Review

Allert, Craig D., *Early Christian Readings of Genesis One: Patristic Exegesis and Literal Interpretation,* (Downers Grove, Il: IVP, 2018), 338 pages. ISBN 978-0-8308-5201-7

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It must be said from the outset that Allert's, *Early Christian Readings of Genesis One,* marks a significant contribution to Christian theology in general, and its evangelical variety in particular. The author is to be highly commended for his capacity to distill very complex issues and extensive research into a reasonably sized book of very readable style. While the book's audience extends to those generally interested in the topic, it is specifically addressed to the North American evangelical community, especially with respect to the creation science-evolution debate. However, the thesis, assumptions and argument apply to other Christian confessions as well. All orthodox Christians should take careful note of how precisely the early Christian Fathers interpreted Genesis 1, in its relation to the doctrine of creation.

The fundamental thesis of the book is that any attempt to "expropriate" so-called "literalistic" patristic readings of Genesis 1 often imposes a modern conception of "literal" exegetical meaning upon a world of hermeneutical practice that knew nothing of it. Consequently, any attempt to expropriate the Fathers in the service of a "literal" reading of Genesis 1 is not only misguided, it is contrary to their conception of the Christian doctrine of creation.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which describes a problematic reading of "literal exegesis" in the Father's on the part of some evangelical "creationists." This reading is to be taken together with the establishment of the necessary guidelines for properly identifying the Fathers, in their context and with their proper use of "literal" interpretation/exegesis. The second half of the book demonstrates how "literal" interpretation actually functioned, using primarily Basil of Caesarea's *Hexaemeron* as the *locus classicus* for understanding what the Father's meant by patristic interpretation, especially as it was applied to the reading of Genesis 1 (Ch.4). This makes Chapter 4 the crux of the whole argument. Chapter's 5-7 then illustrate the principle of "literal" interpretation, properly and contextually understood, as it plays out in the Patristic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (Ch. 5), the "days" of Genesis 1 (Ch. 6), and the Augustinian understanding of the opening line of Genesis ("In the beginning.." Ch.7). Chapter 8 returns to Basil's *Hexaemeron* and functions as an exhortation, to remind us that, from a Patristic point of

view, the Genesis creation narrative is not to be read as either mythology, history or science per se, but primarily as "*theologia*." It is designed purposely in the Fathers, to "point to the invisible creator" (321).

In the first three chapters, Allert recognizes that evangelicals are beginning to come to grips with the significance of the Church Fathers for Christian witness today. Allert opines, however, that this rediscovery is in its infancy and thus often marked by egregious usage of the Fathers as 'ammunition' in doctrinal causes. In the case of readings of Genesis 1, creationists, and the creation-science movement in general incorrectly appeal to the Fathers' supposed "literal" interpretation of that text on the part of "young earth." Allert contends that the creationist reading of the Father's literal interpretation of Genesis 1 fails to understand the significance of the Father's hermeneutical practices, uses overly simplistic conclusions, misunderstands the nature of interpretation in the Scriptures themselves and fails to read the Fathers in their context. Thus, he seeks a truer context for understanding the Fathers' hermeneutical principles in general and their interpretation of Genesis 1 in particular. He correctly points out that the Fathers "offer a window into an age where some of the most fundamental Christian ideas, doctrines and practices were disclosed and developed." This fact alone necessitates a careful treatment of the theology of the Fathers and of their hermeneutical practices (49-50).

Allert singles out James Mook and Louis Lavallee as careless readers of the Fathers; both offer proof-text readings without regard for the plurality of hermeneutical understanding in the Fathers. His strategy of using the principle of literal interpretation to bring this abuse of the Fathers to the fore is effective, especially as it relates to Genesis 1. Allert argues that literal interpretations are imbued with the modern rationalist obsession with objective truth. The Fathers, and demonstrably Basil, had no such notions of the function of truth, and its relation to the written Word. In an incisive discussion of Patristic hermeneutics and exegetical practice Allert concludes that the conceptual world of the Fathers, which included the distinction between allegorical, typological and literal interpretation, is not closed to reinterpretation, like the former mistaken distinction between Antiochian 'literalistic' and Alexandrian 'allegorical' types of biblical interpretation. Patristic hermeneutics in both the East and West exhibits considerable interplay between all these types, and no categorical rejection of either in any sector of the patristic world, generally speaking. Furthermore, today's methods of grammatical-historical exegesis, historical-critical exegesis, and "literal" interpretation of today are qualitatively different from the hermeneutics of the patristic period. Allert finds that, for the Fathers, literal

interpretation was not just a matter of grammar or history, but also matter of sacred grammar and sacred history, delivered by the text in its both literal and spiritual meaning. In short, it was concerned with *theologia*. The hermeneutics of the patristic world was too methodologically pluralistic to be restricted to modern conceptions of what any one of the Fathers meant by the term "literal."

In chapter 4, the crux of the book's argument, Allert demonstrates his thesis through a thorough hermeneutical analysis of Basil's *Hexaemeron*, which contains a "literal" interpretation of Genesis 1. The creationist argument fails in its attempt to sequester Basil's literalism to its own cause. Allert proves that Basil does not mean by literal what creationists take him to mean. Noting that Origen uses literal interpretation as the basic step for less advanced Christians, Allert concludes that Basil does not intend to restrict his exegesis to the literal sense. In the *Hexaemeron* , his pastoral concern for the souls of Christian novices keeps him disciplined to a literal interpretation of Genesis one. "The approach he takes here as a result is well within Origen's hermeneutical theory, because of its sensitivity to the levels of Scripture" (202). Origen was *the* paragon and most original theorist of allegorical interpretation in the patristic period. The breadth of the hermeneutical interpretations of the Fathers is Allert's most significant conclusion. The implications of the Fathers' hermeneutic is further demonstrated by the breadth of subsequent Christian doctrine concerning creation.

Allert's chapter on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is relevant to the discussion of literal interpretation in terms of the function of language in its feeble attempt to respond descriptively to the mystery of the universe's origins from "nothing." Doctrinally speaking, the texts rest in a certain appropriation of Genesis 1:1, "in the beginning...". Had Basil been a true literalist, as creationists perceive it, would he have been able to affirm *creatio ex nihilo*? The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was accepted as true at least by the third century. If indeed the language of nothingness is impossible to define linguistically, then some level beyond a literal interpretation of Genesis 1:1 becomes necessary. However Basil may have disagreed with philosophical attempts to describe it, he nevertheless subscribed to the doctrine in its essence. Gerald May's argument notwithstanding, the doctrine illustrates well Basil's continuity with a doctrine that seems to defy any literal interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the modern sense.

In chapter 6, Allert amplifies his thesis thesis with a discussion of the more controversial question regarding the days of creation. He argues that, in the Hexaemeron and elsewhere, Basil is willing to support an interpretation of the days of creation that is consistent with what was already available in the

church's tradition, including from Theophilus of Antioch and Ephrem the Syrian. This verifies Allert's conclusion in chapter 4. "Apparently Basil does not consider these passages of Scripture as scientific (literal) descriptions of the nature and form of the heavens" (246). Clearly, Basil cannot be counted a literalist in the terms described by modern day creation-science. Basil's attitude runs throughout his treatment of the days of creation in the *Hexaemeron*. Again it is the liturgical and theological meaning of Genesis 1 that matters, not the details of a scientific account of creation.

Resistance to the kind of literal interpretation that some evangelical creationists want from the Fathers is to be found in one of the Church's greatest theologians. Augustine makes it clear in his treatment of Genesis 1:1 and the days of creation that any literal interpretation is quite impossible because it is theologically suspect, childish even! A literal approach would fail to understand the analogical process by which humans come to know their world, and would effectively destroy the eternity of God, since the idea of literal rest as applied to God's being would reduce him to some materialistic aspect of creation, motion, space matter or time. In his *City of God* and his *de Genesii ad Litteram*, Augustine stands in an interpretive tradition that does not allow literal interpretation to function as a closure on the meaning of a given text. The utterance of creation is an utterance of the eternal into time and not merely a vocal or literary sign. It bespeaks eternity and cannot therefore be limited to literalistic interpretation, or by the "matter" his speech gives rise to. As Allert reiterates in his exhortation to follow Basil and "be like Moses," the creation accounts are not an attempt to reconstruct the physical, scientific and historical process of the origins of the universe, in which Basil and Augustine at least have no interest. Rather, in seeking the deep secret *theologia* of the text, we shall find, and return to, paradise.

While Allert's description of some of the evangelical misappropriation of the Fathers is persuasive, especially by groups he has identified, the parameters he lays out in the attempt to correct the abuses of proof-texting, expropriation and failure of hermeneutical acuity has a hidden danger. At points it seems as though only experts are really permitted to mine the Fathers as a resource for a theology of creation today. Does the author think that his and other discouragements concerning misreading the Fathers could lead evangelicals to believe they lack the expertise to understand them and abandon them again? Can lay people read the fathers freely and gain insight from them, or should they be limited to what the experts allow them to appropriate? In some espects, this guardedness smacks of scholarly papism.

A second caution follows from this question. At times it appears that the only people in the history of Christianity who read the Fathers amiss are

literalistic evangelicals. The author appears to have missed the fact that many Protestants and Catholics of the past have misread the Fathers. The net used to catch the misappropriation of the Fathers is cast too narrowly, and it is done regularly throughout.

A final caution has to do with the problem of hermeneutics among the Fathers; that is, their respective understanding of literal interpretation. What should the Church's relative function be, vis-à-vis hermeneutical pluralism? If literal is not really literal in the modern sense, how do we place proper controls on the interpretation of Scripture such that doctrine, especially a doctrine of creation, can have regulative force? This is a question that is beyond the scope of the book, but Allert could have done more to ease evangelical sensibilities regarding the subjectivity of interpretation. His book is not likely to calm such concerns, but properly understood and read, it should not inflame sensibilities either. On the whole, *Early Christian Readings of Genesis One* is a balanced approach to Genesis 1, and the rest of the Creation narrative therein.

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