

Book Review

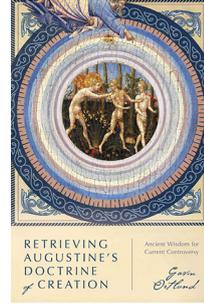
Gavin R. Ortlund.

*Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation:
Ancient Wisdom for Current Controversy*

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.

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Questions regarding the origin of the universe and rise of humanity continue to be argued within both the broader culture and Evangelicalism. Many Christian leaders believe that the discrepancies between “science” and Genesis cause many to question the validity of Christianity and scripture. Even within Evangelicalism, battle lines are drawn over whether one believes in a young-earth creationism or theistic evolution and whether Adam and Eve were historical figures.

It is in response to these disputes and controversies that Gavin Ortlund wrote *Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation*. In short, Ortlund contends that engaging Augustine's teaching on the doctrine of creation, contemporary Christians can view the controversies through a different perspective, one untainted by Darwinist, fundamentalist and modernist stances. Through that “dialogue”, Ortlund hopes that Christians on opposing sides of the debate could gain a humbler stance towards their own position coupled with a more generous spirit towards their opponents’.

In Chapter 1, Ortlund argues that Christians have neglected the doctrine of creation, delegating it to a subordinate role to sin and redemption. He then launches into a somewhat academic discussion about the internal coherence of Augustine's thinking in his *Confessions*. The switch struck this reader

as strange. However, readers should be patient as Ortlund eventually shows that the discussion is indeed relevant. In the end, Ortlund argues that Augustine connects personal piety with the doctrine of creation by noting that creatures find their origin and “rest” in their creator. Ortlund then reviews key tenets of Augustine's belief namely, God is prior to all; creation was established *ex nihilo*; creatures, therefore, are contingent and made to find their true happiness in God; evil is not just privation but a loss of being (p. 51); and finally, redemption must involve deification, not in the sense that we have divine nature, but in the sense that we become the sons of God, the source of being.

After outlining the major themes of Augustine's theology of creation, Chapter 2 pivots to Augustine's theological and moral attitude. In this fascinating chapter, Ortlund details how Augustine avoided arrogant dogmatism and open-headed liberalism when interpreting the creation narratives. Augustine's approach flowed from a pastoral concern that Christians hurt the cause of Christ by speaking on topics they knew little about. Not only would this result in pagan ridicule of Christianity but also would give the impression that ignorant statements were doctrines of the Christian faith.

Chapter 3 discusses Augustine's view of the days of creation. Ortlund dutifully shows how Augustine could hold a “literal” view in tension with an allegorical or typological view. It should be noted that literal here does not

mean Augustine held to a 6-day young earth creationism. Rather it means that Augustine believed that the Bible was relating something that had a historical reality. Ultimately, Ortlund is using Augustine to help loosen contemporary Christians from their dogmatism, while simultaneously showing that loosening does not necessarily involve a jettisoning biblical teaching.

Chapter 4 reviews Augustine's belief that animal death occurred before the Fall. Contrary to some creationists, Augustine did not believe that the pre-fall world was "perfect" nor had to be perfect. The pre-fall world was good, but there was pain, predation, insects and death. The difference was that human death only came after the Fall. Augustine, arguing against the Manicheans, said that those who think that predation and pain are evil, suffer from self-referential judgement. In other words, they use their limited perspective to pronounce judgement on the whole, of which they are ignorant. I found this chapter to be quite helpful as it supported the argument made in *Dominion over Wildlife? An Environmental-Theology of Human-Wildlife Relations* against the claims of the Andrew Linzey and his theology of Christian Animal Rights. I was puzzled, however, as to why Ortlund did not connect Augustine's theology to Genesis 1:26-8 with how Adam and Eve should have expressed dominion, perhaps lethal dominion, over the serpent for its blasphemy.

The final chapter addresses the status of Adam and Eve. Interestingly, Adam and Eve were understood by Augustine to be both historical and figurative. Ortlund, in discussing the views of Scot McNight and Peter Enns, believes that Augustine would have asked them why not see Adam and Eve as both historical and figurative too? Why prioritize one over the other? Though

some may want to interpret Augustine's *rationes seminales* in light of biological evolution, Ortlund believes it would be improper to draw too hard of a line to connect the ideas.

This reviewer is not qualified to comment on the accuracy of Ortlund's description of Augustine's views. So, my comments will focus on other areas. The text does make a strong case for Evangelicals to lower the debate temperature regarding questions pertaining to human origins. Ortlund does not make this claim out of a belief that these questions are not important. He does so because he does not believe these questions are essential to orthodoxy. While not fully convinced of Ortlund's contention, there is no doubt that his admonition to humility is an important one. Every interpreter should check his/her attitude and avoid speaking beyond the biblical evidence. In this regard, this conversation with Augustine is extremely helpful and could be useful material for hermeneutics teachers to incorporate into their courses.

However, at times, Ortlund in holding up Augustine as an example of humility, seemed to forget that Augustine did not know Hebrew. It makes sense that Augustine should have been humble as his knowledge was limited. Modern biblical scholars know far more about linguistics, comparative literature etc. than Augustine did. So, would it stand to reason that contemporary scholars could be more "dogmatic" than Augustine and justifiably so? In addition, Ortlund should have pointed out that science is no more "objective" than biblical interpretation. Too often, science is treated as a monolith when a closer look reveals far more diversity and "doubt" than the atheistic apologists admit. Granted Ortlund does recognize this in the text but his most of his criticism was directed more toward arrogant

theologians than arrogant scientists.

The book is well written and has helpful summaries both at the end of each chapter and the book as a whole. Those looking for a comprehensible way to enter the theology of Augustine should find this work valuable. In the end, biblical interpreters should read this text if for nothing more than to check their own arrogance. Ortlund has used Augustine to properly remind us that not everything in scripture is as plain as we might believe. For that, we should thank Augustine and Ortlund for this.

