

Does the 1994 Catholic Catechism Say that a Symbolic Interpretation of the Creation Story is Now “Official”?

A Response to James Akin

In the January 2003 issue of *This Rock* magazine, senior apologist for *Catholic Answers* in California, James Akin, makes the assertion that the symbolic view of the creation story in Genesis 1 is now the “official” interpretation of the Catholic Church. According to Akin, the Catholic Church, through the 1994 Catechism, has finally relinquished the long-held traditional view that the days of Genesis are 24-hour periods. He further says that although the literal view is still tolerated, the Church is systematically trying to ease that interpretation out of the Catholic’s mind.

If you are a fair-minded and rational thinking traditional Catholic, you are probably wondering how Akin came up with this rather bold assertion. To my knowledge, Akin is the first person in Catholic apologetics to declare that a symbolic view of Genesis 1 is the “official” interpretation of the Catholic Church. Mind you, this is in the face of absolutely no word from the current Vatican that it has issued an “official” interpretation. Not surprisingly then, Akin marshals little facts, except a lot of personal opinions and innuendos, to support his claims. There is no kind way to say this, but nevertheless I must tell my readers that Akin’s essay is filled with poor scriptural exegesis, shoddy historical research, convoluted logic, not to mention a total misconstruing of what the Catechism stated.

Akin writes:

Though the majority of the Church Fathers took the six days of creation as being six literal days, there was not moral unanimity among them on this question. (1)

Knowing that what the Fathers believed on this subject is vitally important in deciding the issue, in the above paragraph Akin attempts to put doubt in the reader’s mind as to their relevance on this particular issue. He does this by drawing a distinction (albeit a false one) between the “majority of the Church Fathers” as opposed to their “moral unanimity.” Unfortunately, Akin doesn’t tell us what the difference is, while at the same time he argues that “moral unanimity” is stronger than a “majority.”

Nevertheless, by emphasizing the category of “moral unanimity” Akin is acknowledging a difference between “total unanimity” as opposed to agreement in principle but with minor exceptions. It is the latter that Akin is seeing as a “moral unanimity” – a term employed by canonists who are quite aware that even on the most crucial subjects the Fathers invariably had a few voices who questioned or objected to what was being proposed. Obviously, between “total unanimity” and “moral unanimity” the latter is certainly less restrictive, since it doesn’t require 100% agreement.

With that in view, we wonder, then, what Akin sees as the difference between “moral unanimity” and “the majority of the Church Fathers”? Perhaps the “majority of the Church Fathers” refers to something just over 50%, since a majority can be anything from 51% to 100%. Or perhaps it is 60, 70 or 80%? Whatever Akin envisions as the numerical equivalent, we are left wondering what percentage would have to be reached in order to qualify as a “moral unanimity.” Akin never tell us.

Allow me to answer the question for you. It makes little difference, simply because, on this particular subject, Mr. Akin has created an artificial distinction between “the majority of the Church Fathers” and the “moral unanimity” of the Fathers. The facts are these: Of the thirty or so Church Fathers that gave at least some interpretation to Genesis 1, all of them, with the exception of one (Origen), and possibly two (Augustine), believed that the days of Genesis 1 were six literal days of twenty-four hours each. Many of them even use the words “twenty-four hours” or its equivalent.(2) We don’t possess many defined dogmas in Catholicism that have as much patristic evidence behind them as we do for a literal six-day creation (e.g., doctrines of Mary, purgatory, indulgences, etc).

Moreover, when we examine the reasons for Origen’s denial of literal days, his departure from the Fathers is not something about which Akin should take much satisfaction. The fact is that Origen did not see the days of Genesis as literal because practically his whole methodology in interpreting Scripture was allegorization. There is hardly a Scriptural text that Origen did not impose his allegory – a method he learned from the school of Philo, the Greek philosopher bent on assigning his Platonic ideals to holy writ. There is a reason why we don’t call him “St. Origen,” and that is because many of his ideas were heterodox, and a few of his beliefs were actually declared heretical (e.g., the transmigration of souls).

As for Augustine, far from rejecting a literal six-day period, he did not for a moment suggest that the days of Genesis 1 could be billions of years long, and he never, in fact, rejected that the days of Genesis were 24 hours long. Rather, in *one* of his interpretations, Augustine suggested that perhaps God created everything instantaneously, and that the six days were the means by which the angels could comprehend, in stages, what God had made all at once.(3) In short, Augustine offered what he thought was a viable alternative to remedy what he believed were exegetical difficulties in interpreting Genesis 1 as six literal days, not to mention the fact that Augustine also had a penchant for spiritual interpretation.

The main reason Augustine had these difficulties is due to his self-imposed desire to find some place in Genesis 1 for the creation of the angels. Seeing no other place to put them, Augustine suggested that the creation of light in Genesis 1:3 served this purpose. This, of course, would force the other days to be representations of what the angels contemplated, but not necessarily in 24-hour segments. Since none of the other Fathers of the Church shared his concern about when the angels were created, Augustine acknowledged that his interpretation was only a possibility, and that he would gladly concede it if someone could harmonize the rest of the Genesis 1 text. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* he writes:

Whoever, then, does not accept the meaning that my limited powers have been able to discover of conjecture but seeks in the enumeration of the days of creation a different meaning, which

might be understood not in a prophetic or figurative sense, but literally and more aptly, in interpreting the works of creation, let him search and find a solution with God's help. I myself may possibly discover some other meaning more in harmony with the words of Scripture. I certainly do not advance the interpretation given above in such a way as to imply that no better one can ever be found, although I do maintain that Sacred Scripture does not tell us that God rested after feeling weariness and fatigue (Bk 4, Ch 28, No 45).

Another reason Augustine struggled with Genesis 1 was due to his unique interpretation of Ecclesiasticus 18:1. The Greek of the Septuagint translates it as: "He who lives forever has created all things in common." The word in question is "common," which is from the Greek *koine*, and normally means "in common" or "without exception." But the Latin Vulgate, from which Augustine read, translated *koine* with the words *omnia simul*,⁽⁴⁾ which in Latin means "at one time" or "altogether." But the Vulgate's translation is at best questionable and at worst erroneous. Ecclesiasticus 18:1, at least in the original Greek, does not, in its primary meaning, say that the creation was made "at one time," but of what was made, the Lord created it all, with no exceptions. The context of the passage bears this meaning out,⁽⁵⁾ and it is certainly the way the rest of the creation passages in Scripture describe God's work in Genesis, in addition to the fact that there is no other verse in Scripture which specifically indicates that God created everything "at one time." If the Greek author had wanted to impart the idea of "all at once" there were plenty of words at his disposal.⁽⁶⁾ The reason this mistake may have happened is that Augustine's knowledge of Greek was at an elementary level when he began his commentary on Genesis in 401 AD.⁽⁷⁾ It wasn't until he was an old man that he had a modest reading ability of Greek. Unfortunately, Augustine was dependent on the Vulgate's translation of Ecclesiasticus 18:1, and thus he could have easily misunderstood the meaning of the verse.⁽⁸⁾

So let's take the tally. Of the thirty or so Fathers who taught on the days of Genesis 1, all but two said the days were literal. Of those two, one had a known-habit of interpreting almost all of Scripture in an allegorical sense (Origen), while the other said the days could be limited to one instant of time, but only because he felt compelled to add the angels to Genesis 1, in addition to the fact that he misconstrued the Greek of Ecclesiasticus 18:1, yet even at that, admitted his interpretation might not be correct and he would gladly concede it to anyone who had a satisfactory literal interpretation. Thus, we have at least 94% of the Fathers who say the days of Genesis 1 are literal days, 3% who say they are not, and 3% who say that they may be.

So how could 94%-97% not figure in Akin's calculations as being a "moral unanimity," but only a "majority of Church Fathers"? We know Akin is aware that Origen and Augustine represent the only dissenting voices among the Fathers, since later in his essay he says that "Origen and Augustine...remarked...that the sun was not created until the fourth day." Obviously, Akin couldn't find any more Fathers who agreed. Could it be that Akin never really calculated how many Fathers believed that the days of Genesis 1 were to be literally interpreted before he wrote his article, and never really investigated why Origen opposed it and why Augustine offered an alternative? Could it be that Akin began with an agenda (e.g., a belief in evolution over long-ages) and was seeking some way of accommodating that view to satisfy the evolutionist audience to whom he was appealing?

Before we answer that question, let's look at another statement Akin makes in the same paragraph. He writes: "In addition later Catholic authorities (e.g., Thomas Aquinas; see ST I:74:2) recognized a diversity of permissible interpretations."(9)

From this statement you would think that Aquinas was just gushing with possible interpretations of Genesis 1, but his writings show that is not the case at all. Aquinas dealt with only two possible interpretations – Augustine's one day view (while rejecting Origen's allegorizing), or the earlier Fathers' six day view, represented best by Basil, Ambrose and Chrysostom.

Moreover, nowhere in his writings does Aquinas suggest that the days of Genesis 1 are to be understood as long ages or anything resembling today's evolutionary theory, nor did he posit that the literal interpretation could be substituted for the "framework" view that Akin is advocating. Again, the only question Aquinas had about how to interpret the days of Genesis was whether to adopt an instantaneous creation or six 24-hour days. Thomas strikes somewhat of a middle ground by suggesting that a likely scenario is that all the matter of the universe was instantaneously created yet fashioned over six literal days (Sent. 12, q. 1, art 2, ad 8). He reminds us that the non-Augustinian Fathers held that the formlessness of the primal matter did not mean no form at all, but rather a lack of proper differentiation and finished beauty (ST I, q. 69, art 1), and to which he agrees (Sent, d. 12, q. 1, art 1; art2, ad 2; ST I, q. 45, art 4). In opposition to Augustine's "angel" interpretation, Aquinas maintains that the light of Genesis 1:3 was literal light, because without that light there would have been no first day (ST I, q. 67, art 4).

Moreover, I think it is rather significant that paragraph 116 of the 1994 Catechism, the very Catechism that Akin claims is giving evidence of his symbolic "framework" hypothesis, quotes Aquinas from the *Summa Theologica* as stating that the literal sense is the meaning of the words of Scripture.(10) Paragraph 116 states: "The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and... 'all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal.' This is precisely why none of the Fathers, many of whom also offered allegorical interpretations to Genesis 1, never allowed such added nuances to obscure or replace the literal interpretation.

The 1909 Pontifical Biblical Commission:

Next, Akin addresses the decisions of the 1909 PBC regarding the interpretation of Genesis. After citing query 4, Akin concludes that the PBC "established a significant measure of freedom from the interpretation of the six days. In particular, the answer to the latter question asserted room for the day-age hypothesis."

Here Akin seems to possess the ability to read the mind of the 1909 PBC. Unfortunately for him, nowhere does the PBC mention the "day-age hypothesis" or the theory of evolution in any of its decrees on the interpretation of Genesis. The PBC refers to "these chapters [of Genesis], which the Fathers and Doctors have understood differently," but as we have seen, all the Fathers and Doctors believed in a miraculous, *ex nihilo* creation, and the only differences they had, apart from Augustine's issue with the creation of the angels, regarded how to understand the details of the literal interpretation of the six 24-hour days, not regarding whether the days of Genesis represented long-ages or suggested an evolutionary process. In fact, Pius X, who commissioned the 1909 PBC, was adamant against the theory of evolution, more so in its social context, but

also as it stemmed from its biological context. His writings were filled with denunciations against its pseudo-intellectual claims. For example, in the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Pius X stated the problem quite succinctly:

To conclude this whole question of faith and its various branches, we have still to consider, Venerable Brethren, what the Modernists have to say about the development of the one and the other. First of all they lay down the general principle that in a living religion everything is subject to change, and must in fact be changed. In this way they pass to what is practically their principal doctrine, namely, evolution. To the laws of evolution everything is subject under penalty of death – dogma, Church, worship, the Books we revere as sacred, even faith itself.

As for the PBC's answer to query 8, it appears that Akin has much too liberal an interpretation of its words. Query 8 posed the following:

Whether in that designation and distinction of six days, with which the account of the first chapter of Genesis deals, the word "days" can be assumed either in its proper sense as a natural day, or in the improper sense of a certain space of time; and whether with regard to such a question there can be free disagreement among exegetes?

The PBC's answer was: "Reply: In the affirmative." Because of the PBC's answer, many evolution enthusiasts, like Akin, have concluded that, as of 1909, the Catholic Church was adopting or accepting the theory of long-ages. But that is far from the truth.

First, as we noted in query 4, the PBC mentions nothing about the day-age theory or the theory of evolution in query 8. The PBC simply said "a certain space of time." As noted previously, since the PBC is connecting itself to the teachings of the "Fathers and Doctors," the PBC could not be intending to give room for the theory of evolution (since none of the "Fathers and Doctors" said the days of Genesis were long ages or that living things evolved from species to species), but merely to accommodate the view of St. Augustine (and which St. Thomas also said was possible), which held that a conceivable interpretation of Genesis 1 was that the whole universe was created instantaneously, i.e., in one day, rather than six days.

Second, and more importantly, in the clause "to such a question there can be free disagreement among exegetes," the PBC is not making a determination of whether Genesis speaks of indefinite periods of time, but only that "exegetes" can be free to disagree. Who are "exegetes"? They can be anyone, but they certainly do not have official standing in the Church. Exegetes can be "free to disagree" because they are, in fact, merely exegetes, not officials of the magisterium who must speak dogmatically for the Church. "Exegetes" are a diverse body of individuals who quite frequently "disagree" with one another on a whole host of subjects, not to mention the fact that they do not bind anyone's conscience. Thus they can argue all they want about the meaning of "day" in Genesis 1, but it won't matter at all in the final analysis. Conversely, the Church, in her official declarations, is not "free to disagree," simply because Church doctrine cannot waver between two opinions, since obviously, a "day" in Genesis 1 cannot be both 24-hours and not 24-hours at the same time.

Third, we must realize that, in allowing exegetes two possibilities of interpreting “day” in Genesis 1, the PBC is admitting that it *does not know how to interpret the word*. Obviously, if the PBC *did know*, it would have clearly stated whether “day” was 24 hours or not. Accordingly, the PBC cannot be claiming divine assistance to make a definitive decision on the word “day,” for by the same token, God does not waver between two possibilities when He gives divine help to Peter and his underlings. It follows, then, that the PBC’s only purpose was to tell “exegetes” they could be “free to disagree,” but it was not to discount two thousand years of Church tradition which had not so much as entertained the theory of evolution, even though the Greeks had been teaching it as a fact of life.(11)

Pius XII’s Letter to the 1948 PBC:

Next, Mr. Akin makes reference to Pius XII’s approval of a reply from the PBC, which Akin claims “effectively nullified the restrictive aspect of the PBC’s 1909 replies.” The part of the reply from Pius XII that Akin quotes is as follows:

These replies are in no way a hindrance to further truly scientific examination of these problems in accordance with the results acquired in the last forty years (Letter to Cardinal Suhard [1948]).

First, we wonder how, in his assessment of the 1909 PBC, Mr. Akin can say that its decrees were “restrictive,” yet also say, as we saw earlier, that the 1909 PBC gave a “significant measure of freedom.” At the least, Akin’s view of the 1909 PBC seems quite arbitrary, and perhaps is more of an indication that his emphases is dependent on the direction he wants to steer the reader at any given moment.

Second, Akin shows no evidence where, in this letter to Cardinal Suhard, that Pius XII makes reference to the 1909 PBC, yet Akin makes the brash conclusion that Pius XII was “effectively nullifying the restrictive aspects of the PBC’s 1909 replies.” Moreover, Akin is asserting that a mere papal letter – a letter with no designated authority for the universal church – trumps the official and binding declarations of 1909 PBC, even though the PBC was speaking for Pius X and was understood as an authoritative arm of his magisterium. Apparently, Akin feels not the slightest compunction of pitting Pius X and the 1909 PBC against Pius XII and the 1948 PBC. In reality, the differences between the two commissions are only in the mind of James Akin.

Irrespective of these concerns, the only thing of note that Akin quotes from Pius XII’s letter is a statement concerning literary forms. Regarding the interpretation of Genesis, at one point Pius XII says: “It is therefore impossible to deny or to affirm their historicity as a whole without unduly applying to them norms of a literary type under which they cannot be classed.” From this, Akin concludes that “there was a great deal of liberty thereby granted to exegetes on how to interpret these chapters of Genesis.” As we noted above, however, “exegetes” do not establish official doctrine for the Church, but are more or less the purveyors and surveyors of what the Church considers worthy of investigation, not committing herself to any of the suggestions of the exegetes, especially those that deviate from established dogma or the traditional consensus. This was the very reason Pius XII condemned the notion of *polygenism* (viz., the belief that the

human race had multiple sets of first parents) in his 1950 encyclical, *Humani Generis*, which in itself was a mortal blow to evolution yet to be admitted by its adherents.

Second, Pius XII's statement says nothing different than the 1909 PBC, since the latter also recognized literary forms within the Creation account. Considering Pius XII's use of the operative phrase "as a whole," the only thing he means to say is that, since we cannot be sure of the literary form being used in Genesis, then we cannot say that the narratives are all history. But this is no surprise, since the 1909 PBC said the same thing when it noted that Genesis contains "metaphors and anthropomorphisms." So there is really nothing here on which Mr. Akin can hang his hat. In fact, it is Akin's "framework" view which requires all of Genesis 1 to be symbolic, and of which neither the 1909 or 1948 PBC ever sanctioned.

The 1994 Catholic Catechism, Paragraph 337:

Next, Akin comes to the decisive part of his essay – his remarks on the 1994 Catechism. He tarts out by making what I would have to consider an outlandish claim. Akin writes:

In recent years the Church has adopted at least the outlines of an official position on the interpretation of the six day. This happened in 1994 with the release of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which states, "God himself created the visible world in all its richness, diversity, and order. Scripture presents the work of the Creator symbolically as a succession of six days of divine 'work,' concluded by the 'rest' of the seventh day" (CCC 337).

As you can see, Akin claims that the 1994 Catechism "adopted at least the outlines of an official position." First, we wonder what are "outlines" of an official position? Is Mr. Akin suggesting that the Catechism's author is tepid about giving a *genuine* official position and thus has to beat-around-the-bush and choose the clandestine approach to introducing this new teaching? I think this is precisely what Mr. Akin has in mind, since he concludes later in his essay that paragraph 337 of the Catechism

...introduced in a magisterial text for the first time here, that it has not been oft-repeated, and that it is not expressed in a forceful way....To introduce the symbolist view in such a casual manner suggests that Rome is wanting to establish more of an official position than it has to this point.

In other words, it is Mr. Akin's view that the Church has now adopted a *totally* symbolic view of Genesis 1, leaving room for any theory of evolution modern man wishes to invent. Yet he laments that, because the Church for 1900 years had believed that Genesis was to be understood in its literal sense, the Catechism must now tip-toe through this historical mine-field with the most gingerly of steps.

Despite all this tip-toeing, Mr. Akin eventually surpasses saying that the Catechism gives a mere "outline" of an official position, since in a later paragraph he comes right out and states that

It would be fair to say that the Catechism's statement makes the symbolic view the *official* interpretation of the Catholic Church on the six days (emphasis his).

To say the least, this is quite a presumptuous conclusion, for the simple reason that the Church has not declared it even possesses an official “symbolic” interpretation of Genesis 1, let alone bind anyone to such an interpretation. Unfortunately, this is not the first time Akin has made bold statements on controversial subjects and declared that something akin to his interpretation is the Church’s “official” position. A few months earlier in *This Rock*, Akin asserted that the Catechism made a “binding declaration of Catholic teaching...the...affirmation of the future conversion of the Jews (CCC 674).” Suffice it to say, neither the Catechism nor any other official Catholic teaching by pope or council states that there will be a “future conversion of the Jews.” There wasn’t even a consensus or “moral unanimity” among the few Fathers and Medievals who broached the subject, let alone an official position held by the Church.(12)

Mr. Akin tries to defend his interpretation of paragraph 337 by attempting to head off those who might retort that the Catechism “means merely that the creation narrative includes a few symbols” (which, incidentally, confirms that Akin sees all of Genesis 1 as symbolic). Akin assures us that this cannot be the case since

...that isn’t what it says. Symbolically [Latin, symbolice] is an adverb modifying the verb presents. The resulting symbolic manner of presentation is then specified ‘as [Latin, tamquam] a succession of six days.’ The succession of days itself, not just a few items mentioned within the days, is what the Catechism says is symbolic.

This is where Akin really gets himself into hot water. First, I think the audience should know that James Akin is not an expert in Latin (or Hebrew or Greek), at least enough to make such all-pervasive and binding conclusions as he does in the above paragraph. Unless he has learned Latin since the last time I talked with him, which was about three years ago, Akin acquires his Latin grammatical analysis from various people he knows who are acquainted with Latin. Nevertheless, Akin does not cite what authority he is consulting, and thus he gives the uneducated reader the mistaken notion that *his* analysis is common knowledge among those in the know. Irrespective of that lacuna, if, as he claims, Akin’s Latin analysis is such a crucial factor in analyzing the meaning of paragraph 337, why doesn’t the Catechism, or especially its detailed commentary, explain or even mention this important fact?

The answer is that Akin’s analysis of the Latin grammar is not only superfluous, it is quite off the mark, and you don’t even have to know Latin in order to figure this out. Let’s look at paragraph 337 once more. Please pay attention to the words I have underlined:

God himself created the visible world in all its richness, diversity, and order. Scripture presents the work of the Creator symbolically as a succession of six days of divine ‘work,’ concluded by the ‘rest’ of the seventh day.

As noted, Mr. Akin says that the word “symbolically” is an adverb modifying the verb “presents.” That much we will grant him. Adverbs modify verbs, even in English. But then Akin takes this well-known grammatical fact and arbitrarily limits the “symbolic manner of presentation” to the “succession of six days.” What has Akin done? Two things. First, he failed to acknowledge that verbs which are modified by adverbs are often accompanied by direct objects or verbal phrases, which is as true in Latin as it is in English. The verb “presents” is

connected to the words “the work of the Creator,” and as such, the clause “presents the work of the Creator” defines the extent of the “presentation.” Unfortunately, Akin eliminated this crucial phrase (“the work of the Creator”) while he arbitrarily confined “presents” as applying only to the next phrase, “succession of six days.” What Akin misses is that “the work of the Creator” is that which is “presented” “symbolically” in six successive days, not the six successive days in themselves.

This is confirmed by the other phrase Akin leaves out of his analysis – the genitival phrase “of divine ‘work.’” If he had paid close attention, he would have noticed that the “work” of the genitival phrase (“of divine work”) matches the “work” of the direct object of the verb “presents,” and thus he would have realized that the Catechism is specifying the “work” of the Creator as that which is portrayed symbolically, not the succession of six days.

In addition, if Akin had not left out the second verbal clause: “concluded by the ‘rest’ of the seventh day,” he would have again seen that it is not the “succession of six days” that the Catechism is interested in displaying as symbolic, but the divine “rest” occurring after the six days.

In other words, the Catechism, with regards to the question of symbolism in Genesis 1, is not committing itself to any other event that occurred during the six days, except God’s “work” and “rest.” In fact, that is why, of all the words in paragraph 337, the Catechism puts only “work” and “rest” in quotation marks, but not the succession of six days. Obviously, it does so because it wants to get across the fact that only the “work” and “rest” of God are “symbolically presented.” Why? Because it’s the same thing that the 1909 PBC said when it concluded that Genesis contains “anthropomorphisms.” Anthropomorphisms are physical actions that are ascribed to God who, in the real sense, does not “work” and “rest” as we do.(13) Other than that, paragraph 337 does not suggest anything else that might be symbolic in the Creation narrative.

Because of his misconstruing of the Catechism’s words, Akin goes on to conclude in the next paragraph:

The ordinary week view is at variance with the Catechism’s statement because it takes the succession of six days as literal days, not as a symbolic presentation of what God did...That leaves us with the Catechism endorsing some form of symbolic view, such as the framework interpretation mentioned earlier. The succession of six days isn’t a set of literal time periods but a symbolic means of presenting what God did in creation.

Akin, having no qualms about opposing the majority of Church Fathers (which, as we have seen in an earlier footnote, was a view the Fathers held against the Greek philosophers who were advocating an evolutionary origin to the universe), nor any qualm about opposing the consensus of medieval theologians who adopted the patristic consensus, he summarily dismisses all of them for one statement in the Catechism – a statement, which we have seen, he totally distorts to his own liking, as well as failing to cite even one corroborating source to back up his interpretation. Yet he calls his symbolic approach the “official” interpretation of the Catholic Church!

Ironically, Akin admits in the next paragraph that the use of “evening and morning” in each of the six says of the Genesis 1 presents a “problem.” He writes:

Evening and morning in that order are the transition points of the day according to the Hebrew reckoning (the Hebrew day starts at sunset). The mention of evening and morning tell you that *yom* is being used in the twenty-four hour sense, since longer periods are not divided by evening and morning in this way.

Here Akin is quite correct. The most conclusive evidence that the word “day” in Genesis 1 is to be interpreted as a 24-hour period is that, in Scripture, the phrase “evening and morning” always refers to the sequence of darkness and light comprising a single period of one day, a 24 hour period. “Evening and morning” is a very unique phrase in Scripture, since outside of Genesis 1 where it is used six times, it only appears eight other times in the Hebrew canon (cf., Ex 16:8-13; 27:21; 29:39; Lv 24:3; Nm 9:21; Dan 8:26).(14) As opposed to the many times in Scripture that the words “morning” or “evening” appear separately with the word “day,” some of which refer to a literal solar day and some which are indefinite of time, the specific Hebrew phrase “and there was evening and there was morning” never refers to a figurative or indefinite length of time.

In pointing out the meaning of “evening and morning,” Akin concludes that this definition would strongly disfavor the day-age interpretation of Genesis (i.e., the interpretation that claims the days of Genesis are symbolic of millions or billions of years). That much is obvious. In fact, this was one of Aquinas’ strongest reasons for siding with the Fathers’ view that “day” meant 24-hours.(15) What seems to escape Akin’s notice, however, is that the 24-hour period he voluntarily associates with the phrase “evening and morning” also undercuts his own symbolic approach to interpreting Genesis. Obviously, Akin cannot dismiss for his own non-literal interpretation what he happily applies to another non-literal interpretation.

The Light of Day One versus the Sun of Day Four:

Next, Akin starts to make more room for his “framework” theory by bringing out what he considers an extreme exegetical difficulty for those who interpret Genesis 1 literally. He writes:

...it would still have the other drawbacks...the sun not being created until the fourth age, after the earth already has dry land, after it has a hydrological cycle, and – most importantly– after it has a day-night cycle. People in the ancient world knew that daylight comes from the sun, and early writers (e.g., Origen and Augustine) remarked on the fact that the sun was not created until the fourth day, sometimes citing it as a reason not to take these as ordinary literal days.

For those who know the facts about this issue, it is clear that either Akin has not done his homework or he has an agenda hiding in the background. The fact is that, as much as the Fathers saw the apparent discrepancy between the light of the first day being at odds with the sun and stars created on the fourth day, none of them refused to harmonize the texts, and neither did the medievals who followed them for the next thousand years. For example, Aquinas postulated that the effusive light on the first day was created as the sun and stars on the fourth day,(16) perhaps similar to God fashioning man on the sixth day from the dust He created on the first day.

That the sun takes over the day/night sequence is an important fact. Since we know that the division of light and darkness by the sun's light takes place in 24 hours, this allows us to extrapolate the same 24 hours back to the first three days of creation when there was no sun, only light. Moreover, since Genesis 1 indicates that the sun is made to fit the day rather than the day to fit the sun, this is further confirmation that the Creation days were of the same length.

Why would the Fathers and medievals seek to harmonize the first and fourth day rather than adopt a symbolic view of Genesis 1? Because not only was it common practice to take Scripture at its plain word no matter how difficult,(17) more specifically, Scripture revealed to them that there was a difference between "light" and the luminous bodies we know as the sun and stars. For example, in the book of Job, God asks Job questions that he knows Job cannot answer. In Chapter 38:18-24 He asks:

18 "Have you understood the expanse of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this. 19
"Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place, 20 That
you may take it to its territory And that you may discern the paths to its home? 24
"Where is the way that the light is divided, Or the east wind scattered on the earth?"

Notice that God chooses his questions on the basis that Job cannot answer them. Logically, this must rule out the sun and stars Job sees everyday as an answer to God's query regarding the "dwelling of light." For those who have the heart to appreciate it, it is quite apparent that God is teaching us, through revelation, something we could never figure out on our own, that is, the light to which He is referring has no dimensional source. It exists as light, exclusive of being traced, and thus its paths cannot be discerned, and the way it is divided from darkness is not known. But, of course, in order to accept this information one must accept that Scripture is giving trustworthy propositional truth and not mere fables and myths.

The distinction between light and the sun is also supported by other Scriptures. For example, Psalm 74:16 states: "Yours is the day, Yours also is the night; You have prepared the light and the sun." If someone were to argue that the "light" of Psalm 74:16 may refer to the stars, other Scriptures will answer that objection by showing that the "light" is distinct from both the sun and the stars. For example, Ecclesiastes 12:1-2 states: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth...before the sun and the light, and the moon and the stars are darkened." Notice how the writer mentions all the known luminous bodies that emanate light, but he insists there is still an additional independent source of light. As in Psalm 74:16, these four sources are specifically separated by three deliberately placed Hebrew conjunctions so that it doesn't say "sun's light" but the sun and the light and the moon and the stars.

One might object that, in regards to purpose, there is no distinction between the light of Genesis 1:3 and the light of Genesis 1:14-19, and thus to claim that they are separate lights is to perpetrate an unnecessary redundancy on the Creation account. But this is easily answered in noticing that Genesis 1:14-17 state that the light of the stars and sun are to "give light on the earth" in order to serve as markers for "seasons, and for days and years." In contrast, the light of Genesis 1:3 appears before the waters surrounding the earth are separated and is not designated as a seasonal marker.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation:

Obviously, since any number of explanations can be given to the apparent anomalies of Genesis 1, the biblical exegete must not presume there is conflict or redundancy if one were to read the account literally. To claim that events did not happen as recorded would necessitate that the exegete possesses an all-knowing perspective from which to judge the validity of the text's propositions. If the exegete were to de-literalize every Scripture which posed an apparent conflict if read plainly, much of the Bible would become historically useless. Unfortunately, that is precisely what a lot of modern Catholic exegetes have concluded about the Bible's historical record, and I am afraid that Mr. Akin and Catholic Answers are falling into it.(18) As we have seen earlier, it is precisely the Catholic Church's two-thousand year insistence that key passages in Scripture be understood literally which has drawn the ire of Protestant objectors (e.g., Matt. 16:18-19; John 3:5; 6:54; 20:23; James 5:14, and many others).

For example, if the critiques levied against a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 were applied to the account of the plagues of Egypt in Exodus 8-10, the latter would present even more problems than a plain reading of the former. For example, Exodus 9:6 records that all the cattle of Egypt died in the fifth plague, but according to Exodus 9:19 more cattle were to be killed in the seventh plague. According to Exodus 8:24, the insects of the fourth plague destroyed all the plants of Egypt, but in Exodus 9:31 the flax and barley were destroyed in the seventh plague, while in Exodus 10:15 the locusts of the eighth plague eat the remaining vegetation.

It is not the prerogative of the exegete to conclude that these apparent conflicts bar a chronological reading of the text in favor of a thematic or symbolic one. The exegete must carefully compare Scripture with Scripture to work out a viable and credible chronology, accepting no compromises with inspired and inerrant revelation. Otherwise, he will end up concluding that the ten plagues of Egypt are fictitious accounts, or accounts riddled with factual errors due to its human authorship – which is precisely what modern biblical critics conclude about the Exodus events.

Now, Akin is correct in saying that Origen did not believe that the light and the sun could be harmonized.(19) In contrast, Augustine was always open to a harmonization of the two passages. In fact, if we follow Augustine's methodology we see that he sought to exhaust all possible harmonizations before he would ever be forced into an alternate interpretation. For example, in dealing with the firmament of Genesis 1:6-8, Augustine is firm in his resolve that, no matter how much the scientists of his day sought to discount the concept of water above the firmament, Scripture has the final word on difficulties of this nature. He writes:

With this reasoning some of our scholars attack the position of those who refuse to believe that there are waters above the heavens...But whatever the nature of that water and whatever the manner of its being there, we must not doubt that it does exist in that place. The authority of Scripture in this matter is greater than all human ingenuity.(20)

So of all the almost three dozen Fathers who gave interpretations to Genesis 1 (in addition to the medievals who also saw no problem in seeing the "light" and the "sun" as distinct sources of light), Akin can really only point to one, Origen, a known heretic, who refuses to harmonize the

light and the sun. Yet when Akin appeals to “e.g., Origen and Augustine” as his evidence, this gives the impression to the uneducated reader that there is a whole slew of Fathers who took the same line as Origen. If he was to be forthright with the evidence, Akin should have said that there was one patristic witness, possibly two, who did not share what all the other Fathers and medievals held in consensus. That honesty would have shown the reader that the burden of proof is on Mr. Akin, not on those who take the literal view of Genesis. But, of course, that is tough to do when your main goal is to present a symbolic view of Genesis to make room for the theory of evolution that many liberal-minded Catholics are clamoring for today.

To his credit, however, Mr. Akin finishes the article with a somewhat resigning note. He writes:

Indeed, the recent history of this question has strongly emphasized liberty of interpretation. To introduce the symbolist view in such a casual manner suggests that Rome is wanting to establish more of an official position than it has to this point, yet still not disturb individuals who are attached to the literal view, which heretofore has been both permitted and even historically dominant. The question of how the six days are to be interpreted should remain an active one in Catholic circles for some time to come.

As we have seen, due to Akin’s misinterpretation of the Catechism’s paragraph 337, he is wrong in assuming that “Rome is wanting to establish more of an official position” for the “symbolist view.” Thus, it is quite an understatement for him to say that Rome has “permitted” a literal view. Rome has more than “permitted” a literal view, since there is nothing in the Catechism which says that Rome is now entertaining a symbolic view of Genesis 1, except the “work” and “rest” of God that the Church has always seen as symbolic.

Accordingly, Akin is correct in saying that the literal view is the “historically dominant” one, but this is also an understatement. For example, we all have two arms, but usually the right one is dominant in most people. “Dominant” implies that, of two things, one has an advantage over the other, even though the other is quite viable in itself. But that is not the case with the literal versus the symbolic interpretation of Genesis 1. As we have painstakingly shown, close to 100% of the Fathers, and almost as many of the medievals, adopted the literal view of Genesis. In other words, there was no contest. The literal view was not merely “historically dominant,” it was, for all intents and purposes, the only game in town. Even those Fathers and medievals who had a spiritual interpretation of Genesis 1 had never considered it anything but an addition to the literal interpretation, not its rival.

In conclusion, if Mr. Akin wants to teach the beautiful symmetry of his “framework” view, he can do so, but he must first be true to the Tradition and do what all his predecessors have done: Adopt the literal interpretation of holy writ first, and only then add your favorite literary model. Both can work together, provided both are respected and have their proper domain.

Footnotes:

1. *This Rock*, “The Six Days of Creation,” January 2003, p. 36.

2. Basil: “Thus were created the evening and the morning. Scripture means the space of a day and a night...If it therefore says ‘one day,’ it is from a wish to determine the measure of day and night, and to combine the time that they contain. Now twenty-four hours fills up the space of one day – we mean of a day and of a night” (Hexameron 2, 8). See also: Ambrose (Hexameron 1:20, 37; 6:75; Gregory of Nyssa (Hexameron, PG 44:68-69); Victorinus (On the Creation); Ephraim (Commentary on Genesis); Irenaeus (Against Heresies 5, 28, 3); Lactantius (Institutes 7, 14); Clement of Alexandria (Stromata 6, 16); Epiphanius (Panarion 1, 1); Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechetical Lectures 3, 5); Hippolytus (Refutation of All Heresies 6, 9); Chrysostom (Homily 3); Athanasius (Discourse Against the Arians, 2, 48), et al.

3. It is well known among those who have studied Augustine that he often had two, three or even four interpretations to a given verse. For example, for 1 Timothy 2:4, Augustine had four distinct interpretations. Sometimes the variety was due to the difficulty of the verse, other times it was due to where Augustine was in the development of his thinking on a given subject.

4. *qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul Deus solus iustificabitur et manet invictus rex in aeternum.* The Douay-Rheims, which translates the Latin Vulgate, reads: “He that liveth for ever created all things together.”

5. Ecclesiasticus 18:1-6 says: “He who lives for ever created the whole universe; the Lord alone will be declared righteous...To none has he given power to proclaim his works; and who can search out his mighty deeds? Who can measure his majestic power? And who can fully recount his mercies? It is not possible to diminish or increase them, nor is it possible to trace the wonders of the Lord” (RSV).

6. *Hama, eutheos, parachrema, hapax, pote*, et al.

7. Ancient Christian Writers, ed. Johannes Quasten, et al, Vol. 1 (New York: Newman Press, 1982), p. 5.

8. This is not to impugn the Vulgate in any way. Overall, it is the best translation of holy writ with which we have ever been graced. But most scholars are aware that there were a few places where Jerome’s translation is questionable.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

10. ST I, 1, 10, ad 1.

11. In his Hexameron, Basil gives a long list of Greek writers advocating the evolutionary hypothesis (Homily 1, NPNF II, vol. 8, p. 53). Likewise, Basil dismissed the allegorical interpretation of Origen as “old wife’s tales” (The Hexameron, Homily 3, 2). Hippolytus also tells of his struggles against the Greek ideas of evolution in The Refutation of All Heresies, “Ch. X: Leucippus and His Atomic Theory.” Hippolytus also critiques “Thales, Founder of Greek Astronomy;” “Pythagoras on his Cosmogony and the Transmigration of Souls”; Empedocles on “Causality”; Heraclitus on his “Theory of Flux”; Anaximenes on the idea of “Infinite Air”;

Anaxagoras on his “Theory of Mind and Efficient Cause”; Parmenides on his “Theory of Unity,” and many other Greek philosophic and scientific ideas.

12. For my essay refuting Akin’s assertion that the Catechism is officially teaching a future conversion of the Jews, see my paper at <http://www.catholicintl.com/epologetics/akinarticle.asp>

13. In our previous quote from Augustine from *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, we see that he also believes this is a point that cannot be compromised (“I certainly do not advance the interpretation given above in such a way as to imply that no better one can ever be found, although I do maintain that Sacred Scripture does not tell us that God rested after feeling weariness and fatigue” (Bk 4, Ch 28, No 45).

14. Daniel’s use of the “evenings and mornings” is confirmed to be understood as 2,300 days by many of the Father’s (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Book 1, Ch 21: “For he said that there were two thousand three hundred days from the time that the abomination of Nero stood in the holy city, till its destruction.”

15. Aquinas writes: “Thus we find it said at first that “He called the light Day”: for the reason that later on a period of twenty-four hours is also called day, where it is said that “there was evening and morning, one day” (*Summa Theologica*, Bk 1, Ques. 69, Art 1).

16. *Summa Theologica*, 1, Qs. 67, Art. 4, Re. 2. Agreeing with Aquinas here are: Gregory of Nyssa (*Hexameron*, PG 44, 66-118); Ephrem the Syrian (*Genesim et in Exodum commentarii*, in CSCO, v. 152, p. 9); Chrysostom (*Homilies on Genesis* (PG 53, 57-58); See especially, Basil in *The Hexameron*, Homily II, 7; Victorinus in *On the Creation of the World*. Leo the Great stated: “But what is the sun or what is the moon but elements of visible creation and material light: one of which is of greater brightness and the other of lesser light? For as it is now day time and now night time, so the Creator has constituted divers kinds of luminaries, although even before they were made there had been days without the sun and nights without the moon” (Sermon XXVII). Honorius of Autun (*Hexameron* PL 172, 257); Peter Lombard (*Lombardi opera omnia*, PL 192, 651); Colonna, aka Aegidius Romanus (*Opus Hexaemeron*); Nicholas of Lyra (*Postillae perpetuae*); Cajetan (*Commentarii de Genesis* 1); as well as Moses Mendelssohn (*Commentary on Genesis*) Zwingli (*Werke*); Luther (*Commentary on Genesis*); Calvin (*Commentary on Genesis*); Petavius (*Dogmata theologica*) et al.

17. The Catholic Church has a rather marked history of taking Scriptural passages quite literally, whereas Protestants find such exegesis theologically repugnant, e.g., the interpretation of John 6:54 for the Eucharist; John 3:5 for Baptism; John 20:23 for Confession; James 5:14 for Extreme Unction; Acts 8, 19 for Confirmation; Matthew 19:6-9 for Marriage; Matthew 16:18-19 for the Papacy, et al.

18. For a thorough critique of Raymond Brown and the school of Higher Biblical Criticism, purchase the tapes “Raymond Brown and the Demise of Catholic Biblical Scholarship” and “Historical Criticism: Friend or Foe?” at <http://www.catholicintl.com/newtapes.asp>

19. Origen writes to Celsus: “By far the most silly thing is the distribution of the creation of the world over certain days, before days existed; for, as the heaven was not yet created, nor the foundation of the earth yet laid, nor the sun yet revolving, how could there be days?” (*Origen Against Celsus*, Book VI, Ch 60).

20. The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Bk 2, Ch. 5, No 9.

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