

For Quaker Consideration (Seriously):

The Bible in the *Confessions* of Augustine.

The first few verses of Genesis are familiar to most of us. They're easy to remember, in part because their story is a straightforward one: On the first day, God creates light, and day and night; on the second he separates the water from the so-called firmament (literally a vault or buttress), which stands between two bodies of waters, that of the earth and that of heaven. He goes on to make dry ground, sun, moon, and stars, fish and birds, and then land creatures—and finally humankind.

This story is told in a very compact style even for Classical Hebrew, which has a tiny vocabulary and dense grammatical structures relative to modern Western languages. Moreover, the passage is linear; it is logical; it is to the point. Hence standard English translations are, in this case, a better than average indication of what the original text was like. It tells of the creation of the universe, step by step, in six days.

To many later minds, that obviously wasn't a satisfying way to understand the origins of matter, the formation of our own planet, or

the emergence of different species. The prevalent modern method of defending this passage against scientific objections is to read *into it* narrowly, in order to derive a single authoritative interpretation from the sparse detail. The principles for such narrow reading with the farthest-reaching consequences for US culture emanate from Princeton Divinity School in the nineteenth century, particularly from a professor called Charles Hodge (1797-1878), who used to be a household name. Literalist claims for the Bible didn't originate in America, but it was from the so-called Princeton School of thought they began to take on the power they maintain today.

At Princeton, biblical scholars apparently meant to compete head-on with the excitement of scientific and technological discovery by treating the Bible as a reservoir of empirical fact. People had started to regard reservoirs of empirical fact as quasi-sacred, so proponents of the Bible, in an effort not to be left out of this new pseudo-religion, came, in time, to claim that the Bible was pure, objective truth, a set of data with the correct interpretations built in and accessible to experts, one interpretation per passage, in almost the way that an ordinary mathematical equation has only one solution.

Galapagos finches, Darwin established, show in the shapes of their beaks the essential story of their species origins, and you can flesh that story out with evidence from all over the natural world; in the same way, the words of Genesis were supposed to be the essential data set concerning the origins of the universe, and you could enrich that set from elsewhere in the Bible, say by calculating the human generations listed to come up with how many years old the world was exactly.

Pretty kooky. In fact, people who by the nineteenth century had been dead for hundreds and even thousands of years could have said how unnecessary these contortions were. Moreover, *their* ways of enriching and expanding the meaning of the Bible were—I kid you not—ones that Quakers would have recognized.

Jewish intellectuals in the ancient world from the time we have any historical knowledge of them, and Paul and the other New Testament writers, and the so-called Church Fathers, and medieval Catholic thinkers, and the scholars of the Talmud and the Protestant Reformation, and later Christian and Jewish theologians didn't attempt to treat the Bible in idolized isolation, as a self-referential thing. They treated it as God's own actual gift to them for their own actual use; if the

Bible was for actual human use, use that changes over time and varies with culture, then that use had to be contextualized and flexible.

Thus they took the Bible trustingly into their minds and considered it in light of their own experience and needs, and they interpreted it quite freely, sending it out again and sharing it in new forms and functions.

Much unlike Americans, they nearly all lived in multi-lingual environments, so they weren't tempted by the notion that a single, literal, word-for-word reading of anything was possible; they probably couldn't imagine a world in which human beings didn't have to translate, and thus interpret, as best they could. And interpreting itself was an act of worship for them.

Take the greatest early interpreter of the combined Jewish and Christian Bible, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.), who was also the most famous and influential of the Church Fathers, the scholars and religious leaders who between the earliest period of popular Christianity and the start of the so-called Dark Ages worked out the essentials of how this new religion would be thought about and practiced.

Augustine couldn't read the original Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament; he may never have seen the text; he very likely never met a Jewish scholar. He could read the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (which is, however, hardly a great translation by modern standards), and he could read the original Greek New Testament; though he couldn't read Greek well, and it wasn't a whiz-bang text anyway: like almost every piece of literature recopied many times by hand, it was full of mistakes (which have only recently been cleaned up to a certain degree by the kind of professors who taught me, the so-called "textual critics"). He could read the so-called Old Latin scripture (early Latin translations from the Greek Bible) , because he was a native Latin speaker, but even in his own time these writings were recognized as a bad second and third-hand version.

In his own first literary masterpiece, the autobiographical *Confessions*, Augustine shows that he's aware of such difficulties, but he doesn't let any of them worry him; instead, he interprets, and in fact rewrites, scripture with incredible boldness and pleasure. He can do this because many years before he got over beliefs that are logically and theologically

impossible, such as that God is a physical being; hence in his intellectual maturity he treats a huge range of acceptable Bible-based notions as a candy store of ways to imagine an all-powerful and all-loving God and the works of this Being. In the *Confessions* he even lays out three different detailed interpretations of the first verse of Genesis, and then tells his readers, in so many words, “Go nuts! Pick whichever one you like, or come up with some other one on your own, as long as you’re sincere! I don’t care. Isn’t this fun?” (12. 24-27).

He himself is, after all, setting right here the example of winging it. The whole last two chapters of the *Confessions*—a stretch of 98 pages in my own translation—are an ecstatic and poetic, highly imaginative yet quasi-scientific account of what the first verses of Genesis might mean. Here is how he winds up his disquisition and his book:

13.47. We give thanks to you, Master! We see the sky and the earth—whether that means the physical regions above and below, or the spiritual and physical creation [That is, in Genesis 1:1, is it “sky” or “heaven” we’re talking about? Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, all three use a single word for the realm above, and these languages never really

clearly differentiate between physical and metaphysical meanings]; and as an adornment of these parts—which make up either the whole material mass of the universe, or the whole creation in sum—we see the light that has been made and separated from the darkness.

We see the firmament or support of the sky, whether this is between the spiritual waters above and the physical ones below, which were the initial physical objects of the universe; or whether the firmament is simply this space of the air, as this is called the sky as well. Through it wander the winged creatures of the sky, between the waters, those that are carried above them like mist and also drip dew during calm nights, and the waters below that, because of their weight, only undulate on earth.

We see the beauty of the waters herded together over the plains of the sea, and we see the dry earth, either stripped bare, or fashioned so that it could be sightly and ordered as the basis for herbage and trees. [This sentence contributes to a long series of puns on the Latin words *species*—from which we get the English “species,” or type; and *speciosus*, from which we get the English “specious,” or “plausible-seeming but

untrue”; but the meanings of these Latin words are very broad, and they toggle between the idea of things you *can* see and identify, and things you *want* to see, because they are ordered and therefore intellectually pleasing and/or beautiful and desirable. Augustine exploits this ambiguity to the hilt and offers some of his typical extended play on three angles: 1) the philosophical—with its traditional stress on categories (as in the *Categories*,¹ a work of Aristotle that Augustine discusses earlier in the *Confessions*)—2) the aesthetic, and 3) the erotic; very important in the *Confession*, where we keep reading about conversion as a holy seduction]

We see the lights gleaming above, the sun satisfying the day’s needs, the moon and the stars comforting the night, and all of them marking and giving meaning to periods of time.

We see the watery element stretching endlessly in all directions, burgeoning with fish and monsters and birds—as the density of air,

¹ The proper Latin word for these came to be *praedicamenta* (*Confessions* [4.28]). But Augustine

which bears up birds in their flight, is congealed from the waters' evaporation.

We see the face of the land made lovely by land animals, and we see humankind, in your image and likeness, placed above all unreasoning living things because of this very image and likeness, meaning excellence in reasoning and understanding....

We see all these things, and we see that individually they are good, and that all of them are very good....

51. But the seventh day is without an evening and has no setting sun; you made it holy so that it could remain steadfast for all time. You made it after your other very good works. You made them all, of course, when you were at rest, so this expression in your book, that you rested on the seventh day,² is meant to foretell to us that after our works, which are very good in that you granted them to us, we too will rest in you on the Sabbath of eternal life.

² Genesis 2:2-3.

52. At that time also you will rest in us as you now work in us, and your rest through us will be like your works through us now. But you, master, are always at work and always at rest, and you don't see things in time or move in time or rest in time; and yet you make both things for us to see in time and time itself—and rest outside of time.

53. Thus *we* see the things you made because they exist; but they exist because you see them. And we see both outwardly that they exist and inwardly that they are good, but you saw them made at that point where you saw that they needed to be made.

Even we at one time were moved to do good, and that was after our heart conceived from your Spirit; but at an earlier time, when we abandoned you, we were moved to do evil. You, however, the single, the good God, have never stopped doing good. There are certain good works of ours, which are in fact your gift to us, but they are not for all time. We hope that after these works we will rest in your great power to make us holy. But *you* are goodness that needs no goodness, and so are always at rest, since your rest is your very self.

But who among humankind can offer another human being a way to understand this? What angel could offer it to another angel? What angel could offer it to a human being? We must ask you for it, and look for it from you; we must knock at your door: in this way, we will receive it, we will find it, and you will open the door to us.³

Thus the *Confessions* closes in a characteristic ecstasy of untrammelled biblical quotation. And the whole baroque literary edifice of the final two books of the *Confessions* has been reared on the basis of the decidedly not baroque Genesis, Chapter 1. Going back and forth between books of the Old and The New Testaments, and pulling in pagan philosophical discourse too, Augustine has drawn out Biblical vocabulary and images, ideas and questions; but he makes everything thoroughly and ineffably his own. It was a pain in the neck to annotate my translation, because sometimes there would be twenty allusions to the Bible on a single page, but many of these would involve only a short phrase or a fleeting image that occurs several times in the Bible, and

³ Matthew 7:7-8.

Augustine might be using that phrase or image in a form or with a meaning that modern readers of the Bible would not recognize.

What was the point for me and my readers in citing the Bible in these instances? Once someone has developed his private literary language quite extensively and is burbling away in it in directions never contemplated by the sources of that language, it's of limited interest to cite the sources.

Like George Fox more than a thousand years later, Augustine uses the Gospel image of the door being opened to him. But in both authors the derivation of that image is rather ironic. In the Bible, Jesus, a Jew from a hinterland of Palestine, the Galilee, figuratively invites followers into his house. Did either George Fox or Augustine ever enter a Jewish house? Would either of them, in his wildest dreams, have accepted *everything* such a host—or, really, *any* host—told him, in the spirit of a guest who knocks longingly on a single door because he's certain that all the answers are behind it?

Augustine, I'm confident, absolutely wouldn't have. For one thing, not only was he viciously antisemitic, but his idea of sin was organized around sex, including sex within lawful marriage, and his ideal was lifelong celibacy; such a notion was and remains alien to Judaism. As for Fox, he had limited use for the idea of sin, an absolute foundation of the Jesus movement. Both authors, when you come down to it, quote the Bible with complete freedom and considerable gall. But both read the Bible to great effect in growing into a life worth living, and in building a community. *That* was their authority vis à vis the Bible. If we take the example of these great thinkers and leaders to heart, then the principles for reading the Bible appear positively New Age: we should follow our own reasoning, our own hearts, our own bliss.