



BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

EARLY CHRISTIAN READINGS OF GENESIS ONE: Patristic Exegesis and Literal Interpretation by Craig D. Allert. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018. 329 pages. Paperback; \$38.00. ISBN: 9780830852017.

This volume is part of the Biologos Books on Science and Christianity series. Craig Allert is an associate professor of religious studies at Trinity Western University in Langley, BC, Canada. He holds a PhD in historical theology from the University of Nottingham, and has authored a number of books and articles on the topics of inspiration, canon, and the authority of scripture.

Allert notes that the aim of this book is “to give a window into the strange new world of the church fathers and how they understood creation themes in Genesis 1” (p. 3). Allert’s purpose arises from what he sees as an irresponsible approach by some creation science advocates who proof-text and decontextualize the words of the church fathers to further their own theological agendas. For example, Duncan and Hall insist that the church fathers were consistent in seeing the days of Genesis 1 as six sequential (literal) twenty-four-hour days and that any other view is a relatively modern invention. Yet, a select reading of the fathers shows that there is some ambiguity in how a number of them understood the length of the days. Further, these church fathers generally approached the text from a nonliteral rather than a literal point of view.

While Allert mentions a number of church figures in his book, he places a particular emphasis on the person of Basil the Great. This is in response to creation science proponents who cite Basil as a literalist standing against those who use allegorical interpretive methods. By doing so, these scholars automatically support their own position while invalidating the witness of any church father whose interpretive method is different. But Allert pushes back on this view of Basil by asking two questions: “Is Basil actually an opponent of allegory?” and “Is the literal approach of the church fathers identical to the present interpretive method of the same label?”

Before engaging in the above questions, Allert begins by defining the church fathers and highlighting their relevance for present day Christianity. Then, in his second chapter, he surveys what he considers misinterpretations of some church fathers by several adherents of creation science. His following chapter outlines the historical nature of present literal inter-

pretive methods and contrasts this with Jesus’s and Paul’s lack of concern for human authorial intent in their methods. This gives license for the church fathers’ frequent use of spiritual or allegorical readings. It is in this chapter that Allert deconstructs the repeated assumption that there was a conflict between literal and allegorical schools of thought among the church fathers.

Chapter four brings us to Basil the Great and the questions concerning whether he was a literalist (as understood today) and whether he was truly against allegory. Allert shows that Basil’s anti-allegorical language was likely used in his *Hexameron* because his hearers were unable to discern error in heretical allegorical interpretations. Further, Allert shows that outside the *Hexameron*, Basil often used spiritual or allegorical methods of interpretation. Even in the *Hexameron*, Basil used methods that cannot be easily categorized as “literal.” For instance, the unstable, changeable nature of human beings was symbolized by the creation of the moon which is a body that is not always visible.

Chapters five through seven examine how some of the church fathers understood specific themes in the opening chapter of Genesis. Allert notes that *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) arose as an interpretation of Genesis 1 because the church fathers saw creation from unformed matter as impinging on God’s “providence, sovereignty, and eternity” (p. 228). Allert next explains that the church fathers treated the days in Genesis 1 in a variety of ways. For example, Theophilus saw the stars on the fourth day as reflecting those who kept the law of God: bright stars were those imitating the prophets, secondary stars represented the righteous, and the planets and stars that “pass over” were those who wandered from God. On the topic of “In the beginning,” Allert delves into Augustine’s distinction between time and eternity. For Augustine, time was evasive and likely didn’t truly exist since it was always slipping away into the past.

Allert works hard to peel away the literalist label from Basil because such a description arises from a superficial reading of Basil’s method and a mistaken idea of what “literal” meant to the church fathers. Further, he objects to the use of Basil (and other church fathers) as mere “ammunition” in the creation/evolution wars (p. 14). For this reason, Allert focuses his final chapter (“On Being like Moses”) on Basil’s understanding of humanity made in the image of God. Allert begins by explaining that Basil wanted the hearers of Genesis 1 to understand that

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its author (Moses) saw God face to face and that they should understand the text not in human ways (i.e., by literal interpretation) but by the Spirit (i.e., via spiritual and allegorical interpretation). Basil understood that the image of God referred to the inner self, the soul which could not be comprehended through the senses. That which could be understood through the senses, the body, was the mechanism by which the soul expressed itself. So, when the text referred to human beings ruling over the fish, it meant that human beings must use reason to control the passions of the flesh (i.e., body). In a similar, nonliteral, fashion, Basil understood image and likeness as different aspects of humanity. While image was connected to reason, “likeness” was built by the human choice to reign in those passions and (essentially) to “put on Christ” (p. 310). Similarly, Basil understood the commands to “multiply and grow” as the growth of both the body and the soul. Thus, Allert gives examples of Basil’s nonliteral interpretation and puts into question the whole idea that Basil was a literalist.

This is an academic book. It is mostly geared to students and scholars with some familiarity with the church fathers and historic methods of interpretation. The argumentation is thoughtful and flows well, including how Allert describes the early church fathers, recounts the misuse of the fathers by some creation-science adherents, and unpacks their interpretive methods, particularly as they saw Genesis 1. The book is quite effective in leading the reader into the world of the fathers and unfolding both their contexts and their wider thoughts on interpreting scripture. For those unfamiliar with the church fathers, Allert’s definition of who they were, the time frame in which they operated, and the criteria by which they were considered church fathers is all helpful. But even for those familiar with the fathers, Allert’s portrayal of them as people playing a critical role (alongside scripture) in the survival and maintenance of the orthodox faith might be surprising and convincing. He also cites their texts extensively in his effort to give context to their words. He admits that the choice of church fathers is selective due to the constraints of space.

The book provides an excellent assessment of the importance of the church fathers and an evaluation of their interpretive methods. It also calls into question the assumption that the modern category of literal interpretation parallels the literal analysis of the church fathers. As a side accomplishment, the book casts doubt on the often-mentioned conflict between literal and allegorical interpretive camps.

Most of all, it puts a serious dent in the argument that the church fathers interpreted scripture (and especially Genesis 1) in the same way as many proponents of creation science. The interpretation of Genesis 1 has become a litmus test of orthodoxy in a number of Christian circles; since the witness of the church fathers says something about what were normative or acceptable beliefs, any lack of care in using them in the creation/evolution debate will entrench positions on a topic that is already divisive.

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THE BIBLE & ANCIENT SCIENCE: Principles of Interpretation by Denis O. Lamoureux. Tullahoma, TN: McGahan Publishing, 2020. 218 pages. Paperback; \$15.99. ISBN: 9781951252052.

Simply stated, I believe the literary genre of Genesis 1–3 is an ancient account of origins. Notably, it is deeply rooted in ancient science. (p. 195)

Denis O. Lamoureux is Professor of Science and Religion at St. Joseph’s College at the University of Alberta. He possesses three earned doctorates (dentistry, theology, and biology) and tells of an intellectual and spiritual journey out of atheism, through fundamentalism, and to his current position. Consequently, if there was ever a model voice that displays the academic and personal experience necessary to speak formidably about the hermeneutical issues associated with Genesis 1–3 and the other creation texts of the Bible, it is Lamoureux.

The study begins with what seems like a simple question, “Is the Bible a book about science?” However, before the opening chapters are completed, the reader understands that the question is anything but simple. In fact, the difficulty of the conversation is poignantly displayed when he offers answers to his leading question from two giant figures within the evangelical tradition. Henry M. Morris answers in the affirmative, but Billy Graham answers negatively. Yet, to his credit, Lamoureux does not dwell on this disagreement. He quickly emphasizes that a proper answer to his question requires an entanglement with issues of hermeneutics, or principles of interpretation (p. 13). Consequently, the remainder of the book is a journey through the wild and woolly world of biblical hermeneutics on the way to answering the question of whether the Bible is a book about science.

Lamoureux guides the reader toward his answer by discussing twenty-two hermeneutical principles