

The Role of the Genesis Creation in the Writings of the Apostolic Fathers

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1. Introduction

Earliest Christianity continued to affirm the doctrine of creation as a fundamental tenet in its beliefs after the closing of the canon. This is evident in those writings that have been traditionally classed as the “Apostolic Fathers” of the late first century and second century.¹ However, a problem exists in the contemporary understanding of the way the “Apostolic Fathers” interpreted the account of the Genesis creation, concerning whether the Fathers interpreted the Genesis creation account literally or fundamentally in some other fashion. Misunderstandings of the hermeneutic method of the Fathers can lead to the perception that they simply “spiritualize away” creation. The purpose of this essay is to seek to help solve this problem by discovering, through a close reading of the texts of the “Apostolic Fathers,” the way in which these Fathers understood the factual and temporal aspects of the Genesis creation account.

A study of these earliest extant, post-canonical Christian writings shows that not only did the Apostolic Fathers assume, but they also explicitly uphold, the Genesis account of a literal, six-day creation. In doing so, these authors do more than merely echo New Testament

¹ This essay deals with those writers traditionally included among the “Apostolic Fathers,” whilst acknowledging that the classification leads to arbitrary boundaries. For example, the works of Irenaeus are not considered here; neither are other second-century apologists, nor the Alexandrians Clement and Origen.

emphases; they indeed develop them further, making the doctrine of creation a fundamental part of the foundation of their theologies. These writings have not received the attention that they should, in terms of their understanding of the creation account. As an illustration of this, it is noteworthy that in Peter Bouteneff's monograph on the patristic readings of the creation narratives, as well as Stanley Jaki's study of the history of the interpretation of Genesis 1, the "Apostolic Fathers" are largely absent from both discussions. These recent studies skip from the New Testament and Jewish materials respectively to those of the second-century apologists.²

2. General Remarks on the "Apostolic Fathers"

The texts traditionally denominated as belonging to the "Apostolic Fathers," are by no means a homogenous group of texts; nor are they merely a continuation of the New Testament message; with, "various degrees of approximity to the apostolic preaching. . . none of these writings is ultimately a repetition of the apostolic New Testament message."³ What allows this group of texts to be considered together is that, as Brox again notes, they encompass, "over and beyond all differences. . . the written documents of the post-apostolic era," standing "on the threshold of the transition from the first generation to the later age of the Church."⁴ However, the selection of texts that have traditionally been called the "Apostolic Fathers" is arbitrarily based on tradition, since the corpus excludes some pseudepigraphic and apocalyptic Christian texts that may have been produced earlier than the included texts. Therefore, the term "Apostolic Fathers" is essentially best

² Peter C Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 55-88; Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages* (London: Thomas More Press, 1992), 70-108.

³ Norbert Brox. "Apostolic Fathers," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*. Ed. Karl Rahner (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), 33-36, 34. It is nevertheless noteworthy that many of these texts were treated as Scripture by some churches in the second century. See Roger E. Olson. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 42.

⁴ Brox, "Apostolic Fathers," 34.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

understood an anachronistic denominator for a group of texts that have been popularly, if not altogether logically, categorised together.⁵

Olsen describes the role of the Apostolic Fathers in the history of Christian theology as “ambiguous.”⁶ Protestant Christianity has been particularly ambivalent towards their contribution.⁷ It is nevertheless undeniable that the “Apostolic Fathers” provide a bridge between apostolic and later Christianity,⁸ they provide us with an important window into how the teachings of the apostles were interpreted in the immediately succeeding generations, and it is in this that they have their principal value. The focus of this paper is on how these earliest interpreters of the canonical apostles understood the Old Testament story of creation, both in terms of its nature and its meaning.

3. The Hermeneutics of the “Apostolic Fathers”

Some observations are relevant concerning the hermeneutic approaches used by the “Apostolic Fathers.” First, it is important to note that, “[t]he so-called ‘patristic exegesis’ is deeply rooted in New Testament writings. The exegetes of the patristic period applied and developed methods already used in writings produced during the apostolic period.”⁹ However, Broz also observes that, “[t]he acceptance of New Testament methods did not mean mere repetition,”¹⁰ so that the Church Fathers continued to develop “an ever more sophisticated exegetical methodology.”¹¹

The church fathers were largely uninterested in the “objective” meaning of the text. This does not mean that they believed the text did not have a literal sense, but they were convinced that Scripture had an

⁵ For the purpose of this paper, I have used the collection found in Michael E. Holmes, ed. & tr. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.) This excludes Irenaeus, who is also often classified with the “Apostolic Fathers.”

⁶ Olson, “Christian Theology,” 52.

⁷ Ibid., 53. See also Gonzalez, *Christian Thought*, 96.

⁸ Olson, “Christian Theology,” 52-53.

⁹ Jaroslav Broz. “From Allegory to the Four Senses of Scripture: Hermeneutics of the Church Fathers and of the Christian Middle Ages.” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*. Ed. Petr Pokorny and Jan Roskovec. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, (2002) 301-309, 302.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

aspect that lay beyond the strictly literal sense, and they always sought this non-literal meaning. Broz explains that, “[t]hey searched for the meaning that a particular text might have for the historical, theological, or spiritual context (i.e. for the ‘today’) in which it was being read.”¹² This hermeneutic “was always closely related to the problems of apology, theology, or spirituality that characterized specific historical-existential circumstances of life.”¹³

The Church Fathers were convinced that “Scripture operates on a number of levels and that it contains implicit spiritual meanings.”¹⁴ The allegorical method of the Church Fathers rather affirms these different levels at which Scripture operates, instead of denying them. Therefore, in using an allegorical interpretation, the Fathers did not deny the literal account of creation; as Bouteneff points out, there are two ways of using allegory, either to supersede the literal meaning or to retain it.¹⁵ However, referring specifically to the works of the Fathers, Jaki states as a fundamental epistemological principle that, “[t]he allegorical sense makes sense only insofar as it rests on a clear understanding of the text, which in turn makes no sense if severed from that external reality to which it refers in countless cases.”¹⁶ However, even if allegory is used to supersede literal meaning, there must be a literal meaning from which interpretation must begin.¹⁷

It is also notable that the exegesis of the “Apostolic Fathers” was highly christocentric, as well as being focused on the church.¹⁸ For this reason, in reading the creation narratives through the eyes of the Fathers, “[h]owever we might reckon the narratives’ relationship to the unfolding of events in historical time, our gaze will be fixed decidedly on the New Adam.”¹⁹ For the earliest church, although the oral message of Christ

¹² Ibid., 303.

¹³ Ibid. Broz further explains here that, “[t]hat is the reason we must carefully identify the historical, theological, and spiritual context in which particular exegeses were produced.”

¹⁴ Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 177-178.

¹⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁶ Jaki, *Genesis 1*, 271.

¹⁷ Ibid., points out that typology raises similar issues.

¹⁸ Broz, “Hermeneutics,” 303-304.

¹⁹ Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 183. This aspect of the hermeneutic of the “Apostolic Fathers” is somewhat reflected in the call of Paul H. Santmire. “The Genesis Creation Narratives Revisited: Themes for a Global Age,” *Interpretation* 45.4 (1991): 366-379.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

received priority, the Bible continued to be principally the Old Testament.²⁰ The Old Testament is “Scripture,” and it is normative; however thoroughly christological its interpretation may have been.²¹

In this way, the exegesis of the “Apostolic Fathers” is founded on the strong conviction that the Old and New Testaments represent “an inseparable unity.”²² In terms of the use that the “Apostolic Fathers” made of the Old Testament, Scarsaune has noted that, “[i]n many respects, Christian literature of the period 30–250 C. E. may be said to be one single large commentary on. . . the Hebrew Bible.”²³

4. General Remarks on Creation in the “Apostolic Fathers”

The scholarly work that seems to have most closely examined the topic of creation in the “Apostolic Fathers” was Angelo O’Hagan’s monograph on *Material Re-creation in the Apostolic Fathers*, published in 1968. O’Hagan set out to discover where the “Apostolic Fathers” stood on that polarity that is represented on the one extreme by the Gnostic-Origenist tradition which reduces to a minimum the significance of God’s creation of matter, and on the other extreme, by those who consider that the final state of nature will be achieved through a repetition, albeit improved and elevated, of God’s original act of creation.²⁴ Of course, O’Hagan’s excellent study had an eschatological focus, and the original creation was merely assumed. In other words, the belief of the “Apostolic Fathers” in the Genesis creation account was not questioned, nor were the various uses that they made of it explored in his study.

O’Hagan refers to the ontological fact, in the Jewish view, of “the inherent goodness of matter which derives from creation’s continuity

377, for Genesis 1-2 to be read “through the lenses of an eschatological, ecological hermeneutic of the Future and the Fullness Thereof.”

²⁰ Brox, “Apostolic Fathers,” 36.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Broz, “Hermeneutics,” 302.

²³ Oskar Skarsaune, “The Development of Scriptural Interpretation in the Second and Third Centuries—Except Clement and Origen,” in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, Volume 2, Ed. C. Brekelmans, Menahem Haran, and Magne Saebø. First published 1996. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 373-386, 375.

²⁴ Angelo P. O’Hagan, *Material Re-creation in the Apostolic Fathers*. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Band 100. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), 1.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

with its Creator.”²⁵ It is this principle that necessarily links the first and second creations together, particularly in later Jewish and early Christian thought. Furthermore, soteriology and cosmology were reciprocally linked in that “God’s action in creation and in history was seen to be one and the same.”²⁶ A literal eschatological recreation therefore requires a literal understanding of the Genesis creation.

For these reasons, O’Hagan’s general conclusion was significant in terms of our consideration of the original creation: that this “belief in some material renewal of creation is found in such a large percentage of the Apostolic Fathers. . . and that it leaves fairly clear traces on almost all the others.”²⁷ This indicates that, “in view of the Apostolic Fathers widely differing origins, backgrounds, and literary forms, coupled with their lack of interdependence, belief in a material re-creation of the world was widespread during the sub-apostolic age.”²⁸ The reasonable corollary of this conclusion is that an original material creation of the world was also widespread.²⁹

Although it is counter-intuitive in terms of popular contemporary stereotypes, the fact that the writers of the early patristic era lived in an ancient culture far removed from our own, and before scientific materialism, does not mean that they showed no interest in the nature and process of the Genesis creation. Irenaeus, for example, speculated on the nature of the days of creation.³⁰ Relevant to some more modern perspectives, Bouteneff accordingly notes that, “[t]he de-stressing of science did not forbid the early writers from asking what the “days” actually were—whether they were six twenty-four-hour periods, whether they were eras, millennia. . . or even how there could be said to be a morning, an evening, or a day before there was a sun.”³¹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 8. See also *ibid.*, 9-11.

²⁷ O’Hagan, *Material Re-creation*, 141.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.23.2; 5.28.3.

³¹ Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 171.

5. The Theological Role of Creation in Specific Texts

1 Clement

The first of the documents that will be considered is the letter known as *1 Clement*, which was written from the Christians in Rome to the church in Corinth. *First Clement* is “one of the earliest extant Christian documents outside the New Testament,”³² being written “around the time when John was composing the book of Revelation on the island of Patmos.”³³ Although very few extant manuscripts of this document exist,³⁴ we know that later Christian writers valued *1 Clement* highly, and “[i]t was quoted frequently, and was considered as part of the New Testament in some areas.”³⁵ Robert Grant’s assessment was that, “[d]uring the first thousand years after the Apostolic Fathers wrote, the church valued most highly the writings of Clement and Ignatius, and the church was right in doing so.”³⁶ In Grant’s evaluation, the theologies of both Clement and Ignatius were “creative” rather than “derivative.”³⁷

The occasion for the writing of *1 Clement* appears to have been internal discord within the Corinthian Church, the cause of which is unclear.³⁸ Holmes observes that, “the elements of peace, harmony, and order that are so important to the author (or authors) of this letter reflect some of the fundamental values of Roman society.”³⁹ In his pursuit of his goal of reconciling the factions within the Corinthian Christian community, the author of *1 Clement* uses Jewish and NT writings, as well as making extensive use of examples drawn from standard rhetoric. Scarsaune highlights that, “[o]ne feature of *1 Clement* has leapt to the

³² Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 33.

³³ Ibid. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 35-36, also notes that, “[c]lues in the letter itself suggest that the document probably was penned sometime during the last two decades of the first century. . . . There is, however, a long-standing tradition of dating the document a bit more narrowly; to ca. AD 95-97.”

³⁴ Note that the complete Greek text of *1 Clement* has survived in only a single manuscript, Codex Hierosolymitanus from AD 1056. (Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 38).

³⁵ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 38.

³⁶ Robert M. Grant “The Apostolic Fathers’ First Thousand Years,” in *Church History* 31 (1962): 421-429, 429.

³⁷ Ibid. Grant here classifies the theologies of texts such as Barnabas, Didache, Hermas, Papias, Polycarp in the “derivative” category.

³⁸ As Holmes *Apostolic Fathers*, 34, notes, this internal discord is not the explicit focus of the letter due to the conventions of the genre. Note Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 34, where he reconstructs the possible circumstances of the writing of this letter.

³⁹ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 33.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

eye of every commentator and has been stated over and over again” is “the strong feeling of *immediate continuity* with the Old Testament. . . displayed by the author.”⁴⁰ The author himself seems to be immersed in the knowledge of the Old Testament.⁴¹

First Clement presents God’s creation as a model of harmony for the Corinthian Church. He writes, “Let us note how free from anger he is toward all his creation.”⁴² In this scheme, God is clearly the maker of a world that was made good:

Seeing, then, that we have a share in many great and glorious deeds, let us hasten on to the goal of peace, which has been handed down to us from the beginning; let us fix our eyes upon the Father and Maker of the whole world [τὸν πατέρα καὶ κτίστην τοῦ σύμπαντος κόσμου] and hold fast to his magnificent and excellent gifts and benefits of peace.⁴³

Holmes rightly notes that in this passage, “[t]he portrait of cosmic harmony (20.1-12) is largely of Stoic origins, and his use of the metaphor of the body (37.5) is shaped by Stoic cosmology. . . .”⁴⁴ However, this is explicitly within a Judaeo-Christian setting in which, for example, the stars move at God’s decree, in a universe of which God is sovereign because of His right by creation:

The heavens move at his direction and obey him in peace. . . The sun and the moon and the choirs of stars circle in harmony within the courses assigned to them, according to his direction, without any deviation at all. . . . The earth, bearing fruit in the proper seasons in fulfilment of his will, brings forth food in full abundance. . . All these things the great Creator and Master of the universe ordered to exist in peace and harmony. . . [ταῦτα πάντα ὁ μέγας δημιουργὸς καὶ δεσπότης τῶν ἀπάντων ἐν εἰρήνῃ καὶ ὁμονοίᾳ προσέταξεν εἶναι.]⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Skarsaune, “Scriptural Interpretation,” 381.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 382, also notes that, “[m]any of his short quotations seem to be quotations from memory, which explains some “free” renderings of the LXX text, and also some composite quotations. On the other hand, he is the first Christian writer to insert rather long quotations which obviously are copied *verbatim* directly from LXX manuscripts.” Skarsaune, *ibid.*, also notes here that the latter practice is “non-typical in comparable Jewish documents.”

⁴² *1 Clement* 19:3, tr. Holmes, 73.

⁴³ *1 Clement* 19:2, ed. and tr. Holmes, 72-73.

⁴⁴ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 37.

⁴⁵ *1 Clement* 20:1-11, ed. and tr. Holmes, 73-75.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

We may note here that the author of *I Clement* refers to God as ὁ δημιουργὸς καὶ δεσπότης τῶν πάντων. This is a title that is repeated in *I Clement* 33:2, as will be quoted below. It is a somewhat formulaic title that is, therefore, of some interest. Justo González observes that it may be possible that, “in calling God “demiurge” Clement conceives his relation with the world in Platonic terms, as the artisan who takes a pre-existent matter and gives it a form in imitation of an idea that is above himself.”⁴⁶ However, as González concedes, “Clement does not say enough about creation to allow us to make a judgment regarding the connotations that the title of ‘demiurge’ has for him.”⁴⁷

Although the author of *I Clement* may use Platonic and Stoic terms, we should not underestimate how radically different his conception of the world is from the prevailing pessimistic understandings of the time. For what Clement is here insisting on, as is common to the Fathers of the earliest centuries, is the inherent goodness of the world, that is based on the reality of its divine origin with a God of goodness. This was not only a radically Christian understanding of existence; it was also a fundamental tenet of the early Fathers in their dire battle against Docetism.⁴⁸

The fact that God is the Creator is presented by the author of *I Clement* as the motivation for the Corinthians to obey a series of ethical exhortations. These are introduced with the words, “Take care, dear friends, lest his many benefits turn into a judgment upon all of us, as will happen if we fail to live worthily of him and to do harmoniously those things that are good and pleasing in his sight.”⁴⁹ The connection between creation and the church is elaborated in *I Clement* 33:1–8, where the author asks:

What then shall we do, brothers? Shall we idly abstain from doing good, and forsake love? May the Master never allow this to happen, at least to us; but let us hasten with earnestness and zeal to accomplish

⁴⁶ Justo González. *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 63-64.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Paul, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*. Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford University Press: Oxford; New York, 2004), 83.

⁴⁹ *I Clement* 21:1, tr. Holmes, 75.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

every good work. For the Creator and Master of the universe [αὐτός γὰρ ὁ δημιουργὸς καὶ δεσπότης τῶν πάντων] himself rejoices in his works.⁵⁰

For the author of *1 Clement*, the obligation of Christians to do good and to love is therefore based on the goodness of the Creator, and the reality that He Himself creates good works. The author of *1 Clement* goes on to refer to the manner by which God established the heavens in order, highlighting “His infinitely great might” and “His incomprehensible wisdom.” Next he refers to the separation of “the earth from the water surrounding it,” and to how God “called into existence by His decree” [τῆ ἐάντο διατάζει ἐκέλευσεν εἶναι] the “living creatures that walk upon it,”⁵¹ having previously “created the sea and the living creatures in it.” Finally, the author of *1 Clement* describes how,

as the most excellent and by far the greatest work of his intelligence, with his holy and faultless hands he formed humankind as a representation of his own image. For thus spoke God: “Let us make humankind in our image and likeness. And God created humankind; male and female he created them. So, having finished all these things, he praised them and blessed them and said, ‘Increase and multiply.’”⁵²

First Clement 33:1-8 is presented as an exhortation to good works and harmony within the church.⁵³ However, the passage quoted above is also notable in several other regards. Firstly, it clearly follows and quotes the creation account as presented in Gen 1. In doing this, it affirms the belief of the both the author and recipients of this letter in a literal, six-day creation. Secondly, it provides an account of the creation of humanity that relates directly to the Genesis account. Thirdly, the

⁵⁰ *1 Clement* 33:2, ed. and tr. Holmes, 86-87.

⁵¹ *1 Clement* 33:3, ed. and tr. Holmes, 88-89.

⁵² *1 Clement* 33:4-6, tr. Holmes, 89, quoting Gen 1:26-28. O’Hagan, *Material Re-creation*, 97, notes that “[t]he notion of ‘establishing the universe’ is . . . a technical expression of Greek cosmology [which] had been absorbed into Jewish Hellenistic thought by Philo and the Alexandrian synagogue.”

⁵³ Thus, this section concludes with the admonishment, “We have seen that all the righteous have been adorned with good works. Indeed, the Lord himself, having adorned himself with good works, rejoiced. So, since we have this pattern, let us unhesitatingly conform ourselves to his will; let us with all our strength do the work of righteousness.” (*1 Clement* 33:1-8, tr. Holmes, 87-89.)

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

passage confirms a belief in the manner in which God created the universe, that it was called into existence by “his decree.” This is also made explicit in *1 Clement* 27:4, where the author writes, “[t]herefore let faith in him be rekindled within us, and let us understand that all things are near to him. By his majestic word he established the universe [ἐν λόγῳ τῆς μεγαλωσύνης αὐτοῦ συνεστήσατο τὰ πάντα], and by a word he can destroy it.”⁵⁴

First Clement, however, goes beyond merely making a link between creation and the church. It argues from creation, to the church, and finally to God’s recreation. The famous passage about the phoenix is presented in the context of this exhortation to appropriate ethical behaviour in the church.⁵⁵ *First Clement* uses the phoenix to illustrate the coming resurrection from the dead, which, in the context of a “new creation,” is then in turn related back to the original creation of the universe. The author argues, “How, then, can we consider it to be some great and marvellous thing, if the Creator of the universe [ὁ δημιουργὸς τῶν ἀπάντων ἀνάστασιν] shall bring about a resurrection of those who have served him in holiness. . . .”⁵⁶

The doctrine of creation is therefore fundamental to the entire letter of *1 Clement*. It clearly underpins *1 Clement*’s ecclesiology, serving as the motivation for harmonious behaviour in the church. The doctrine of creation is explicitly related to eschatology, in terms of God’s new creation and the resurrection. In terms of his understanding of the original creation, the author of *1 Clement* clearly holds to a literal understanding of creation that follows the account in Gen 1 and 2. The letter ends with a prayer for harmony that includes the words, “[f]or you, through your works, have revealed the everlasting structure of the world. You, Lord, created the earth [σύ, κύριε, τὴν οἰκουμένην ἔκισας]. You are faithful throughout all generations, righteous in your judgments, marvellous in strength and majesty, wise in creating and prudent in establishing what exists.”⁵⁷ This is, in turn, followed by a summary of the letter in which God as the Creator is again emphasized:

⁵⁴ *1 Clement* 27:4, tr. Holmes, 83.

⁵⁵ *1 Clement* 25.

⁵⁶ *1 Clement* 26:1, ed. and tr. Holmes, 80-81.

⁵⁷ *1 Clement* 60:1, tr. Holmes, 125.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

We have written. . . to you, brothers, about the things that pertain to our religion and are particularly helpful for a virtuous life, at least for those who wish to guide their steps in holiness and righteousness. For we have. . . reminded you that you must reverently please Almighty God. . . by being humble toward the Father and God and Creator [τὸν πατέρα καὶ θεὸν καὶ κτίστην] and toward all people.⁵⁸

In his presentation of God as the creator, the author of *1 Clement* therefore concludes by reminding the audience that this has been a fundamental theme that underpins the arguments of his entire letter.

2 Clement

The document known as *2 Clement* is “the oldest surviving complete Christian sermon outside the New Testament.”⁵⁹ Traditionally following *1 Clement* in the manuscripts in which it is preserved, “virtually nothing is known about its author, date, or occasion.”⁶⁰ Holmes surmises that the author of the sermon, who is addressing a primarily Gentile congregation (1.6;3.1), “may also be reacting against Gnostic influences (10:5; cf. the stress on the deity of Jesus [1.1] and the resurrection and judgment [9.1–5]).”⁶¹ This is within the context of a call to repentance and faithfulness, based on Isaiah 54:1.⁶²

The proposals for the dating of *2 Clement* range from about the same time as *1 Clement* to around the mid-second century.⁶³ Skarsaune notes that this document is “principally paraenetic.”⁶⁴ However, Bromiley judges that the “most glaring weakness” of the author of *2 Clement* “is his incompetence in the theological exposition of scripture.”⁶⁵ Without making any generalized critique of the theological skills of the author of *2 Clement*, our interest is instead on the use that he makes of the Genesis creation narrative.

⁵⁸ *1 Clement* 62:1-2, ed. and tr. Holmes, 128-129.

⁵⁹ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 132.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 132. Skarsaune, “Scriptural Interpretation,” 381, by contrast, sees the polemic setting as “inner-Christian.”

⁶² Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 132.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Skarsaune, “Scriptural Interpretation,” 381.

⁶⁵ Geoffrey W. Bromiley. *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 9.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

The author of *2 Clement* explicitly affirms creation *ex nihilo*. This appears evident when he writes, “[f]or he called us when we did not exist, and out of nothing he willed us into being.”⁶⁶ However, the overarching theme of *2 Clement* is ecclesiology. The link that *1 Clement* makes between creation and the church is also made in *2 Clement*. In fact, Muddiman refers to *2 Clement* as particularly illustrating “the importance of the Genesis creation story for this early Christian doctrine of the transcendent church.”⁶⁷ This is especially evident in the author’s assertion that:

if we do the will of God our Father we will belong to the first church, the spiritual one, which was created before the sun and moon [ἐσόμεθα ἐκ της ἐκκλησίας της πρώτης, της πνευματικης, της πρὸ ἡλίου καὶ σελήνης ἐκτισμένης]. . . the living church is the body of Christ, for the scriptures says, “God created humankind male and female.” The male is Christ; the female is the church. [ὅτι ἐκκλησία ζωσα σωμα ἐστὶν Χριστου· λέγει γὰρ ἡ γραφή·ποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἄρσεν καὶ θηλυ· τὸ ἄρσεν ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός, τὸ θηλυ ἡ ἐκκλησία] Moreover, the books and the apostles declare that the church not only exists now but has been in existence from the beginning. [τὴν ἐκκλησίαν οὐ νυν εἶναι λέγουσιν ἀλλὰ ἄνωθεν].⁶⁸

For the author of *2 Clement*, therefore, an understanding of the creation of the world is important for an understanding of the doctrine of the church. It is significant to realise that although they are not writing systematic theology, the “Apostolic Fathers” are insightful in the theological connections that they make.⁶⁹ The notions of the “body of Christ” and of the male and the female are themselves Pauline,⁷⁰ and allude to an ecclesiology that is based on the person and nature of Jesus Christ, and ultimately on his creative and redemptive power.

⁶⁶ *2 Clement* 1:8, tr. Holmes, 139.

⁶⁷ John Muddiman, “The Church in Ephesians, *2 Clement*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*” in *Trajectories Through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*. Eds. Andrew F. Gregory and Christopher Mark Tuckett. The New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers, 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107-122, 120.

⁶⁸ *2 Clement* 14:1-3, ed. and tr. Holmes, 154-157.

⁶⁹ Particularly in the light of a modern tendency to treat the Genesis creation account as if it has no systematic theological implications.

⁷⁰ 1 Cor 10:16; 12:27; Eph 4:12; 5:25-27.

The Didache

Although a wide range of dates, from before A. D. 50 to after the third century, has been proposed for the *Didache*, Holmes argues that it seems more probable that the *Didache* may have been put into its present form as late as 150.⁷¹ However, “[t]he materials from which it was composed reflect the state of the church at an even earlier time.”⁷²

This text, typical of the Church Father in their polemic against Docetism,⁷³ insists on the goodness of creation. Accordingly, in the very beginning of the *Didache*, the first principle of the gospel is introduced, which emphasises that humans have been made by God the Creator. The *Didache* states, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways. Now this is the way of life: First, you shall love God, who made you.” [τὸν θεὸν τὸν ποιήσαντά σε δεύτερον]⁷⁴ The doctrine of creation is therefore seen as underlying the essence of Christianity itself. This is also evident in the responsive thanks that is to be given after having participated in the Eucharist, “You, almighty Master, created all things [σύ, δέσποτα παντοκράτορ, ἔκτισας τὰ πάντα ἕνεκεν] for your name’s sake.”⁷⁵

As is the case in *1 Clement*, the author of the *Didache* appeals for moral and ethical purity on the basis of creation. He writes, “But the way of death is this. . . It is the way of persecutors of good people. . . corrupters of God’s creation [φθορεῖς πλάσματος θεοῦ]. . . May you be delivered, children, from all these things!”⁷⁶

The Epistle of Barnabas

Barnabas “appears to have been written after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70⁷⁷ but before the city was rebuilt by Hadrian following the revolt of AD 132-135.”⁷⁸ It is also widely considered to have been written in Alexandria,⁷⁹ and may therefore be

⁷¹ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 337.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Stewart Bryan, “The Apostolic Fathers,” in *Omnibus IV: The Ancient World*, edited by D. Wilson, G. E. Veith, and G. T. Fisher (Lancaster: Veritas Press, 2009), 431-444, 435.

⁷⁴ *Didache* 1:1, ed. and tr. Holmes, 344-345.

⁷⁵ *Didache* 10:3, ed. and tr. Holmes, 359-389.

⁷⁶ The *Didache*, 5:1-2, ed. and tr. Holmes, 352-353; cf. *Barnabas* 20:2.

⁷⁷ Holmes, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 16.3-5.

⁷⁸ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 373.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

“the first document of the young Alexandrine school of theology.”⁸⁰ The anonymous author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* seeks to show that “Christians are the true and intended heirs of God’s covenant.”⁸¹ He pursues this “tendentious reading”⁸² of the law of Moses and of prophets by means of allegorical exegesis, a method that was entrenched in first century Judaism, and indeed in subsequent eras. Holmes therefore sees *Barnabas* as “a good early example of what became the dominant method of interpreting the Bible in the early and medieval church.”⁸³

Skarsaune comments that, “*Barnabas* has much original material and comment, not recurring in this peculiar form in later writers. It seems that *Barnabas* is depending on sources that stem from an early Christian milieu still in close contact with Jewish scholarship, possibly a Jewish-Christian milieu.”⁸⁴ *Barnabas*’ allegorical exegesis is in the context of “a strong eschatological awareness of living in the last days (esp. chs. 4; 15),”⁸⁵ and the author “sometimes applies a past-present-future scheme as a kind of hermeneutical key to the teaching of Scripture.”⁸⁶ This is evident in the author’s explanation that:

the Master has made known to us through the prophets things past and present [τὰ παρεληλυθότα καὶ τὰ ἐνεστώτα], and has given us a foretaste of things to come. [καὶ τῶν μελλόντων δοῦς ἀπαρχὰς ἡμῖν γεύσεως.] Consequently, when we see these things come to pass, one thing after the other just as he predicted, we ought to make a richer and loftier offering out of reverence for him.⁸⁷

Therefore, for the author of *Barnabas*, the past is not only important, but it is essential, so that believers may have the correct understanding of both the present and the future. His allegorical exegesis and its application to the present and the future is based on the reality of past events. In a striking passage that illustrates his exegetical method, the

⁸⁰ González, *Christian Thought*, 95.

⁸¹ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 370.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Skarsaune, “Scriptural Interpretation,” 387.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Barnabas* 1:7, tr. Holmes, 383.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

author of *Barnabas* writes, “And in another place he says: “If my children guard the Sabbath, then I will bestow my mercy upon them.” He speaks of the Sabbath at the beginning of creation, “And God made the works of his hands in six days, and finished on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it.” He continues, “Observe, children, what ‘he finished in six days’ means. It means this: that in six thousand years the Lord will bring everything to an end, for with him a day signifies a thousand years [ἡ γὰρ ἡμέρα παρ’ αὐτῷ σημαίνει χίλια ἔτη]...”⁸⁸ Continuing, the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* writes that:

Therefore, children, in six days—that is, in six thousand years—everything will be brought to an end. “And he rested on the seventh day.” This means: when his son comes, he will destroy the time of the lawless one and will judge the ungodly and will change the sun and the moon and the stars, and then he will truly rest on the seventh day.⁸⁹

In this passage, the author interprets the six days of creation as referring to the “six thousand years” at the completion of which the world would end, inaugurating the rest of the “seventh day.” However, it should be noted that this interpretation is not based on a *denial* of the reality of a literal six days of creation, as has sometimes been assumed, but rather it is explicitly based on a strong *affirmation* of the reality of the account found in Genesis 1 and 2. The author of *Barnabas* clearly understands the Genesis account to be literal, and he demonstrates this both by direct quotation and affirmation. As such, he is able to say of the author of Genesis, that “[h]e speaks of the Sabbath at the beginning of creation,” (τὸ σάββατον λέγει ἐν ἀρχῇ της κτίσεως).⁹⁰

However, within this scheme, and in terms of the author’s polemical concern to explore the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, the Sabbath, notably, is in fact interpreted entirely eschatologically:

Finally, he says to them: “I cannot stand your new moons and Sabbaths.” You see what he means: it is not the present Sabbaths that are acceptable to me, [οὐ τὰ σάββατα ἐμοὶ δεκτά] but the one that I

⁸⁸ *Barnabas* 15:4, ed. and tr. Holmes, 426-427.

⁸⁹ *Barnabas* 15:4-5, tr. Holmes, 427-429.

⁹⁰ *Barnabas* 15:2, tr. Holmes, 426.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

have made; on that sabbath, after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world. [ἐν ᾧ καταπαύσας τὰ πάντα ἀρχὴν ἡμέρας ὀγδόης ποιήσω, ὃ ἐστὶν ἄλλου κόσμου ἀρχήν.] That is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arise from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven.⁹¹

It is clear that the author of *Barnabas* does not recognize the contemporary validity of the seventh-day Sabbath of the Genesis account. He uses it as an allegory of the “true” Sabbath, which is the eschatological Sabbath of one thousand years that is the beginning of the new creation. However, it is to be noted that he does not deny the existence of the original and literal creational Sabbath of the seventh day; he has merely re-interpreted it allegorically to provide a particular layer of meaning. Grenz comments that:

According to the author of this letter, even in the first creation narrative the act of creation refers to the eschatological renewal of the world. Not only was this interpretation widely held in the patristic era, it has gained increased following in our day. The Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, for example, concludes that the Priestly writers intended the reader to understand God’s Sabbath rest on the seventh day of creation as the future, eschatological fulfilment. We are to conclude from the creation narrative, therefore, that we are living in the sixth day, awaiting the dawn of the day of perfect *shalom*, the completion of God’s creative activity.⁹²

This presents us with a theology that is firmly based on the future. Without making any further evaluation of this theology, it certainly attempts to be focused on hope. Grenz explores the implications of the assertions of the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, noting their “weighty implications” that therefore “the creation of the world is yet future,” and that “[i]f the act of creation ultimately lies in the future, the essence of all reality is likewise ultimately not found in the primordial past, but in the eschatological consummation of history.”⁹³ Correspondingly, “[i]f the

⁹¹ *Barnabas* 15:8-9, ed. and tr. Holmes, 428-429.

⁹² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) 111, citing von Rad, *Genesis*, 62-63.

⁹³ Grenz, *Theology*, 111.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ultimate human essence lies in the future, then we must not look to the first human pair in the pristine past for the paradigm of essential human nature. Rather, our essential nature lies in the resurrected humankind in the future kingdom of God, which is revealed to us before the end of time in the resurrected Christ.”⁹⁴

However, this theology is still only possible because it is grounded in a real past.⁹⁵ Weber calls the fundamental theology, not just of *Barnabas*, but of the “Apostolic Fathers” more broadly, the “theology of recapitulation.” He outlines it as follows:

The theology of recapitulation is another way of describing the ancient framework of God’s story: creation–incarnation–re-creation. Recapitulation brings together the first Adam and the second Adam themes of Paul. It brings together all the typologies of Scripture and emphasizes the whole of Scripture, refusing to compartmentalize this or that doctrine or teaching without its connection to everything else. Jesus Christ is the new Adam who *does it over again*. . . winning the world back for his heavenly Father, returning it to the garden of God’s glory.⁹⁶

Particularly in the way that *Barnabas* interprets Scripture, the creation story actually becomes the foundational narrative of all Christian doctrine.⁹⁷ This theological construct pervades the entire work. For example, it becomes the narrative of the incarnation, so that *Barnabas* writes that, “if the Lord submitted to suffer for our souls, even though he is Lord of the whole world, to whom God said at the foundation of the world, [καταβολης κόσμου] ‘Let us make humankind according to our image and likeness,’ how is it, then, that he submitted to

⁹⁴ Ibid. cf. 1 Cor 15:48-49.

⁹⁵ See for example, Barnabas’ argument against the temple: “Finally, I will also speak to you about the temple, and how those wretched people went astray and set their hope on the building, as though it were God’s house, and not on their God who created them. For they, almost like the heathen, consecrated him by means of the temple. But what does the Lord say in abolishing it? Learn! “Who measured heaven with the span of his hand, or the earth with his palm? Was it not I, says the Lord? Heaven is my throne, and the earth is a footstool for my feet. What kind of house will you build for me, or what place for me to rest?” (*Barnabas*, 16:1-2, tr. Holmes, 429-431.)

⁹⁶ Robert E. Weber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 172-173.

⁹⁷ This is particularly evident in *Barnabas* 6:8-14.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

suffer at the hand of humans?”⁹⁸ The author then goes on to apply this text to the incarnation of Christ. *Barnabas*’ author similarly uses the narrative of creation to describe conversion, so that, “since he renewed us by the forgiveness of sins, he made us people of another type, so that we should have the soul of children, as if he were creating us all over again [ὡς ἂν δὴ ἀναπλάσσοντος αὐτοῦ ἡμᾶς].”⁹⁹

The Shepherd of Hermas

Holmes notes that *The Shepherd of Hermas* was “widely popular in the second and third centuries”¹⁰⁰ and that “there are more surviving early copies of *The Shepherd* than of many canonical writings.”¹⁰¹ *The Shepherd of Hermas* was accepted as Scripture by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and, briefly, by Origen.¹⁰² Dating the *Shepherd* is difficult, although its citation by Irenaeus (ca. 175) establishes a latest possible date, but dates as early as the 70s and 80s have been suggested.¹⁰³ Holmes suggests that the *Shepherd* may be a composite document, so that, “*Visions* 1-4 would represent the earliest stage of its formation, while the final editing, including the interpolation of *Parables* 9-10, may well have occurred about the time (mid-second century) suggested by the Muratorian Canon.”¹⁰⁴

In the *Shepherd*, the author narrates several visions and their explanations that were given to Hermas, who was a Christian living in Rome. Holmes comments that, “[t]he *Shepherd* represents concerns primarily of lower-class slaves and freedmen of marginal social and economic standing, whereas *1 Clement* reflects the perspective of a better-educated, higher-status group, many of whom were likely Roman citizens.”¹⁰⁵ The piety reflected in the *Shepherd* is centred on “observing the divine commandments and self-control.” Holmes further observes

⁹⁸ *Barnabas*, 5:5, ed. and tr. Holmes, 392-393.

⁹⁹ *Barnabas* 6:11, ed. and tr. Holmes, 398-399. Also Ryan T. Jackson, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters: A Study of the Historical and Social Setting of a Pauline Concept*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe, 272 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 442.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 447.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 443.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

that, “[t]he distances from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. . . in tone and perspective is considerable.”¹⁰⁶

The notion of the transcendent church, evident in the *Shepherd*, has already been noted with regard to *2 Clement*. Muddiman, in fact, observes that the similarities in this concept of the transcendent church between the canonical epistle to the *Ephesians*, *2 Clement*, and *Hermas*, are “very striking.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, this emphasis and link is explicitly through the creation story of Gen 2-3; explaining this, Muddiman observes that:

The pre-existence/foreordination of the church is implied in this appeal to the creation story of Gen. 2-3. . . .The creation typology appears again with the citation of Gen. 2.23 f., but its literal sense is decidedly secondary to the allegorical interpretation of the text in reference to Christ and the church. We shall observe the same move in *2 Clement* and the *Shepherd*.¹⁰⁸

Muddiman acknowledges that there is no mention of Adam and Eve in *Hermas*,¹⁰⁹ however, the creation of the world and the creation of the church are certainly linked together. The only words that Hermas could remember that the old woman read from her book were the last words: “Behold, the God of hosts, who by his invisible and mighty power and by his great wisdom created the world [αὐτοῦ κτίσας τὸν κόσμον]. . . and by his own wisdom and providence created his holy church, which he also blessed.”¹¹⁰ In stating that these were the only words that Hermas could remember, the author highlights the importance of God as creator in relation to what will be subsequently revealed to Hermas, and in particular, the link between the creation of the world and the church is again affirmed.

In the third vision, Muddiman notes that, “[t]he link between creation and the church appears again in the building of the tower which, like the universe, is ‘built upon water,’ representing the saving waters of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Muddiman, “Church,” 121. On the possibility of some kind of influence from *Ephesians*, see *ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰⁸ Muddiman, “Church,” 112.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹¹⁰ *Shepherd of Hermas* 3:4, ed. and tr. Holmes 460-461.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

baptism.”¹¹¹ When Hermas asks her about the meaning of the tower, the elderly woman says to him, “[t]he tower that you see being built is I, the church.”¹¹² Hermas then asks her who are the six young men who are building the tower, to which the elderly lady answers, “[t]hese are the holy angels of God who were created first of all, to whom the Lord committed all his creation [οἱ πρωτοι κτισθέντες, οἷς παρέδωκεν ὁ κύριος πασαν τὴν κτίσιν αὐτου αὕξειν].”¹¹³

The doctrine of the church is again represented in the parable of the field in *Herimas*. Again the notion of creation ties the concept of the creation of the church to God the Creator of the original creation, so that Hermas is told, “I will explain to you the parable about the field and all the rest that followed it. . . The field is the world, and the lord of the field is the one who created all things (ὁ δὲ κύριος του ἄγρου ὁ κτίσας τὰ πάντα).”¹¹⁴

In the *Didache*, the belief in creation is at the heart of the “way of life,”¹¹⁵ and similarly the doctrine of creation is fundamental to what it means to be a Christian in *Herimas*. The shepherd commands Hermas to write down a set of commandments, beginning with:

[f]irst of all, believe that God is one, who created all things, and set them in order, and made out of what did not exist everything that is.¹¹⁶

Πρωτον πάντων πιστεύσον, ὅτι εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ θεός, ὁ τὰ πάντα κτίσας καὶ καταρτίσας καὶ ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Muddiman, “Church,” 120. Regarding baptism, see *Shepherd of Herimas* 11:5.

¹¹² *Shepherd of Herimas* 11:3, tr. Holmes, 475. In fact, Hermas is told in a revelation who the elderly woman is. He asks, “Then who is she?” I said, “The church,” he replied. I said to him, “Why, then is she elderly?” “Because,” he said, “she was created before all things; therefore she is elderly, and for her sake the world was formed.” (‘Ὅτι, φησί, πάντων πρώτη ἐκίσθη διὰ τοῦτο πρεσβυτέρα, καὶ διὰ ταύτην ὁ κόσμος κατηρτίσθη - *Herimas* 8:1, ed. and tr. Holmes, 468-469.) Again the connection between creation and the woman is explicitly made.

¹¹³ *Shepherd of Herimas* 12:1, ed. and tr. Holmes, 476-477.

¹¹⁴ *Herimas* 58:1-2, tr. Holmes, 576-579.

¹¹⁵ *Didache* 1:1.

¹¹⁶ *Herimas*, 26:1, tr. Holmes, 505.

¹¹⁷ *Herimas*, 26:1, ed. Holmes, 504.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The fact that the first commandment requires belief in the Creator God, who made all things *ex nihilo*, speaks for the importance of this understanding in the many sections of early Christianity in which the *Shepherd of Hermas* circulated. The author of *Hermes* also brings in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit into both the concepts of the original creation and that of the church, so that, “[t]he pre-existent holy spirit, which created the whole creation (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον τὸ προόν, τὸ κτίσαν πᾶσαν τὴν κτίσιν), God caused to live in the flesh that he wished.”¹¹⁸ Indeed, the doctrine of creation is the “glue” that binds the theological framework of the *Shepherd of Hermas* together. The concept of creation permeates the entire work, as is reflected again in the following passage, which again brings the church into view:

The name of the Son of God is great and incomprehensible, and sustains the whole world. If, therefore, all creation is sustained by the Son of God (Ἄκουε, φησί· τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ μέγα ἐστὶ καὶ ἀχωρητὸν καὶ τὸν κόσμον ὅλον βαστάζει. εἰ οὖν πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις διὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ βαστάζεται), what do you think of those who are called by him and bear the name of the Son of God and walk in his commandments? Do you see, then, what kind of people he sustains? Those who bear his name with their whole heart.¹¹⁹

This last quotation highlights a fundamental aspect that pervades the theology of the “Apostolic Fathers,” the idea of “community.” The concept appears in a number of the passages of the “Apostolic Fathers” mentioned above. God’s seeks community with creation through the Son of God. As Grenz characterises it, “[w]e may summarize God’s intention for the world by employing the term ‘community.’ Just as the triune God is the eternal fellowship of the Trinitarian members, so also God’s purpose for creation is that the world participate in ‘community.’”¹²⁰

Having just mentioned the sustaining power of God throughout creation, it is worth observing how the “Apostolic Fathers” are quick to recognise that “the doctrine of creation readily leads to the doctrine of providence.”¹²¹ Indeed, “[t]he apostolic fathers insist that Christianity is

¹¹⁸ *Hermas* 59:5, ed. and tr. Holmes, 580-581.

¹¹⁹ *Hermas* 91:5-6, ed. and tr. Holmes, 648-649.

¹²⁰ Grenz, *Theology*, 112.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

enmeshed with the created order,¹²² and consequently the doctrine of a literal six-day creation is fundamental.

The Epistle of Diognetus

The *Epistle to Diognetus*¹²³ is the final document that will be mentioned in this discussion. Holmes comments that the inclusion of the *Epistle of Diognetus* “is more a matter of tradition than logic; in terms of both purpose and genre, they might more fittingly be placed among the Christian apologists.”¹²⁴ Furthermore, there is much unknown about the text. Holmes writes that “[t]he author is anonymous, the identity of the recipient is uncertain, the date is unknown, the ending is missing.”¹²⁵ The document would seem to come from the period after that of the “Apostolic Fathers,” and the most likely dating seems to be from the late second to the early-mid third century.¹²⁶

O’Hagan comments that “many of the expressions and even ideas of the author betray the Hellenism of the late second-century world in which he lived.”¹²⁷ In this context, O’Hagan detects a “sharp trend away from the things of this earth”¹²⁸ in this text. However, in various ways, *Diognetus* still affirms the goodness of creation, and creation itself. *Diognetus* asserts that “the things created by God for human use” were “created good” (καλως λτισθέματα).¹²⁹ *Diognetus* refers to God as, “the one who made the heaven and the earth and all that is in them [ὁ γὰρ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς], and provides us all with what we need.”¹³⁰

The main function of creation in the *Epistle of Diognetus* is in terms of its christology. Christ is the doctrinal focal point of *Diognetus*, and the fact that Christ is the Creator highlights the magnitude of God’s sending His Son into the world. The chain of logic is that God is the Creator, and creation reveals God’s love and wisdom, “[f]or God, the Master and

¹²² Bryan, “Apostolic Fathers,” 435, quoting Ignatius, *Trallians*, 3:9.

¹²³ See Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 694-719.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 686. O’Hagan, *Material Re-creation*, 108, comments that the *Epistle to Diognetus* is rather capriciously included by history among the Apostolic Fathers.”

¹²⁵ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 688.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 689.

¹²⁷ O’Hagan, *Material Re-creation*, 108.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²⁹ *Diognetus* 4:1-2, ed. and tr. Holmes, 700-701.

¹³⁰ *Diognetus*, 3:3-4, ed and tr. Holmes, 698-699.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Creator of the universe, who made all things and arranged them in order [δεσπότης καὶ δημιουργὸς τῶν ὅλων θεός, ὁ ποιήσας τὰ πάντα καὶ κατὰ τάξιν διακρίνας], was not only tenderhearted but also very patient.”¹³¹

The Father and the Son evidently share the work of creation, since the Father, who is the Creator, has sent the Son, who is also the Creator, to this earth to reveal His salvation. The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* explains that:

the omnipotent Creator of all, the invisible God himself [ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἀληθῶς ὁ παντοκρτωρὰ καὶ παντοκτίστης καὶ ἀόρατος θεός]. . . established among humans the truth and the holy, incomprehensible word from heaven... not, as one might imagine, by sending them some subordinate... but the Designer and Creator of the universe himself, [ἀλλ’ αὐτὸν τὸν τεχνίτην καὶ δημιουργὸν τῶν ὅλων]. . . by whom all things have been ordered and determined and placed in subjection, [ὡ πάντα διατέτακται καὶ διώρισται καὶ ὑποτέτακται] including the heavens and the things in the heavens, the earth and the things in the earth, the sea and the things in the sea, fire, air, abyss, the things in the heights, the things in the depths, the things in between—this one he sent to them!¹³²

Through Christ, the doctrine of creation is linked to the concepts of God’s revelation and to salvation, and even to the nature of man. Indeed, as is evident in the quotation above, for the author of *Diognetus*, the doctrine of creation serves to frame and magnify the glory of Jesus and the wonder of His incarnation and redemptive work. For this reason, *Diognetus* states that:

God loved humanity, for whose sake he made the world [δι’ οὗς ἐποίησε τὸν κόσμον]. . . , them he created in his own image, to them he sent his one and only Son, to them he promised the kingdom in heaven, which he will give to those who have loved him.¹³³

¹³¹ *Diognetus* 8:7, ed and tr. Holmes, 708-709.

¹³² *Diognetus* 7:2, tr. Holmes, 705-707.

¹³³ *Diognetus* 10:2, ed. and tr. Holmes, 710-713. Through Christ, *Diognetus* also links creation with eschatology, since, “he will send him as judge, and who will endure his coming?” (πέμψει γὰρ αὐτὸν κρίνοντα· καὶ τίς αὐτοῦ τὴν παρουσίαν ὑποστήσεται - *Diognetus* 7:6, ed. and tr. Holmes, 706-707.)

6. Reflections and Conclusion

As O'Hagan observed, "the Apostolic Fathers refuse to be synthesized."¹³⁴ Although they admittedly do not portray a consistent focus or theology across their various texts, in terms of their understanding of the original creation, there are commonalities that can be identified. The first is that they assume, and often explicitly affirm, the creation narrative of Genesis in ways that indicate that they view it as a real and literal account.

The second commonality is that in their writings, the creation narrative plays a fundamental role in how they develop and express their theological understandings. This is particularly so in terms of their ecclesiology, christology, and soteriology. In fact, the very hermeneutic of the "Apostolic Fathers" depends on a literal understanding of the Genesis creation account. This conclusion essentially differs from that of Bouteneff, who writes:

[t]he point is not, then, whether the fathers took the seven "days" or Adam as historical. . . none of the fathers' strictly theological or moral conclusions—about creation, or about humanity and its redemption, and the coherence of everything in Christ—has anything to do with the datable chronology of the creation of the universe or with the physical existence of Adam and Eve. They read the creation narratives as Holy Scripture, and therefore as "true." But they did not see them as lessons in history or science as such. . . . Generally speaking, the fathers were free from a slavish deference to science. Rather their theological and paraenetic approach to the creation narratives left them free to enjoy an unprejudiced scientific inquisitiveness.¹³⁵

Bouteneff here appears to assert that the "theological" approach of the Fathers precluded their understanding the creation narrative as events grounded in history; that somehow, because they had a theological or religious mind set, that the reality of the events did not matter. Bouteneff, it seems, treats the early Fathers unfairly, in attempting to impose a modern world-view on their mental world. The ancient world did not differentiate between religion, history, and science. The mental world of the early Fathers was much more organic, and was not composed of

¹³⁴ O'Hagan, *Material Re-creation*, 139.

¹³⁵ Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 183.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

strictly discrete mental categories. The ancient Greeks had no word for “science” as a discipline as we presently understand it, and generally subsumed all knowledge under “philosophy.”¹³⁶ Of course, they did not see the Genesis narratives as discrete lessons in history or science, and they were certainly “free from a slavish deference to science.” However, this was not because they did not appreciate the Genesis narratives as being grounded in a past reality. Nor was this because they were so naïve as to not be able to discriminate between real history and its spiritual applications. It is simply because the concept of science as a discrete empirical discipline had not yet properly emerged.

Furthermore, the early Fathers were interested to a greater degree in the more recent facts that had impacted the world: the birth, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the growth and well-being of the church as His body. It is for this reason that their hermeneutical focus is so firmly christological. The reality is, however, that in spite of how far-fetched their allegorical hermeneutic may appear to be to some, its very existence is based on an affirmation, rather than on a denial, of the literal truth of Scripture’s account of God’s dealings with the world, beginning with its creation. This affirmation stands as a key foundation of their theological understanding, and particularly of their ecclesiology and soteriology.

The relevance of the findings of this essay to the current discussions about science and origins is that they illustrate that the “Apostolic Fathers” understood the Genesis creation account to be real and literal, and that they reflected this same emphasis in the writings that they left for us. There may be aspects of the teachings of the “Apostolic Fathers” with which we may choose to disagree; however, at least we should note that they carefully observed the implications of their literal understanding of the Genesis creation account, and worked them into their theological understandings. They understood the principle that beginnings do have endings, that beginnings do have implications, a principle that still holds true today.

Although the “Apostolic Fathers” are far from the idea of writing systematic theology, it is right to say that they rely to a greater extent on

¹³⁶ See further R. W. Sharples “Introduction,” in *Philosophy and the Sciences in Antiquity*. Edited by R. W. Sharples. Keeling Series in Ancient Philosophy (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), 1-7, 1-3.

GONZALEZ: ROLE OF THE GENESIS CREATION

the Genesis creation account as a foundational element in their theologies, than do most modern theologians. In this emphasis, they align closely with Jewish and New Testament emphases, and they remind us not to neglect the work that God did “[i]n the beginning.”

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