

Reading Genesis with Cardinal Ratzinger

By *Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco*

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The author answers Catholic creationists by arguing that contemporary exegetes have sufficient reason to go beyond a literalist reading of Genesis.

How is a Catholic supposed to read the first chapter of Genesis that details the six days of creation? In a lecture entitled, "Restoration of Traditional Catholic Theology on Origins," given at the First International Catholic Symposium on Creation held in Rome on October 24-25, 2002, Father Victor Warkulwiz, M.S.S., a priest with a doctorate in physics, argued that the Catholic Church needs to return to a traditional Catholic theology on origins, a theology that is "based on the literal and obvious sense of Genesis 1-11."¹ He is not alone in saying this. In recent years, Catholics of a more traditionalist bent have begun to embrace a special creationism — the belief that God created the different kinds of living things by divine fiat less than 10,000 years ago — that, in years past, was associated more with fundamentalist Protestants.²

Catholic creationists often claim that Catholics who seek to be faithful to the Catholic tradition need to interpret the six-day creation account of Genesis in its "literal and obvious sense" as most of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church had done. Thus, they argue that the first chapter of Genesis is an accurate historical narrative, a precise description, of an event that took place over a six-day period several thousand years ago. To justify this approach, Catholic creationists cite Pope Leo XIII, who in *Providentissimus Deus*, his 1893 encyclical on the study of sacred scripture, taught the following:

The opinion of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they treat of these matters [the interpretation of Sacred Scripture] in their capacity of doctors, unofficially; not only because they excel in their knowledge of revealed doctrine and in their acquaintance with many things which are useful in understanding the apostolic Books, but because they are men of eminent sanctity and of ardent zeal for the truth, on whom God has bestowed a more ample measure of His light. Wherefore the expositor should make it his duty to follow their footsteps with all reverence, and to use their labors with intelligent appreciation. *But he must not on that account consider that it is forbidden when just cause exists, to push inquiry and exposition beyond what the Fathers have done; provided he carefully observes the rule so wisely laid down by St. Augustine-not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires; a rule to which it is the more necessary to adhere strictly in these times, when the thirst for novelty and unrestrained freedom of thought make the danger of error most real and proximate.*³

Though Catholic creationists admit that Leo XIII permitted Catholics to move beyond the literal and obvious sense of Sacred Scripture — what modern biblical scholars would call a literalist reading of the text⁴ — they respond by asserting that contemporary Catholic exegetes have failed to show that their non-literalist reading of Genesis is justified either by reason or by necessity as specified by Leo XIII.

In this essay, I respond to the Catholic creationist movement by arguing that contemporary exegetes have sufficient reason to move beyond a literalist reading of the

Genesis text. I will begin by summarizing the three hermeneutical principles employed by then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, in his non-literalist interpretation of the six-day account of Genesis, traditionally called the Hexaemeron. I will then show that his method is faithful both to the teaching of the Catholic Church most recently articulated in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, and to the teaching of his predecessor, Leo XIII, in *Providentissimus Deus*. Thus, I propose that Cardinal Ratzinger's approach to reading Genesis, as a particularly noteworthy example of the hermeneutical method endorsed by Vatican II, should be paradigmatic for the contemporary Catholic exegete seeking to be faithful to the Catholic tradition.

First principle: The distinction between form and content

During the Lenten season of 1981, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, gave four homilies on creation in the Liebfrauenkirche, the cathedral church of Munich in Germany.⁵ In his first homily, entitled "God the Creator," he discusses the principles that govern his reading of Genesis. He begins by recalling the opening words of the Sacred Scriptures that highlight the creative action of God "in the beginning." However, he goes on to ask the question that lies at the heart of the creationist debate: Are these words true? Do they count for anything? In order to answer these questions, he suggests three criteria for interpreting the Genesis text: the distinction between form and content in the creation narrative, the unity of the Bible, and the hermeneutical importance of Christology.

First, he proposes that the exegete "must distinguish between the form of portrayal and the content that is portrayed."⁶ He must keep in mind that the Bible is, first and foremost, a religious book and not a natural science textbook. Thus, Cardinal Ratzinger concludes that Genesis does not and cannot provide a scientific explanation of how the world arose. Rather, it is a book that seeks to describe things in such a way that the reader is able to grasp profound religious realities. It uses images to communicate religious truth, images that were chosen from what was understandable at the time the text was written, "images which surrounded the people who lived then, which they used in speaking and in thinking, and thanks to which they were able to understand the greater realities."⁷ In other words, the Catholic exegete is called to respect the text as it is. He is called to read Genesis as its human author wished it to be read, not as a scientific treatise, but as a religious narrative that communicates profound truths about the Creator.

Cardinal Ratzinger's first criterion for exegesis echoes the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, the Council Fathers taught that,

Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for "literary forms." For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.⁸

Moreover, though Cardinal Ratzinger does not provide a theological justification for this criterion, the Second Vatican Council did. According to the Council, we need to respect the form of the text because “God speaks in sacred Scripture through men in human fashion.”⁹ Thus, the exegete “in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.”¹⁰ In other words, the Catholic exegete should respect the form of the Sacred Scriptures because in doing so, he respects the action of God who authored the sacred text without violating the freedom, identity, and idiosyncrasies of the human authors who wrote in different forms.

Second principle: The unity of the Holy Bible

Cardinal Ratzinger’s first criterion raises an important question: But how does one grasp the particular form of the sacred text? For instance, how do we know that the human author of the six-day creation account did not mean to write a *bona fide* historical narrative or a scientific treatise? He certainly could have. In his Lenten homily from 1981, Cardinal Ratzinger brings up the same question asking, “Is the distinction between the image and what is intended to be expressed only an evasion, because we can no longer rely on the text even though we still want to make something of it, or are there criteria from the Bible itself that attest to this distinction?”¹¹ In response, he proposes a second criterion for sound Catholic exegesis — the exegete should interpret a text from within the context of the unity of the Bible. Applying this criterion to the interpretation of the six-day creation account, we discover that the creation accounts in the Old Testament — the Hexaemeron is only one of several found in Genesis and in Psalms — are clearly “movement[s] to clarify the faith”¹² and are not scientific or historical narratives. For instance, Cardinal Ratzinger notes that a study of the origins of the creation texts in the Wisdom literature especially reveal that they were written to respond to the Hellenistic civilization confronted by the Israelites.¹³ Thus, it is not surprising that the human authors of these accounts did not use the image of the six days to assert their faith in the one Creator God. This image would not have been appropriate for their time and would not have been understood by their Greek contemporaries. In contrast, a study of the origins of the Hexaemeron, the six-day account of creation, found in the first chapter of Genesis reveals that it was written to respond to the seemingly victorious Babylonian civilization confronted by the Israelites several centuries before their encounter with the Greeks. Here, the human author of the sacred text used images familiar to their pagan contemporaries to refute the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation account that claimed that the world was created when Marduk, the god of light, killed the primordial dragon.¹⁴ Thus, as Cardinal Ratzinger points out, it is not surprising that nearly every word of the first creation account addresses a particular confusion of the Babylonian age. For instance, when the Sacred Scriptures affirm that in the beginning, the earth was without form and void (cf. Gen. 1:2), the sacred text refutes the existence of a primordial dragon. When they refer to the sun and the moon as lamps that God has hung in the sky for the measurement of time (cf. Gen. 1:14), the text refutes the divinity of these two great celestial bodies believed to be Babylonian gods. These verses, and they are only two of many examples, illustrate the intent of the human author of the Hexaemeron. He wanted to dismantle a pagan myth that was commonplace in Babylon and assert the supremacy of the one Creator God. Cardinal Ratzinger concludes:

Thus, we can see how the Bible itself constantly readapts its images to a continually developing way of thinking, how it changes time and again in order to bear witness, time and again, to the *one* thing that has come to it, in truth, from God's Word, which is the message of his creating act. In the Bible itself the images are free and they correct themselves ongoingly. In this way they show, by means of a gradual and interactive process, that they are only images, which reveal something deeper and greater.¹⁵

In sum, a comparative study of the different creation accounts scattered throughout the Sacred Scriptures reveal that they were not and are not historical or scientific narratives. They were theological arguments that used different images to communicate the same truth – the truth about the Creator and his Creation.

Again, Cardinal Ratzinger's second criterion is not a novel invention. It echoes the teachings of Vatican II, which taught: "Since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light."¹⁶

Third Principle: Christ as the Interpretative key of the Holy Bible

Finally, the second criterion raises another important question: Why should the Sacred Scriptures be treated as a unity? What is the source of this unity? In response, Cardinal Ratzinger provides his third and final criterion for interpreting the sacred text: We are to read the Sacred Scriptures "with Him in whom all things have been fulfilled and in whom all of its validity and truth are revealed."¹⁷ It is Christ who unifies the Bible. The entire Bible is about him. Thus, Genesis has to be read in the context of its fulfillment in Christ. Therefore, the Holy Father asserts that the first creation account cannot be read without reference to the conclusive and normative scriptural account of creation which begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1;3, *Revised Standard Version*). For Cardinal Ratzinger, it is Christ who sanctions readings of the sacred text that move beyond a strict literalist reading because it is Christ who wishes to communicate profound theological truths that penetrate the human heart and soul: "Christ frees us from the slavery of the letter, and precisely thus does he give back to us, renewed, the truth of the images."¹⁸

Again, the Holy Father's third criterion can be found in the Vatican II documents: "God, the inspirer and author of both testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the New Covenant in His blood, still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it."¹⁹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: "Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover" (no. 112). All of Sacred Scripture has to be interpreted in light of Christ.

In sum, the Hexaemeron is true. However, it is true not because it communicates historical or scientific truth but because it communicates theological truth, the truth that the world was created by a God who is love. Reading Genesis with Cardinal Ratzinger's

three hermeneutical principles justifies this assertion and provides reasons for moving beyond a literalist reading of the sacred text. It is a reading of sacred scripture that is faithful both to faith and to reason.

Finally, how do we reconcile Cardinal Ratzinger's interpretation of the six-day account of creation with Leo XIII's teaching discussed above? Recall that in *Providentissimus Deus*, Leo XIII taught that Catholic exegetes are "not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires." Catholic creationists have argued that this criterion has not been satisfied — natural science has not provided reasons for moving beyond the literal and obvious sense of the Hexaemeron. They argue that a literalist reading of the six-day creation account should only be abandoned when science has definitively disproved the narrative explicitly described in the Hexaemeron. Their argument, however, fails to recognize that Pope Leo XIII did not limit his statement to *scientific* reasons. A Catholic exegete has to interpret the sacred text in a manner that coheres not only with truths discovered by the natural sciences but also with truths uncovered by other fields of genuine human inquiry. In other words, interpreting the sacred text is a work of both faith and reason. As Cardinal Ratzinger has convincingly argued, in the case of the Hexaemeron, we have to depart from a reading that is limited to the literalist sense because studies of ancient texts and ancient cultures — and not natural science — have given us good and necessary reasons for doing so. Sticking to a literalist reading of Genesis would do violence to the original meaning of the human author and thus to the truth God wanted to manifest through his words. As Vatican II emphasized, like God, we too are called to respect the human author. Since he did not write a scientific or historical treatise in the Hexaemeron, we should not read it as one.

NOTES

¹ Victor P. Warkulwiz, M.S.S., "Restoration of Traditional Catholic Theology on Origins," in *Proceedings of the International Catholic Symposium on Creation, October 24-25, 2002*. (Woodstock, VA: Kolbe Center for the Study of Creation, 2003), 17-35, p. 17

² Dermott J. Mullen, "Fundamentalists Inside the Catholic Church: A Growing Phenomenon," *New Oxford Review* 70 (2003): 31-41. For a response to Mullen's article from Catholics who claim to be creationists, see Hugh Owen and Robert Bennett, "Are Catholic Defenders of Special Creation 'Fundamentalists'?" at www.kolbecenter.org/nor.response.htm. Last accessed September 1, 2004.

³ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical letter, *Providentissimus Deus*, November 18, 1893, nos. 14-15. Translation of the Vatican website http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/. Last accessed September 11, 2004.

⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, March 14, 1994, Section F: Fundamentalist Interpretation.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *'In the Beginning...': A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, Trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, November 18, 1965: AAS 58 (1966) 817-830, no. 12. All English citations from the texts of Vatican II are taken from Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ For an interesting essay on the relationship between the Hexaemeron and the Enuma Elish written for a popular audience, see Victor Hurowitz, "The Genesis of Genesis: Is the Creation Story Babylonian?" *Bible Review* 21 (2005): 37-48; 52-53.

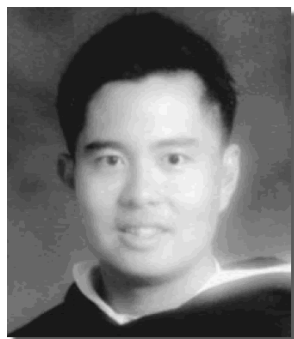
¹⁵ Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Dei verbum*, no. 12.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Dei verbum*, no. 16.



Reverend Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, O.P., received his Ph.D. in biology from M.I.T. in 1996 and his S.T.L. from the Dominican House of Studies in 2005. He currently serves as an assistant professor of biology and adjunct professor of theology at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island. His work previously appeared in the December 2003 issue of HPR.