

GENESIS AND LITERALISM

Fr Peter Joseph 30.3.06

In his book, *Creation Rediscovered*, Gerard Keane writes:

It seems beyond reasonable doubt that the sacred writer(s) of Genesis intended to assert a literal meaning of 24-hour Creation days; therefore, they must each have been 24 hours. How could it be otherwise?¹

Mr Keane's interpretation of the book of Genesis is shared and actively promoted as acceptable for Catholics by the *Kolbe Center for the Study of Creation*. On its website, Hugh Owen says:

Theistic evolutionists and defenders of the traditional doctrine of creation both agree that the literal historical interpretation of Genesis was upheld by all of the Fathers, Doctors, and magisterial pronouncements of the Catholic Church for more than 1800 years. According to this common doctrine: God created all of the different kinds of creatures *ex nihilo* in six days or less.

For my part, I regard this part of the Literalist Creationist approach as historically inaccurate and fundamentally flawed. Hugh Owen's statement that the Fathers held for "six days or less" is an admission that *some* followed a literal interpretation ('six days'), and *others* a figurative ('less'). This contradicts his previous sentence which says they all upheld a literal interpretation.

Any study of the *Catholic* position on Genesis must begin from a Catholic foundation of Biblical interpretation—for the Bible is not just any book to be worked over according to general rules of interpretation but *the* Book whose author is Almighty God. It has only one authorized interpreter, the Catholic Church. Accordingly, any such study must begin with the Church's position on its interpretation.

The Magisterium on Genesis

The Church has ruled specifically on points in the early chapters of Genesis on several occasions in the last 100 years: on 30th June 1909, when the Pontifical Biblical Commission, with the authority of Pius X, issued eight rulings on the first three chapters; and on 16th January 1948 when the same Commission addressed a letter to Cardinal Suhard, Archbishop of Paris, and, *inter alia*, confirmed the 1909 rulings. The 1948 Letter of response, and therefore also the 1909 rulings, were specifically endorsed by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Humani Generis* in 1950. Since Literalist Creationists appear to be in some doubt as to the authority of these rulings, I will set out their background.

The authority of the Biblical Commission

The Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) was established as an organ of the Church's Magisterium by Pope Leo XIII in 1902. His successor, Pope St Pius X, in his *Motu Proprio Praestantia Scripturae* of 1907 sternly upheld the binding force of its decrees:

After mature examination and the most diligent deliberations, the Pontifical Biblical Commission has happily given certain decisions of a very useful kind for the proper promotion and direction on safe lines of Biblical studies. But we observe that some persons ... have not received and do not receive these decisions with the proper obedience, even though they are approved by the Pontiff.

Therefore we find it necessary to declare and to expressly prescribe, and by this our act we do expressly declare and decree, that all are bound in conscience to submit to the decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, both to those given up to now and those which shall be given hereafter, in the same way as to the decrees of the Sacred Congregations which pertain to doctrine and are approved by the Pontiff; and that all who impugn such decisions as these by word or in writing cannot avoid the charge of disobedience, or on this account be free of grave sin (DS 3503).

One cannot but note that this demand for adherence to the teachings of the Commission is stronger in expression than that issued by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* no. 25 on the need for the faithful to accept the teachings of the Pope.

This status of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) continued until 1971 when Pope Paul VI in his *Motu Proprio Sedula Cura* reduced it to a purely advisory body to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, so that its documents written since then have no Magisterial authority.

The Magisterium on the six days of creation

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council issued a Profession of Faith, *Firmiter*, some parts of which bear on Genesis and creation: “Firmly we believe and simply we confess that the one true God ... by His own almighty power at once (*simul*) from the beginning of time made each creature from nothing, the spiritual and the corporal, namely, the angelic and the earthly, and then man” (DS 800). If one were to take the word *simul* (together; at once) in a ridiculously over-literal understanding, one would think that Lateran IV’s definition prohibits belief in six separate days of creation! This was not the Council’s meaning, and no one took it that way at the time—but this is a warning to the uninitiated against coming along with unhistorical literalism and dictionary definitions as a guide, without deeper theological understanding. The word *simul* was meant broadly, without meaning to determine a time-frame—but no dictionary would help you realize that.

The eighth of the 1909 rulings of the PBC runs as follows:

Whether in that designation and distinction of six days, in the first chapter of Genesis, the word *Yom* (day) can be taken in either its proper sense as a natural day, or in an improper sense of an indefinite space of time; and whether among exegetes it is permitted to discuss this question freely? Affirmative. (DS 3519)

In more colloquial English, the ruling can be rendered as follows: “Yes, the word ‘day’ in Chapter 1 of the book of Genesis can be taken to mean either a natural day (its literal meaning), or some space of time (a looser meaning). Yes, Biblical commentators are allowed to discuss this question freely.”

In *Humani Generis* (1950), Pius XII dealt with a number of false opinions threatening the foundations of Catholic doctrine, including errors in scriptural interpretation. Here is his endorsement of the 1948 Letter to the Archbishop of Paris:

The Letter ... clearly points out that the first eleven chapters of Genesis, although properly speaking, not in conformity with the historical methods used by the best Greek and Latin writers or by competent authors of our time, do nevertheless pertain to the genus of history in a true sense, which however must be further studied and determined by exegetes; the same chapters, in simple and figurative language adapted to the mentality of a people of little culture, both state the principal truths upon which the attainment of our eternal salvation depends, and also give a popular description of the origin of the human race and the Chosen People. (DS 3898)

Fr Brian Harrison explains:

Cardinal Suhard had written asking the Commission to declare officially that three of its earlier responses—those of 1905, 1906 and 1909—were no longer binding on Catholic biblical scholars. He wanted them, in effect, to be simply ‘struck from the record’. But the Commission, after it gained the personal approval of Pius XII, replied in the *negative* to this bold request. This is indicated politely in the 1948 Letter when it informs His Eminence that the PBC “does not believe there is any good reason—at least for the time being — to promulgate new decrees regarding these questions”. What the PBC does instead is to point out that the earlier decrees themselves, to the extent that they are merely disciplinary in character, are *already*

open to an interpretation which is broad or flexible enough to leave modern scholars a legitimate and necessary freedom of research, and to accommodate any genuine advances in biblical and other relevant sciences that have been achieved over the intervening forty years.²

Keys for interpretation

These two points are crucial to the interpretation of the first eleven chapters of Genesis: (1) they were not written in conformity with the historical method of either the best classical writers or of competent authors up to 1950; and, (2) the history they contain is set forth in simple and figurative language adapted to the mentality of a people of small culture. It follows inevitably that the account is not to be read as a rigorous history of what transpired, or as a rigorous expression of the scientific ideas of that time or any time.

When the PBC gave its rulings, it was aware of Lateran IV, and the Church's teaching on the interpretation of Sacred Scripture at the Councils of Trent and Vatican I. These last two General Councils said, among other things on interpretation, that no one may interpret Scripture against the unanimous consent of the Fathers (DS 1507, 3007). They were quoted almost *verbatim* by Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus* of 1893:

In matters of faith and morals belonging to the building up of Christian doctrine, that is to be considered the true sense of holy Scripture which has been held and is held by our Holy Mother the Church whose place it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures; and therefore no one is permitted to interpret holy Scripture against such sense or also against the unanimous agreement of the Fathers. (DS 3281)

The authority of the Fathers

In interpreting the Bible, Catholics are only bound by the *unanimous* consent of the Fathers. What would be an example of such consensus? Their unanimous teaching on the historical fact of Christ's miracles. But where the Fathers vary, and the Church has not pronounced, Catholics are free to follow any reasonable interpretation. The Fathers' *unanimous* agreement binds, because that is a witness that they have received a teaching from Apostolic Tradition.

Furthermore, it is only *on matters of faith and morals* that the Fathers are witnesses to ecclesiastical tradition, not when they present the scientific ideas of their day. Catholics are not bound to follow geocentric cosmology because the Fathers appear to agree on that cosmology when they comment on the sun's standing still in the sky in the book of Joshua. In the light of this principle, one can see the wisdom of Pius XII's remarks on literary genres (*Divino Afflante*: DS 3830), and the "simple and figurative speech adapted to the mentality of a simple people" and "popular description" found in Genesis (*Humani Generis*: DS 3898)—on account of which one does not analyse its first chapters as a scientific textbook. St Thomas also teaches in conformity with this principle that "the mode and order of [the world's] making do not pertain to the substance of the faith, except *per accidens*".³

The variety among the Fathers

The PBC was well aware of the views of the Fathers of the Church on Genesis and that they were *not* unanimous on a literal interpretation of chapter 1. The following Fathers upheld instantaneous creation of all, and denied six days of 24 hours:

1. Clement of Alexandria: *Stromata*, VI, 16
2. Origen: *De Principiis*, IV, 16; *Contra Celsum*, VI, 50 & 60
3. Athanasius: *Orationes contra Arianos II*, 60
4. Gregory of Nyssa: *In Hexaemeron*: PG 44: col. 69, 72, 77 (but literal elsewhere)
5. Augustine: *De Genesi ad litteram*, V, 1; IV, 33.
6. Prosper of Aquitaine: *Sententiae ex August.* n. 141ff.

7. Marius Victor: *Comment. in Gen.* c. 1, vv. 19-21
8. Cassiodorus: *Div. Institutiones*, c. 1
9. Isidore of Seville: *Quaestiones in Gen.* c. 1-2; *Sent.* I, 10
10. Julian of Toledo: *Hoc est Contrariorum* I, q. 1

In his *Hexaemeron*, the Venerable Bede first took a strictly literal approach, but later changed his mind, and in his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* said that all the elementary matter was created before the first day and then organized on the six 24-hour days following. He held that the time preceding the six days was of indefinite duration, and he was the first to admit explicitly a long interval between creation of the first matter and its organization (PL 91:191). In other words, the first two verses of Genesis are the creation, and the verses following describe the organization or development.

St Augustine said that God made all things instantaneously, although, for the purposes of narration, the narrative separates them in time.⁴ The PBC was also aware of the endorsement of St Augustine's opinion by the Church's greatest philosopher and theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, in his first major work:

Moses, instructing a primitive people about the creation of the world, divided into parts what was made at the same time. Now, Ambrose and other Saints hold that there was an order of time observed in which things were distinguished; and this opinion is indeed more common, and seems to accord better with the apparent literal sense. Still, the previous opinion [of Augustine] is more reasonable and better protects Holy Scripture against the derision of unbelievers, which Augustine teaches (*De Gen.* I, 19) must be especially heeded: 'the Scriptures are so to be explained as not to incur the ridicule of unbelievers;' and this opinion I find more satisfying.⁵

About 14 years later, in the *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas explicitly reasserted this interpretation. Augustine's opinion, he says, "is that all the days that are called seven are one day, represented in a seven-fold aspect."⁶

It is a certain result of the PBC's ruling no. 8 of 1909, that no Catholic is constrained to accept that the word 'day' in Genesis chapter 1 necessarily means a natural day. There is no burden on any Catholic, whether of proof or otherwise, to endorse or reject a literal meaning of the word 'day' in this chapter. The PBC said the question may be discussed or debated freely ('libere disceptare' DS 3519). I mention this, because Mr Keane wrongly, and in opposition to the Biblical Commission, says, "The onus is upon those who reject a meaning of 24 hours to prove their case" (p. 254). He says much the same thing on pages xxviii, 268 and 269. In certain other rulings, however, the Biblical Commission's answers *did* assign a burden of proof. For example, in 1905 the PBC was asked whether certain historical books of the Bible can be regarded, in whole or in part, as not relating strict history but something else. The answer was, "Negative, except however in cases not to be easily or rashly admitted, in which ... it can be proved by solid arguments that the Sacred Writer did not intend to give a true and strict history, but rather, under the guise and form of history, to set forth a parable or an allegory or something distinct from the strictly literal or historical meaning of the words." (DS 3373).

The PBC ruling on the word 'day' is not surprising since the text itself provides difficulties. Since the sun was not created until the fourth 'day', the word 'day' could not mean the solar day before then—a point noted by Origen⁷ and Augustine.⁸

Literal sense Vs literalism

The literal sense of Sacred Scripture is simply the first step in interpretation. Now, 'literal sense' does not mean 'taking it literally'. Of course, *yom* is a Hebrew word meaning 'day' (the 'literal sense') but it is a different question whether the writer—or the Divine Author—meant it to be 'taken literally.' St Augustine's work is called *A Literal Commentary on Genesis*, but that does not mean he took the whole of Genesis literally.

One of his principles in that *Commentary* is commended by Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus*: “In the interpretation of Holy Scripture, it is not lawful to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except where reason makes it untenable or necessity dictates.”⁹ That Augustinian principle can hardly be quoted against anyone who adopts the Augustinian position on the six days. As anyone who reads his *Commentary* will see, Augustine suggested that a possible meaning of the six days is six stages in the angels’ knowledge of creation.

Certain things in Genesis are literal

In declaring free discussion on the meaning of the word *yom*, the PBC, on the very same day in 1909, in no. 2 of the decree, enumerated a number of elements in the narrative of Genesis that are *not* open to purely figurative interpretation. The PBC declared we cannot question the literal and historical meaning of the narrative when it relates to facts touching the foundations of religion. It listed, among several other things: the unity of the human race; the original happiness of our first parents in the state of justice, integrity, and immortality; the command issued by God to test their obedience; their temptation by the devil under the form of a serpent; their transgression and its punishment; and the promise of a Redeemer (DS 3514). Permission for a figurative meaning for ‘day’ is not a concession to Modernism, as some fear.

The multiple senses of Scripture

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 115-119, sets out the senses in which Scripture is to be read. It distinguishes, according to ancient tradition, two *senses*: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses.

The *literal sense*, the Catechism says, is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis. All other senses of Scripture are based on the literal.

The *spiritual sense* conveys the meaning of the realities and events as signs. In the *allegorical sense* we acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance and fulfilment in Christ. Thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or ‘type’ of Christ’s victory, and also of Christian Baptism. In the *moral sense*, the Biblical events written, as St Paul says, “for our instruction,” serve to lead us to act justly. By the *anagogical sense*, we view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland. So the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The *Catechism* concludes this section with these words from Vatican II: “All these things concerning the manner of interpreting Scripture are ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God.” (DV, 12)

To say that the sacred writer “left no clue” whatsoever that Genesis was intended to be understood in a way completely different from what it plainly states, is to argue as one who believes in private interpretation and excludes the *sensus plenior* (the fuller sense)—namely, the (sometimes multiple) spiritual sense. The fact that one reader sees no clue does not mean that there is no clue. Moreover, what the human author intended by the writing, and what the Divine Author intended in having him write it, are not necessarily the same (cf. *Catechism*, 109).

It is a mistake to think that the credibility of the Bible is at stake if our own interpretation is not accepted and propagated by the Magisterium. Genesis is replete with spiritual meanings (as well as literal)—and where are the “clues” for those? They are not in Genesis at all but in the New Testament, and in Sacred Tradition. The Fathers saw spiritual significance in the sentence *Let there be light*, said on the first of the seven days, and they linked it to the Resurrection, occurring on the same day of the week, Sunday. St Paul says, “Adam was a type of the One who was to come” (Rom 5:14)—but nowhere in Genesis is there a hint of the typological meaning of the man Adam. The

human author of Genesis perhaps had no idea, and certainly gave no clue, of the deeper meanings of those things. *But the Divine Author both knew and intended those deeper meanings.*

Where complete literalism originates and tends

We are not Jews, but Christians who read the Bible as a progressive unity. An argument for pure and naïve literalism—“Genesis is self-explanatory”—would preclude the typological, moral, and anagogical meanings. Therefore it is a false exegetical position. This is not to say that literalism is wrong, but that the argument for it as the *only* valid position is wrong, and has harmful consequences. The proponents of the Literalist Creationist view seem to make some of the errors of those they criticize. Their position resembles that of the ‘higher critics’, who rely on internal indications in the text alone to determine its meaning. Again, it resembles the thinking of the Modernists who interpret the Bible in line with an *a priori* principle. Their principle was that the Bible is a merely human work, made by men for men (cf. *Pascendi*, no. 22). Literalist Creationists seem to assert as a principle that the early chapters of Genesis must be interpreted according to their face value. The matter of greatest concern, however, is the implication that one can ignore the guidance of the Church in interpreting the sacred text. This is pure Protestantism.

The Bible is a great and mysterious Book. St Augustine said of the Bible that his ignorance of it was greater than his knowledge.¹⁰ We should come to the Bible not with our own rules of interpretation already worked out in our head, but in a spirit of docility to the Church whose Book it is, and in a spirit of humility before the multi-faceted speech of God.

If the book of Genesis is as simple and comprehensible as Literalist Creationists say, what was the point of Leo XIII’s advice to Biblical professors, in *Providentissimus Deus*, to study the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and other commentators of note, or his recommendation to study ancient oriental languages? Why would Pius XII, in *Divino Afflante*, have directed scholars to study the ancient Semitic modes of speech? The reason is that the ancient Hebrews did not think and write as modern, Western, rationalist, scientists and historians. But if Literalist Creationists’ rules of interpretation are sufficient, all that is necessary to understand the Bible is a Bible (in English translation) and the ability to read. Were their position valid, the Church would long ago have warned the faithful that St Augustine and St Thomas were untrustworthy Biblical commentators. Moreover, the Church would have warned us against what the Literalist Creationists aver to be a widespread false interpretation of Genesis. Yet, to the contrary, the Church has explicitly permitted this interpretation of the six days.

In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas (‘In necessary things, unity; in doubtful, liberty’)

It remains, then, that a Catholic is free to follow the liberty given by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. No Catholic need take *yom* (‘day’) in the first chapter of Genesis literally. Literalist Creationists are not entitled to go beyond the teaching of the Church and try to intimidate the faithful by asserting that, despite the PBC’s decree, anyone who does not take *yom* literally is against the Fathers, Popes and Councils. The rulings of the PBC are entirely consistent with Tradition. It is a great mistake to turn to schools of Protestantism to protect the integrity of the Bible. Popes Pius X and XII, among others, never needed the help of Protestant Fundamentalists to uphold the inerrancy and true meaning of Sacred Scripture.

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¹ *Creation Rediscovered: Evolution and the Importance of the Origins Debate*, Gerard J. Keane, 2nd edition, Tan Books, Illinois 1999, p. 268

² Cf. B.W. Harrison, S.T.D., *Did Woman Evolve From The Beasts? Part II*, part VI.3 & its footnotes: www.rtforum.org/lt/lt98.html

³ *Comm. in II Sent.*, d. 12, q. 1, a. 2

⁴ *De Genesi ad litteram*, I, 15-16; II, 15; IV, 26, 32, 33, 35; V, 1, 5; *De Civitate Dei*, XI, 9

⁵ *Comm. in II Sent.*, d. 12, q. 1, a. 2

⁶ *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 74, a. 2. Cf. the whole interpretation of Genesis 1 in I, qq. 65-74.

⁷ *De Principiis*, IV, 16; *Contra Celsum* VI, 50 & 60.

⁸ *De Gen. ad litt.*, V, 1; IV, 33.

⁹ DS 3284; *De Gen. ad litt.*, VIII, 7, 13

¹⁰ *Ep. 55 ad Ianuar.*, at the end.