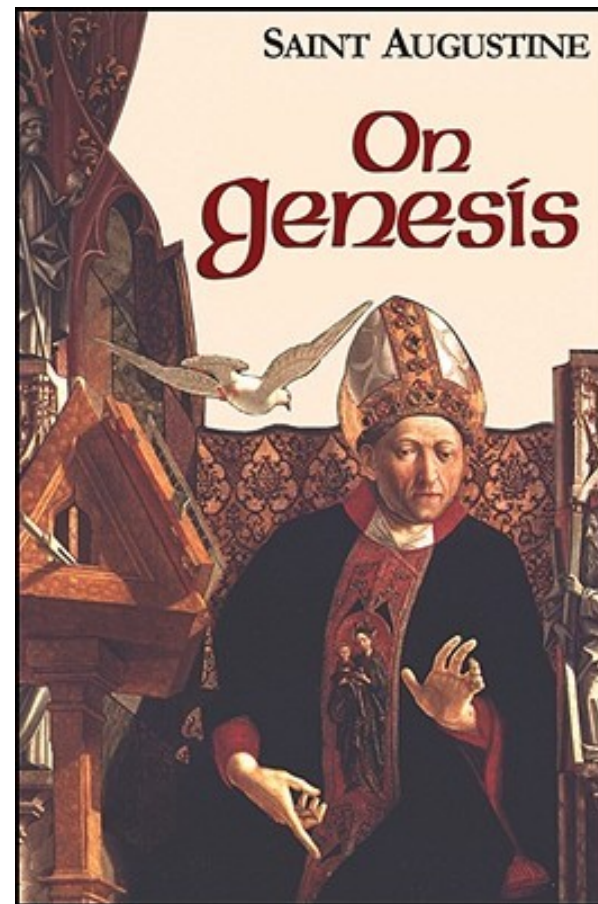


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## The Structure of *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-414)

- Books I-V — Creation narratives (Genesis 1:1-2:6).
- Books VI-XI — The Creation and Fall of Humankind (Genesis 2:7-3:24)
- Book XII — Paradise and Heaven

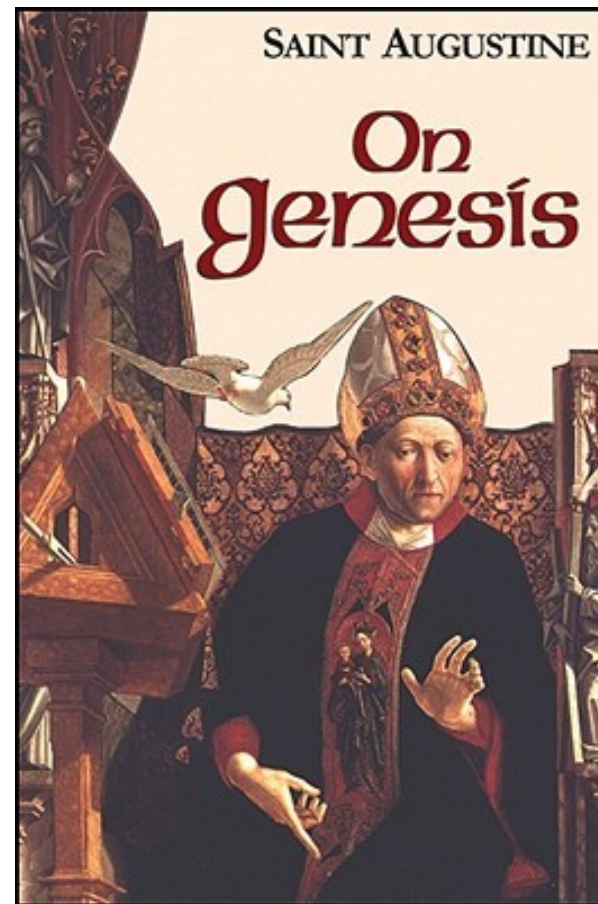


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# Biblical Commentary & the “Literal” Sense

- Modern Biblical Studies analyses biblical literatures as cultural artefacts. It understands the text in relation to the intention of the human author, and the cultures in which it was written/received.
- For A, Scripture is *divine teaching*: a book ultimately inspired by God, so that each word is “sign” selected to convey some divine truth.
- The “literal” meaning of Scripture may therefore exceed the intention of the human author. It is the intention of the *divine* author that is crucial.

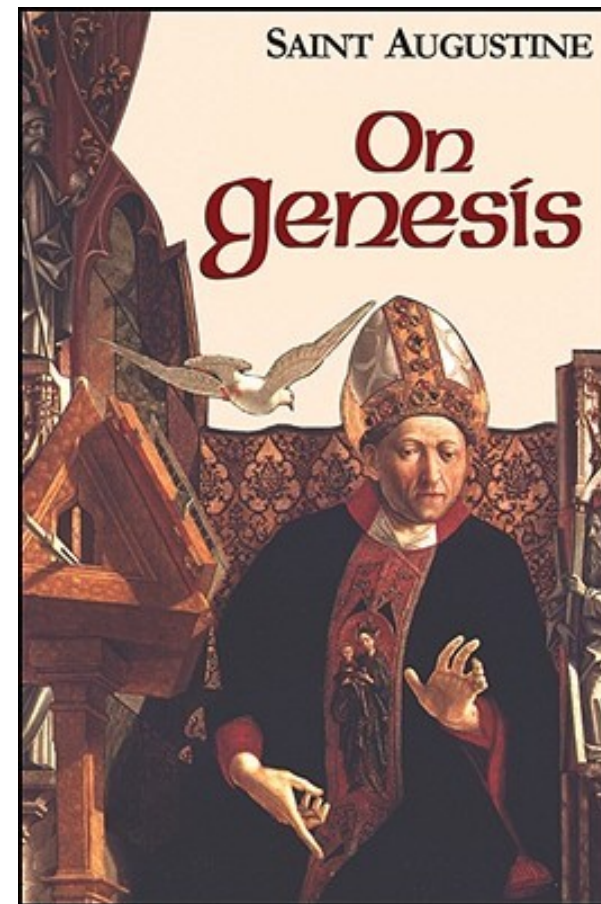


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# Biblical Commentary & the “Literal” Sense

- A’s interpretation of Genesis does not focus on comparing the Biblical literature to other Ancient creation myths, or the interests shaping the text’s production.
- A’s priority is to show the coherence of this text with and its significance for Christian faith.
- “The struggle to understand could not and ought not stop at an understanding of the text of Genesis but had to go beyond the text in order to grasp . . . the reality and truth of which the words of the Bible were speaking” (Hill, p. 16).
- That means A sometimes regards the “literal” meaning as being very figurative. He takes the “light” on the 1st day to refer to the knowledge of God shared by the angels.



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# Biblical Commentary & the “Literal” Sense

- The purpose of Scripture is to provide instruction in faith so that we might live lives of love.
- A’s rule of interpreting the Bible is that the interpretation that most inspires love is to be preferred:
- “Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them” (*De Doctrina*, I.xxxvi.41).
- Interpreting Scripture is not merely a rational, but a moral and spiritual exercise.



Saint Augustine  
On Christian Teaching

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# The Meaning of Nature: A Life-Long Question for Augustine

- In his *Soliloquies*, A wants “to know nothing but God and the soul”. But “creation by its very nature involved relations”, so knowledge of self requires knowledge of God’s creative work (Hill, p. 21).
- The Literal Commentary is thus both historical & metaphysical. But unlike the later Middle Ages which treats Genesis as a textbook on natural philosophy, A is a bit wary of such speculation.
- His interest is really only the relation between created realities and God.



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# The Creative Act as a Gift of Life

- A argues that it would be unfitting of God's perfection for creation to be an extended act. God is all-powerful and so created instantaneously by imbuing creatures with their potentialities (*rations seminales*) which develop over time.
- 7 days is a pedagogical device, offering a guided tour to God's works, illustrating the dependence of created realities in their "measure, weight, and number" (Wis. 11:20), as being dependent upon God.
- The emphasis here is on God as the *origin* and *source* of Creation. This allows A to undermine Manichaeian dualism.



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# The Creative Act as a Gift of Life

- God alone is eternal. Nature must therefore have a “beginning”. A argues that God’s work of *creatio ex nihilo* should be understood as the basis and foundation of time.
- There is no material cause of creation. It exists only by God’s power.
- As God is the principle of all that exists, all that exists is *good*. *Being* and *goodness* are therefore “convertible” with one another.
- This notion of creation as produced *ex nihilo* by participation in God’s gift of life means that evil *cannot* be a substance, because substances have *being*. Evil must be a *privation* — parasitic on the good.



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