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AUGUSTINE'S COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF GENESIS

BOOK ONE THE WORK OF THE FIRST DAY

CHAPTER 1

The interpretation of Scripture. The meaning of heaven and earth.

1. Sacred Scripture, taken as a whole, is divided into two parts, as our Lord intimates when He says:

"A scribe instructed in the kingdom of God is like a householder who brings forth from his storeroom things new and old."¹

These new and old things are also called testaments.

In all the sacred books, we should consider the eternal truths that are taught, the facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicted, and the precepts or counsels that are given. In the case of a narrative of events, the question arises as to whether everything must be taken according to the figurative sense only, or whether it must be expounded and

defended also as a faithful record of what happened. No Christian will dare say that the narrative must not be taken in

a figurative sense. For St. Paul says: "Now all these things that happened to them were symbolic."² And he explains

the statement in Genesis, "And they shall be two in one flesh,"³ as a great mystery in reference to Christ and to the Church.⁴

2. If, then, Scripture is to be explained under both aspects, what meaning other than the allegorical have

the words: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth?"⁵ Were heaven and earth made in the

beginning of time, or first of all in creation, or in the Beginning who is the Word, the only-begotten Son of God?

And how can it be demonstrated that God, without any change in Himself, produces effects subject to change and

measured by time? And what is meant by the phrase "heaven and earth"? Was this expression used to indicate spiritual and corporeal creatures? Or does it refer only to the

corporeal, so that we may presume in this book that the author passed over in silence the creation of spiritual beings, and in saying “heaven and earth” wished to indicate all corporeal creation above and below? Or is the unformed matter of both the spiritual and corporeal worlds meant in the expression “heaven and earth”: that is, are we to understand, on the one hand, the life of the spirit as it can exist in itself when not turned towards its Creator (it is by this turning towards its Creator that it receives its form and perfection and if it does not thus turn, it is unformed);⁶ and, on the other hand, bodily matter considered as lacking all the bodily qualities that appear in formed matter when it is endowed with bodily appearances perceptible by the sight and other senses?⁷

3. But perhaps we should take “heaven” to mean spiritual beings in a state of perfection and beatitude from the first moment of their creation and take “earth” to mean bodily matter in a state that is not yet complete and perfect. “The earth,” says Holy Scripture, “was invisible and formless, and darkness was over the abyss”⁸ These words seem to indicate the formless state of bodily substance. Or does the second statement⁹ imply the formless state of both substances, so that bodily substance is referred to in the words, “The earth was invisible and formless,” but spiritual substance in the words, “Darkness was over the abyss?” In this interpretation we should understand “dark abyss” as a metaphor meaning that life which is formless unless it is turned towards its Creator. Only in this way can it be formed and cease being an abyss, and be illumined and cease being dark. And then what is the meaning of the statement, “Darkness was over the abyss?” Was there no light? If there was any light at all, there would be a great abundance of it, for that is the way it is in the case of a spiritual creature that turns to God, the changeless and incorporeal Light.

CHAPTER 2

How did God say, “Let there be light”?

4. And how did God say, “Let there be light?”¹⁰ Was this in time or in the eternity of His Word? If this was spoken in time, it was certainly subject to change.¹¹ How then could we conceive of God saying it except by means of a creature? For He Himself is unchangeable. Now if it was by means of a creature that God said, “Let there be light,” how is light the first creature, if there was already a creature through which God spoke these words? Are we to suppose that light was not the first creature? Scripture has already said: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” and God might have made use of the heaven He created to produce an utterance subject to time and change when He said, “Let there be light.” But if this is so, God created material light to be seen with the eyes of the body when He said, “Let there be light,” using a spiritual creature He had already made when “in the beginning He created heaven and earth.” In this way, through the inward and hidden action of such a creature, the divine words, “Let there be light” might have been uttered.

5. And was there the material sound of a voice when God said, “Let there be light,” as there was when He said, “Thou art my beloved Son?”¹² In this supposition did He use a material creature which He had made, when “in the beginning He created heaven and earth,” before there existed the light which was made at the sound of this voice? And, if so, what was the language of this voice when God said, “Let there be light?” There did

not yet exist the variety of tongues, which arose later when the tower was built after the flood.¹³ What then was that one and only language by which God said, "Let there be light?" Who was intended to hear and understand it, and to whom was it directed? But perhaps this is an absurdly material way of thinking and speculating on the matter.

6. What then shall we say? Is it the intellectual idea signified by the sound of the voice, in the words, Let there be light," that is meant here by the voice of God, rather than the material sound? And does this belong to the Divine Word, referred to in the statement, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God?¶ 4 When it is said of the Word, All things have been made through Him,¹⁵ it becomes quite clear that light was made through Him when God said, Let there be light, and so this utterance of God is eternal. For the Word of God, true God in the bosom of God and the only Son of God, is co-eternal with the Father; and yet through this utterance of God in the eternal Word, creation has been brought about in time. It is true that the words "when" and "sometime" refer to time, but the when of something that must be created is eternal in the Word of God; and it is created when in the Word there is an exigency for its creation. But in the Word Himself there is no when and no eventually, because the Word is in every way eternal.

CHAPTER 3

What is the light which God created?

7. What is the light itself which was created? Is it something spiritual or material? If it is spiritual, it may be the first work of creation, now made perfect by this utterance, and previously called heaven in the words, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." In this supposition, we must understand that when God said, "Let there be light," and light was made, the creature, called by its Creator to Himself, underwent a conversion and illumination.¹⁶

8. Why, moreover, is it stated, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," and not, "In the beginning God said, 'Let there be heaven and earth,' and heaven and earth were made"? For in the case of light, the words are: God said: "Let there be light," and light was made. Are we to understand that by the expression, "heaven and earth" all that God made is to be included and brought to mind first in a general way, and that then the manner of creation is to be worked out in detail, as for each object the words "God said" occur? For whatever God made He made through His Word.

CHAPTER 4

The formation of a formless being.

9. But perhaps there is another reason why the expression, "God said, 'Let there be... '," could not be used in reference to the creation of formless matter, whether spiritual or material. God in His eternity says all through His Word, not by the sound of a voice, nor by a thinking process that measures out its speech, but by the light of Divine Wisdom,

coeternal with Himself and born of Himself. Now an imperfect being which, in contrast to the Supreme Being and First Cause, tends to nothingness be-cause of its formless state, does not imitate the exemplar in the Word, who is inseparably united to the Father. But it does im-itate the exemplar in the Word, who exists forever in immutable union with the Father, when in view of its own appropriate conversion to the true and eternal Being, namely, the Creator of its own substance, it also receives its proper form and becomes a perfect creature.¹⁷

And so, when Scripture declares, “God said, ‘Let there be...’,” we may understand this as an immaterial utterance of God in His eternal Word, as the Word recalls His imperfect creature to Himself, so that it may not be formless but may be formed ac-cording to the various works of creation which He produces in due order. In this conversion and formation the creature in its own way imitates the Divine Word, the Son of God, who is eternally united with the Father in the perfect likeness and equal essence by which He and the Father are one.¹⁸ But it does not imitate this exemplar in the Word if it is turned from its Creator and remains formless and imperfect. Hence, when Scripture says, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” mention of the Son is made not because He is the Word, but only because He is the Beginning;¹⁹ for here the origin of created being is indicated still in its imperfect and formless state.

But there is mention of the Son, who is also the Word, where Scripture declares: “God said, ‘Let there be. . . ‘.” Thus, in Him who is the Beginning, Holy Scripture places the origin of created be-ing, which exists through Him but still in an imperfect state. But it shows that to Him as the Word belongs the perfecting of created being, which is called back to Him to be formed by a union with its Creator and by an imitation, in its own way, of the Divine Exemplar, who, eternally and unchangeably united with the Father, is of necessity identical in nature with Him.

CHAPTER 5

An intellectual creature is formed by turning to the Word of God.
The Spirit of God stirring above creation.

10. The Divine Word and Son of God does not live a formless life. In His case not only is being the same thing as living, but living is the same thing as living wisely and happily.²⁰ But a creature, although it has a spiritual nature endowed with intellect or reason and seems to be quite close to the Word of God, can have a formless life. In the creature’s case, being is the same thing as living, ²¹ but living is not the same as possessing a life of wisdom and happiness. For when it is turned away from changeless Wisdom, its life is full of folly and wretchedness, and so it is in an unformed state. Its formation consists in its turning to the changeless light of Wisdom, the Word of God.²² The Word is the source of whatever being and life it has, and to the Word it must turn in order to live wisely and happily. The Be-ginning of an intellectual creature’s life is indeed eternal Wisdom. This Beginning, remaining unchangeably in Himself, would certainly not cease to speak by interior inspirations and summons to the creature of which He is the Beginning, in order that it might turn to its First Cause. Otherwise such a

creature could not be formed and perfect. Hence, asked who He was, the Divine Word replied: "I am the Beginning, for I am even speaking to you."²³

11. But what the Son speaks, the Father speaks, because in the speech of the Father, the Word, who is the Son, is uttered according to God's eternal way--if we can use the term "way" in describing God's utterance of His eternal Word. Now,²⁴ God has a benevolence that is sovereign, holy, and just; and it is not out of any need but out of His goodness that His love is directed towards His works. Hence, before the words, God said, "Let there be light,"²⁵ Sacred Scripture first says: "And the Spirit of God was stirring above the water."²⁶ We might say that by the term "water" the sacred writer wished to designate the whole of material creation.²⁷ In this way he would show whence all things that we can recognize in their proper kinds had been made and formed, calling them water, because we observe all things on earth being formed and growing into their various species from moisture.

Or we might say that by this term he wished to designate a certain kind of spiritual life, in a fluid state, so to speak, before receiving the form of its conversion. Certainly "the Spirit of God was stirring" above this creation. For all that He had begun and had yet to form and perfect lay subject to the good will of the Creator, so that, when God would say in His Word, "Let there be light" the creature would be established, according to its capacity, in the good will and benevolence of God. Quite rightly, therefore, did it please God, as Scripture indicates: "And light was made; and God saw that the light was good."²⁸

CHAPTER 6

The Trinity manifested in the beginning of creation and in the formation of creatures.

12. Hence, in the very beginning of creation in its inchoate state, which has been called heaven and earth because of what was to be produced from it, it is the Blessed Trinity that is represented as creating. For, when Scripture says, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," by the name of "God" we understand the Father, and by the name of "Beginning," the Son, who is the Beginning, not for the Father, but first and foremost for the spiritual beings He has created and then also for all creatures; and when Scripture says, "And the Spirit of God was stirring above the water," we recognize a complete enumeration of the Trinity. So in the conversion and in the perfecting of creatures by which their species are separated in due order, the Blessed Trinity is likewise represented: the Word and the Father of the Word, as indicated in the statement, God said; and then the Divine Goodness, by which God finds pleasure in all the limited perfections of His creatures, which please Him, as indicated by the words, "God saw that it was good."²⁹

CHAPTER 7

Why the Spirit of God is said to be stirring above the waters.

13. But why does Scripture first mention creatures, still, of course, in their unfinished state, and then the Spirit of God? The sacred text says: "The earth was invisible and formless, and darkness was over the abyss;" and then it adds: "And the Spirit of God was

stirring above the water.”

Now, love is generally needy and poor, so that its outpouring makes it subordinate to the objects that it loves. Hence, when there is mention of the Spirit of God, whereby the Divine Good-ness and Love are to be understood, perhaps He is said to be stir-ring above creation, so that God may be thought of as loving the work to be produced not out of any need or necessity, but solely out of the largeness of His bounty. The Apostle, Saint Paul, has this in mind when he begins his discourse on charity by saying that he will point out “a superior way;”³⁰ and in another place he speaks of “the charity of Christ superior to knowledge.”³¹ Since, then, it was necessary to represent the Spirit of God as stirring above, it was only natural to introduce a work already begun, over which He might be said to stir by the transcendent excellence of His power and not by any spatial relation.

CHAPTER 8

God’s love for creatures gives them existence and makes them abide.

14. Moreover, when the works thus begun had been formed and perfected, “God saw that it was good.” For He found His works pleasing, in keeping with the benevolence by which He was pleased to create them. There are, it should be noted, two purposes in God’s love of His creation: first, that it may exist, and secondly, that it may abide. Hence, that there might exist an object to abide, “the Spirit of God was stirring above the waters.” That it might abide, “God saw that it was good.” And what is said of the light is said of all the works. For some³² abide in the most exalted holiness next to God, transcending all the changes of time; but others abide according to the determinations of their time, while the beauty of the ages is unfolded by the coming and passing of things.

CHAPTER 9

The words, “Let there be light,” refer to the illumination and formation of intellectual creatures.

15. Now when God said, “Let there be light,” and light was made, did He say this on a certain day or before the beginning of days? If He said it by the Word, who is coeternal with Himself, He certainly did not speak in time. On the other hand, if He spoke in time, He did not speak by His eternal Word but by a creature subject to time; and so light could not be the first creature, be-cause there already existed a creature by which He said in time, “Let there be light.” Thus, we must suppose that before the beginning of days, He wrought the work referred to in the words, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” And then by the expression “heaven” we must understand a spiritual created work already formed and perfected, which is, as it were, the heaven of this heaven which is the loftiest in the material world.³³ On the second day God made the firmament, which He called heaven again. But by the expression, “earth without shape or form,”³⁴ and by the dark abyss, is meant the imperfect material substance from which temporal things would be made, of which the first would be light.

16. But it is difficult to understand how the words, “Let there be light,” could have been

said in time by means of a creature which God made before the beginning of time. We do not suppose that they were spoken by the sound of a voice; for a voice, whatever it is, is always corporeal. Was it from the unformed material substance that God made a material voice by which He might utter the sound, "Let there be light?" In this supposition, a material sound was created and formed before light. But if this is so, there already was time, in which the voice moved as it traveled through the successive localities of the sound. And if time already existed before light was made, at what time was the voice produced which sounded the words, "Let there be light?" To what day did that time belong? For there is a day on which light was made, and it is the first day in the series. Perhaps to this day belongs all the extent of time in which the material sound of the voice, Let there be light, was produced, and in which the light itself was made.

But every such utterance is produced by the speaker for the benefit of the sense of hearing in the ear of the hearer. This faculty has been made to perceive sound with the impact of air on the sense organ. Shall we say, then, that there was such a sense of hearing in that formless and shapeless creation, whatever it was, to which God thus uttered a sound when He said, "Let there be light?" Let such absurdities have no place in our thoughts.

17. Well, then, are we to suppose that a movement which was spiritual, but belonging to the order of time, spoke the words, Let there be light, a movement produced by the eternal Godhead through the eternal Word in a spiritual creature, which He had already made, as indicated by the statement, In the beginning God created heaven and earth? In other words, was this movement produced in that spiritual creation which is the heaven³⁵ of the visible heaven above us? Or shall we say that this was an utterance not only without any sound but also without any temporal motion of the spiritual creature in whose mind³⁶ it was placed and impressed, as it were, by the eternal Word of the Father, and that according to it the dark and imperfect corporeal world below was moved and directed towards its form³⁷ and thus became light?

Here is a matter that is difficult to understand. God's decree is not pronounced in time, and it is heard, but not in time, by a creature that transcends all time in the contemplation of truth. But when this creature transmits to beings of a lower rank the forms ("*rationes*") which are, so to speak, intelligible utterances impressed upon its intellect by the unchangeable Wisdom of God, then there can be movements in the temporal order in beings subject to time that are to be formed and governed.³⁸

But if the light spoken of first of all in the words, "Let there be light," and "light was made," must also be supposed to have a primacy in creation, it is nothing other than intellectual life, which must be in a formless and chaotic state unless it is turned to its Creator to be illumined. But when it is turned and illumined, the decree, "Let there be light," spoken by the Word of God has been fulfilled.³⁹

CHAPTER 10

How can we explain the light and darkness mentioned in v. 4?

18. Since the divine utterance was spoken without the limitations of time, because the Word, being coeternal with the Father, is not subject to time, was the work produced by

the utterance also made independently of time? This is a question that might be asked. But how can such a theory be accepted? It is said that light was made and separated from the darkness, the names "Day" and "Night" being given to them, and Scripture declares, "Evening was made and morning made, one day."⁴⁰ Hence it seems that this work of God was done in the space of a day, at the end of which evening came on, which is the beginning of night. Moreover, when the night was spent, a full day was completed, and the morning belonged to a second day, in which God then performed another work.

19. But here there is matter to give us pause. With no division of syllables, God in His eternal Word said, "Let there be light." Why, then, was the creation of light so delayed until a day passed and evening came? One might say that light was made immediately, but that the space of a day could have gone by while it was being separated from the darkness, and while light and darkness were being given their names. But it would be strange if this could have taken as much time to be done by God as it takes us to say it. And the separation of light and darkness was done, surely, in the very act of the creation of light. There could not have been any light unless it was separated from the darkness.

20. As for the fact that God called the light Day and the darkness Night, how much time could this have taken, even if God did it by syllables with the sound of a voice? Surely, it would not be more than it takes us to say: "Let the light be called Day and the darkness be called Night." No one certainly would be so foolish as to think that, because God is great beyond all beings, even a very few syllables uttered by I-us mouth could have extended over the course of a whole day. Furthermore, it was by His coeternal Word, that is, by the interior and eternal forms of unchangeable Wisdom, not by the material sound of a voice, that "God called the light Day and the darkness Night." And further questions arise. If He called them with words such as we use, what language did He speak? And what was the need of fleeting sounds where there was no bodily sense of hearing? These difficulties are insurmountable in such a supposition.

21. But another explanation might be offered. Although this work of God was done in an instant, did the light remain, with-out night coming on, until the time of one day was complete; and did the night, following upon the daylight, continue while the hours of the nighttime passed by until the morning of the following day dawned, one day, the first one, being then complete? But if I make such a statement, I fear I shall be laughed at both by those who have scientific knowledge of these matters and by those who can easily recognize the facts of the case. At the time when night is with us, the sun is illuminating with its presence those parts of the world through which it returns from the place of its setting to that of its rising. Hence it is that for the whole twenty-four hours of the sun's circuit there is always day in one place and night in another. Surely, then, we are not going to place God in a region where it will be evening for Him as the sun's light leaves that land for another.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes it is written: "The sun rises, and the sun goes down and is brought to his place;" that is, to the place where it rose. And the author continues: "At its rising it goes forth to the south and turns again to the north."⁴¹ When, therefore, the south has the sun, it is daytime for us; when the sun in its course has arrived in the north, it is night here. We cannot say that in the other region there is no daylight when the sun is there, unless our thinking is influenced by the fantasies of poets, so that we believe the sun dips into the sea and in the morning arises on the other side out of his bath.⁴² Even if this were so, the ocean itself would be illumined by the presence of the sun, and daylight

would be there. It could certainly illuminate the waters, since it could not be extinguished by them. But such a supposition is preposterous. Moreover, the sun was not yet created. 22. If, therefore, it was spiritual light that was created on the first day, did it perish in order that night might follow? But if it was corporeal, what is the nature of such a light, which we cannot see after the setting of the sun (because there was no moon in existence yet and no stars)? If it is always in that part of the heaven in which the sun is, and yet is not the light of the sun, but a sort of companion of the sun, so closely joined to the sun that it cannot be distinguished from it, we are back in the same difficulty. Such a light, if it is the companion of the sun, travels round like the sun and goes from its rising to its setting:

it is in another part of the world at the time when this region of ours is in the darkness of night. This forces us to believe (Heaven forbid it!) that God was in one particular part of the world which this light would have to leave in order that evening might come to it. But had God perhaps made light in that region in which He was going to make man? In this theory, it can be said that, when light had left that region, evening was made, even though the light, which had passed from there, still existed elsewhere and was due to rise in the morning with the completion of its circuit.

CHAPTER 11

What is the connection between the light of v. 3 and the lights of V. 14?

23. Why, then, was the sun made to rule the day⁴³ and shine upon the earth if that other light was sufficient to make the day and was even called the Day? Did that light illumine the higher regions far from the earth and out of sight from here, so that there was need for a sun by which day might shine upon the lower regions of the universe? Again, one might say that the brightness of day was increased by the addition of the sun, sup-posing that there had been a day illuminated by the previous light but less brilliantly than it now is. And another theory has been proposed by a certain writer, ⁴⁴ according to whom light was first brought on the scene in the work of creation, as indicated by the words, "Let there be light, and light was made;" but afterwards, when mention is made of the heavenly bodies, we are told what was made out of the light, this being done in the due course of the days on which the Creator decided to make His works. But where the original light went when evening came on, so that night might have its place, this author does not say, and I do not think any explanation can be found. It must not be supposed that it was extinguished to give place to the darkness of night, and again enkindled to provide for morning before these duties were performed by the sun, which began to function on the fourth day, according to Holy Scripture.

CHAPTER 12

Difficulties connected with the succession of day and night and the gathering of the waters.

24. But before the appearance of the sun, in what sort of cycle could three days and nights have passed in succession? Even if there existed the light which was first created, and even if we assume that it was a corporeal light, it is difficult to discover any solution to propose for this problem. Perhaps one might say that God gave the name “darkness” to the mass of earth and water which were still not separated one from the other (a thing which is said to have happened on the third day), in view of the dense bodily mass of the earth and water, which light could not have penetrated, or in view of the dark shade of the huge bulk. Now there must be such a shade on one side of a body if there is light on the other. Where part of a body cannot be reached by light, because the mass of the body obstructs it, in that part there is shade; for a place deprived of light which would illuminate it if it were not for a body that obstructs the light, fulfills exactly the definition of shade. If this shade, because of the size of the massive body, is large enough to cover a space of the earth equal to that covered by daylight on the other side, it is then called “night.” Not all darkness is night. There is darkness also in large caves in which light cannot penetrate the inner recesses because of the solid mass that obstructs it. In such places there is no light, and all the area is unlighted, but we do not call this darkness “night.” This word we reserve for the darkness that comes to that part of the earth from which day has departed. Similarly, not all light is called “day”; there is the light of the moon, of the stars, of lamps, of lightning, and of all such objects that shine. But that light is called “day” which precedes the night and withdraws when night comes on.

25. But if the light first created enveloped the earth on all sides, whether it was motionless or traveling round, it could not be followed anywhere by night, because it did not vacate any place to make room for night. But was it made on one side, so that as it traveled it would permit the night to follow after from the other? Although water still covered all the earth, there was nothing to prevent the massive watery sphere from having day on one side by the presence of light, and on the other side, night by the absence of light. Thus, in the evening, darkness would pass to that side from which light would be turning to the other.

26. Now, where were the waters gathered if they had originally covered the whole earth?
45 When some were pulled back to lay bare the land, to what region were they brought? If there was some bare portion of the earth where they could be gathered, dry land already was in evidence, and the waters were not occupying the whole. But if they had covered the whole, what place was there in which they might be gathered so that dry land might appear? It surely could not be that they were raised up, as the grain, after being threshed, is lifted up above the threshing floor to be winnowed and then, when piled in a stack, leaves bare the space that it had covered when it was spread about. Who would make such a statement, seeing that the great tracts of the ocean are spread equally everywhere? Even when mountainous waves are raised up, they are levelled off again with the passing of the storm; and if the tide retreats from certain shores, it must be admitted that there are other coasts where the moving waters come, and that then they make their way again to the land from which they have departed. But if water covered the whole wide world, where would it go in order to leave some of the land exposed? Could it be that water in a rarefied state, like a cloud, had covered the earth, and that it was brought together and became dense, thus disclosing some of the many regions of the world and making it possible for dry land to appear? On the other hand, it could be that the earth settled in vast areas and thus offered hollow places into which the flowing

waters might pour; and dry land then would appear in the places from which the water had withdrawn.

27. Matter is not entirely unformed if it has the appearance of a cloud.

CHAPTER 13

When were water and earth created?

A further question, then, arises as to the time when God created these distinct forms and qualities of water and earth. No mention is made of this act in the six days. Hence let us suppose that God did this before any of the days began; for, before any mention of the first days, Scripture says, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." By the word "earth" we should then understand earth with its own fully developed form and the waters clearly marked by their visible form flooding over the earth. Accordingly, where Holy Scripture goes on to say, "The earth was invisible and formless, and darkness was over the abyss, and the Spirit of God was stirring above the water,"⁴⁶ we should not imagine any unformed matter, but earth and water already constituted with their familiar qualities, but without light, which had not yet been created. We should then understand that the earth is said to be invisible because, being covered by the waters, it could not be seen, even if someone were present to see it; and it would be formless inasmuch as it was not yet separated from the sea and bound by shores and adorned with its fruits and living creatures. If, therefore, this is the case, why were these forms of earth and water, which are certainly corporeal forms, made before the beginning of days? Why do we not read, "God said: 'Let there be earth,' and earth was made"; and "God said: 'Let there be water,' and water was made"? Or, if the whole lower order of creation was included in one act, the sacred text might have read: "God said: 'Let there be earth and water,' and so it was done."

CHAPTER 14

"Heaven and earth" must refer to formless matter.

Why is it not said, after this was done, that God saw that it was good?

28. Now, it is obvious that everything subject to change is fashioned out of something formless; and, furthermore, our Catholic faith declares, and right reason teaches, that there could not have existed any matter of anything whatsoever unless it came from God, the Author and Creator of all that has been formed or is to be formed. It is of this formless matter that the inspired writer speaks when he says to God: "Who hast made the world out of formless matter."⁴⁷ We must conclude, then, that this same matter is referred to in words carefully chosen by a spiritual man in a manner that is accommodated to unlearned

readers or hearers, when before the enumeration of the days it is stated, "In the beginning

God created heaven and earth,” etc., as far as the verse that begins, “And God said.” After that there follows the enumeration of creatures that have been formed.

CHAPTER 15

Unformed matter is prior in origin, not in time, to things formed.
The author refers to unformed matter in v. 2.

29. But we must not suppose that unformed matter is prior in time to things that are formed; both the thing made and the matter from which it was made were created together.⁴⁸ A voice is the matter from which words are fashioned, and words imply a voice that is formed. But the speaker does not first utter a formless sound of his voice and later gather it together and shape it into words. Similarly, God the Creator did not first make unformed matter and later, as if after further reflection, form it according to the series of works He produced. He created formed matter. It is true that the material out of which something is made, though not prior by time, is in a sense by its origin prior to the object produced. Accordingly, the sacred writer was able to separate in the time of his narrative what God did not separate in time in His creative act. If someone should ask whether we produce the voice from words or words from the voice, you would hardly find anyone so dull as to be unable to reply that words are produced from the voice. Although the speaker produces both at the same time, a moment’s reflection will show which is the material of the thing produced.

Now, God created together both the matter which He formed and the objects into which He formed it. Holy Scripture had to mention both but could not mention both together. Which, then, had to be mentioned first, the matter from which the works of creation were made or the works produced from the matter? The answer is obvious. We also, when speaking of mat-ter and form, understand that they exist together, but we must name them separately. In a moment’s time, as we pronounce these two words, we utter one before the other; and so in a detailed narration an account had to be given of one before the other, although both, as I have said, were created by God together. Thus, what is prior only by origin in the act of creation is prior also by time in the narration. Even in the case of two things in which there is no priority of any kind, it is impossible to name them together, to say nothing of giving an account of them together. There can be no doubt, therefore, that this un-formed matter, however slight its nature, was made by God alone and created together with the works that were formed from it.⁴⁹

30. Now, we may suppose that this unformed matter is meant by the following words: “But the earth was invisible and formless, and darkness was over the abyss. And the Spirit of God was stirring above the water.” With the exception of the mention of the Spirit of God, we can surely presume that the whole passage refers to the visible creation but implies its unformed state in terms that are adapted to the unlearned. For these two elements, earth and water, are more pliable than the others in the hands of an artisan, and so with these two words it was quite fitting to indicate the unformed matter of things.

CHAPTER 16

The theory of diffusion and contraction of the light rejected.

If this explanation is acceptable, there was no mass formed upon which the light could shine from one side while darkness covered the other, where night could follow on the heels of day.

31. On the other hand, there is no solid reason for understanding day and night as a diffusion and contraction of the light.⁵⁰ There were as yet no living creatures for whose well-being such a succession of light and darkness would be provided, as we see it is provided now by the course of the sun for the living beings later created. Moreover, no analogy can be offered to prove such a diffusion and contraction of the light as would account for the succession of day and night. The shaft of rays from our eyes, to be sure, is a shaft of light.⁵¹ It can be pulled in when we focus on what is near our eyes and sent forth when we fix on objects at a distance. But when it is pulled in, it does not altogether stop seeing distant objects, although, of course, it sees them more obscurely than when it focuses its gaze upon them. Nevertheless, the light which is in the eye, according to authoritative opinion, is so slight that without the help of light from outside we should be able to see nothing. Since, moreover, it cannot be distinguished from the outside light, it is difficult, as I have said, to find an analogy by which we might demonstrate a diffusion of light to make the day and a contraction to make the night.

CHAPTER 17

Light is the illumination of intellectual creatures. Darkness signifies creatures unformed.

32. If it was spiritual light that was made when God said, "Let there be light," it must not be interpreted as the true Light which is coeternal with the Father, through which all things were made and which enlightens every man,⁵² but rather as that light of which Scripture could say, "Wisdom has been created before all things."⁵³ For when eternal and unchangeable Wisdom, who is not created but begotten, enters into spiritual and rational creatures, as He is wont to come into holy souls,⁵⁴ so that with His light they may shine, then in the reason which has been illuminated there is a new state introduced, and this can be understood as the light which was made when God said, "Let there be light." This supposes, of course, that spiritual creatures already existed and were intended by the word "heaven," where Scripture says, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," and that this means not the material heaven but the immaterial heaven above it.⁵⁵ This heaven is exalted above every material thing not by its location but by the excellence of its nature. But how the mind illuminated and the illumination itself could be produced at the same time, although the illumination is placed later in the narrative, is a point that I have already explained in treating about the creation of matter.⁵⁶

33. But how are we to understand the evening and the night that follow upon the light? Is the answer to be found in the darkness from which this light could be divided, according

to the sacred text: "And God separated the light from the darkness?"⁵⁷ Surely there were not sinners already existing and foolish creatures falling away from the light of truth, whom God would separate from creatures remaining in the light, as if marking them as light and darkness, calling the light "Day" and the darkness "Night," and thus showing that He is not the author of evil but the Ruler who governs according to deserts? Perhaps by this by this day all time is meant, and all the scrolls of the ages are included in this word; and so it is not called "the first day" but "one day," as Scripture says: "And evening was made and morning made, one day." This interpretation would imply that the making of evening means the sin of rational creatures; and the making of morning, their renewal.

34. But this is to give an allegorical and prophetic Interpretation, a thing which I did not set out to do in this treatise. I have started here to discuss Sacred Scripture according to the plain meaning of the historical facts, not according to future events⁵⁸ which they foreshadow. How, then, in the account of the creation and formation of things can we find evening and morning in the created spiritual light? Is the separation of light from darkness a marking off of formed creatures from the un-formed? And are the terms "day" and "night" used to indicate an orderly arrangement, showing that God leaves nothing in disarray, and that the unformed state through which things temporarily pass as they change from form to form is not un-planned? And does this expression imply that the wasting and growth by which creatures succeed one another in the course of time is something that contributes to the beauty of the world?⁵⁹ Night certainly consists in darkness which is well ordered.

35. Hence, after the creation of light, it is said, "God saw that the light was good." This might have been uttered after all the works of the same day, so that, having stated, "God said, 'Let there be light,' and light was made...; and God separated the light from the darkness; and God called the light Day and the darkness Night," Scripture would then say, "And God saw that it was good," and after that add, "And evening was made and morning made." Such is the order followed in the other works of creation to which a name is given. The procedure, then, is different here because the unformed creation is marked off from formed creation in order that it may not find its end in an unformed state but rather be set aside to be formed later by other created beings of the corporeal world. If, therefore, after they had been marked off by that separation and given their names, Scripture then said, "God saw that it was good," we should take this to mean that they had been so made that nothing was left to be added to them to perfect them in their several kinds. But, because He had fully constituted only the light in this way, God saw that the light was good, and He distinguished it from darkness by real separation as well as by name. At that point Scripture does not say, "God saw that it was good." The unformed creation had been set apart precisely so that still other beings might be formed from it. Now, when the night with which we are all familiar, which is produced on earth by the motion of the sun, has once been marked off from day by the distribution of the heavenly bodies, the separation of day and night being thus accomplished, Scripture says, God saw that it was good.⁶⁰ This night was not an unformed substance out of which other beings would be formed. It was an empty space, filled only with air, devoid of the light of day: nothing had to be added to it for it to become more formed or distinguished in its kind. But evening, during all these three days before the creation of the heavenly bodies, can perhaps be reasonably understood as the end of each work accomplished,

morning as an indication of a work to follow.

CHAPTER 18

The Spirit stirring or brooding over the waters. In obscure matters we should not be too tenacious of our opinions.

36. Above all, let us remember, as I have tried in many ways to show, that God does not work under the limits of time by motions of body and soul, as do men and angels, but by the eternal, unchangeable, and fixed exemplars of His coeternal Word and by a kind of brooding action of His equally coeternal Holy Spirit. The Greek and Latin translations say of the Holy Spirit that “He was stirring above the waters” but in Syriac, which is close to Hebrew (this interpretation is said to be explained by a Christian scholar of Syria), the rendering is not He was stirring above but rather “He was brooding over.”⁶¹ This action is not like that of a person who nurses swellings or wounds with the proper application of cold or hot water; but it is rather like that of a bird that broods over its eggs, the mother somehow helping in the development of her young by the warmth from her body, through an affection similar to that of love.⁶² Hence, we must not think of the matter in a human way, as if the utterances of God were subject to time throughout the various days of God’s works. For Divine Wisdom Himself, taking our weak nature, has come to gather the children of Jerusalem under His wings, as a hen gathers her young,⁶³ not so that we may always be little children but that, being infants in malice, we may cease being children in mind.⁶⁴

37. In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we may find treated in Holy Scripture, different Interpretations are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture.

CHAPTER 19

On interpreting the mind of the sacred writer. Christians should not talk nonsense to unbelievers.

38. Let us suppose that in explaining the words, “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and light was made,” one man thinks that it was material light that was made, and another that it was spiritual. As to the actual existence of “spiritual light”⁶⁵ in a spiritual creature, our faith leaves no doubt; as to the existence of material light, celestial or supercelestial, even

existing before the heavens, a light which could have been followed by night, there will be nothing in such a supposition contrary to the faith until un-erring truth gives the lie to it. And if that should happen, this teaching was never in Holy Scripture but was an opinion pro-posed by man in his ignorance. On the other hand, if reason should prove that this opinion is unquestionably true, it will still be uncertain whether this sense was intended by the sacred writer when he used the words quoted above, or whether he meant something else no less true. And if the general drift of the passage shows that the sacred writer did not intend this teaching, the other, which he did intend, will not thereby be false; indeed, it will be true and more worth knowing. On the other hand, if the tenor of the words of Scripture does not militate against our taking this teaching as the mind of the writer, we shall still have to enquire whether he could not have meant something else besides. And if we find that he could have meant something else also, it will not be clear which of the two meanings he intended. And there is no difficulty if he is thought to have wished both interpretations if both are supported by clear indications in the context.⁶⁶

39. Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking non-sense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although “they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.”⁶⁷

CHAPTER 20

We should remember that Scripture, even in its obscure passages, has been written to nourish our souls.

40. With these facts in mind, I have worked out and present-ed the statements of the Book⁶⁸ of Genesis in a variety of ways according to my ability; and, in interpreting words that have been written obscurely for the purpose of stimulating our thought, I have not rashly taken my stand on one side against a rival interpretation which might possibly be better.⁶⁹ I have thought that each one, in keeping with his powers of under-standing, should choose the interpretation that he can grasp. Where he cannot understand Holy Scripture, let him glorify God⁷⁰ and fear for himself.⁷¹ But since the words of Scripture that I have treated are explained in so many senses, critics full of worldly learning should restrain themselves from attacking as ignorant and uncultured these utterances that have been made to nourish all devout souls. Such critics are like wingless creatures that crawl upon the earth and, while soaring no higher than the leap of a frog, mock the birds in their nests above.⁷²

But more dangerous is the error of certain weak brethren who faint away when they hear these irreligious critics learnedly and eloquently discoursing on the theories of astronomy or on any of the questions relating to the elements of this universe. With a sigh, they esteem these teachers as superior to themselves, looking upon them as great men; and they return with disdain to the books which were written for the good of their souls; and, although they ought to drink from these books with relish, they can scarcely bear to take them up. Turning away in disgust from the unattractive wheat field, they long for the blossoms on the thorn. For they are not free to see how sweet is the Lord,⁷³ and they have no hunger on the Sabbath. And thus they are idle, though they have permission from the Lord to pluck the ears of grain and to work them in their hands and grind them and win-now them until they arrive at the nourishing kernel.⁷⁴

CHAPTER 21

The advantage of studying Scripture even when the meaning of the author cannot be found for certain.

41. Someone will say: “What have you brought out with all the threshing of this treatise? What kernel have you revealed? What have you winnowed? Why does everything seem to lie hidden under questions? Adopt one of the many interpretations which you maintained were possible.” To such a one my answer is that I have arrived at a nourishing kernel in that I have learnt that a man is not in any difficulty in making a reply according to his faith which he ought to make to those who try to defame our Holy Scripture. When they are able, from reliable evidence, to prove some fact of physical science, we shall show that it is not contrary to our Scripture. But when they produce from any of their books a theory contrary to Scripture, and therefore contrary to the Catholic faith, either we shall have some ability to demonstrate that it is absolutely false, or at least we ourselves will hold it so without any shadow of a doubt. And we will so cling to our Mediator, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,”⁷⁵ that we will not be led astray by the glib talk of false philosophy or frightened by the superstition of false religion. When we read the inspired books in the light of this wide variety of true doctrines which are drawn from a few words and founded on the firm basis of Catholic

belief, let us choose that one which appears as certainly the meaning intended by the author. But if this is not clear, then at least we should choose an interpretation in keeping with the context of Scripture and in harmony with our faith. But if the meaning cannot be studied and judged by the context of Scripture, at least we should choose only that which our faith demands. For it is one thing to fail to recognize the primary meaning of the writer, and another to depart from the norms of religious belief. If both these difficulties are avoided, the reader gets full profit from his reading. Failing that, even though the writer's intention is uncertain, one will find it useful to extract an interpretation in harmony with our faith.⁷⁶