

# The Confessions (Book XII)

*Augustine of Hippo*

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Confession

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## INTRODUCTION

Augustine wrestles with the first verse of Genesis and the concept of matter before form — "formless and void." He argues at length that several interpretations of the creation narrative can be true simultaneously, that scripture's richness exceeds any single reading, and that Christians should not fight over exegetical questions where the text genuinely permits latitude. A more technical book than most, but its approach to biblical interpretation remains influential — and unusually generous in spirit.

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He continues his explanation of the first Chapter of Genesis according to the Septuagint, and by its assistance he argues, especially, concerning the double heaven, and the formless matter out of which the whole world may have been created; afterwards of the interpretations of others not disallowed, and sets forth at great length the sense of the Holy Scripture.

## Chapter 1.— The Discovery of Truth is Difficult, But God Has Promised that He Who Seeks Shall Find.

My heart, O Lord, affected by the words of Your Holy Scripture, is much busied in this poverty of my life; and therefore, for the most part, is the want of human intelligence copious in language, because inquiry speaks more than discovery, and because demanding is longer than obtaining, and the hand that knocks is more active than the hand that receives. We hold the promise; who shall break it? If God be for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31 Ask, and you shall have; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened. Matthew 7:7-8 These are Your own promises; and who need fear to be deceived where the Truth promises?

## Chapter 2. Of the Double Heaven — The Visible, and the Heaven of Heavens.

The weakness of my tongue confesses unto Your Highness, seeing that You made heaven and earth. This heaven which I see, and this earth upon which I tread (from which is this earth that I carry about me), You have made. But where is that heaven of heavens, O Lord, of which we hear in the words of the

Psalm, The heaven of heavens are the Lord's, but the earth has He given to the children of men? Where is the heaven, which we behold not, in comparison of which all this, which we behold, is earth? For this corporeal whole, not as a whole everywhere, has thus received its beautiful figure in these lower parts, of which the bottom is our earth; but compared with that heaven of heavens, even the heaven of our earth is but earth; yea, each of these great bodies is not absurdly called earth, as compared with that, I know not what manner of heaven, which is the Lord's, not the sons' of men.

### Chapter 3. Of the Darkness Upon the Deep, and of the Invisible and Formless Earth.

And truly this earth was invisible and formless, and there was I know not what profundity of the deep upon which there was no light, because it had no form. Therefore You commanded that it should be written, that darkness was upon the face of the deep; what else was it than the absence of light? For had there been light, where should it have been save by being above all, showing itself aloft, and enlightening? Darkness therefore was upon it, because the light above was absent; as silence is there present where sound is not. And what is it to have silence there, but not to have sound there? Have You not, O Lord, taught this soul which confesses unto You? Have You not taught me, O Lord, that before You formed and separate this formless matter, there was nothing, neither color, nor figure, nor body, nor spirit? Yet not altogether nothing; there was a certain formlessness without any shape.

### Chapter 4. From the Formlessness of Matter, the Beautiful World Has Arisen.

What, then, should it be called, that even in some ways it might be conveyed to those of duller mind, save by some conventional word? But what, in all parts of the world, can be found nearer to a total formlessness than the earth and the deep? For, from their being of the lowest position, they are less beautiful than are the other higher parts, all transparent and shining. Why, therefore, may I not consider the formlessness of matter — which You had created without shape, whereof to make this shapely world — to be fittingly intimated unto men by the name of earth invisible and formless?

### Chapter 5. What May Have Been the Form of Matter.

So that when herein thought seeks what the sense may arrive at, and says to itself, It is no intelligible form, such as life or justice, because it is the matter of bodies; nor perceptible by the senses, because in the invisible and formless there is nothing which can be seen and felt — while human thought says these things to itself, it may endeavour either to know it by being ignorant, or by knowing it to be ignorant.

### Chapter 6. He Confesses that at One Time He Himself Thought Erroneously of Matter.

But were I, O Lord, by my mouth and by my pen to confess unto You the whole, whatever You have taught me concerning that matter, the name of which hearing beforehand, and not understanding (they who could not understand it telling me of it), I conceived it as having innumerable and varied forms. And therefore did I not conceive it; my mind revolved in disturbed order foul and horrible forms, but yet forms; and I called it formless, not that it lacked form, but because it had such as, did it appear, my mind would turn from, as unwonted and incongruous, and at which human weakness would be disturbed. But even that which I did conceive was formless, not by the privation of all form, but in comparison of more beautiful forms; and true reason persuaded me that I ought altogether to remove from it all remnants of any form whatever, if I wished to conceive matter wholly without form; and I could not. For sooner could I imagine that that which should be deprived of all form was not at all, than conceive anything between form and nothing — neither formed, nor nothing, formless, nearly nothing. And my mind hence ceased to question my spirit, filled (as it was) with the images of formed bodies, and changing and varying them according to its will; and I applied myself to the bodies themselves, and looked more deeply into their mutability, by which they cease to be what they had been, and begin to be what they were not; and this same transit from form unto form I have looked upon to be through some formless condition, not through a very nothing; but I desired to know, not to guess. And if my voice and my pen should confess the whole unto You, whatsoever knots You have untied for me concerning this question, who of my readers would endure to take in the whole? Nor yet, therefore, shall my heart cease to give You honour, and a song of praise, for those things which it is not able to express. For the mutability of mutable things is itself capable of all those forms into which mutable things are changed. And this mutability, what is it? Is it soul? Is it body? Is it the outer appearance of soul or body? Could it be said, Nothing were something, and That which is, is not, I would say that this were it; and yet in some manner was it already, since it could receive these visible and compound shapes.

## Chapter 7. Out of Nothing God Made Heaven and Earth.

And whence and in what manner was this, unless from You, from whom are all things, in so far as they are? But by how much the farther from You, so much the more unlike unto You; for it is not distance of place. You, therefore, O Lord, who art not one thing in one place, and otherwise in another, but the Self-same, and the Self-same, and the Self-same, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, did in the beginning, which is of You, in Your Wisdom, which was born of Your Substance, create something, and that out of nothing. For Thou created heaven and earth, not out of Yourself, for then they would be equal to Your Only-begotten, and thereby even to You; and in no wise would it be right that anything should be equal to You which was not of You. And anything else except You there was not whence You might create these things, O God, One Trinity, and Trine Unity; and, therefore, out of nothing You created heaven and earth — a great thing and a small, because You are Almighty and Good, to make all things good, even the great heaven and the small earth. You were, and there was nought else from which Thou created heaven and earth; two such things, one near unto You, the other near to nothing, — one to which You should be superior, the other to which nothing should be inferior.

## Chapter 8. Heaven and Earth Were Made In the Beginning; Afterwards the World, During Six Days, from Shapeless Matter.

But that heaven of heavens was for You, O Lord; but the earth, which You have given to the sons of men, to be seen and touched, was not such as now we see and touch. For it was invisible and without form, Genesis 1:2 and there was a deep over which there was not light; or, darkness was over the deep, that is, more than in the deep. For this deep of waters, now visible, has, even in its depths, a light suitable to its nature, perceptible in some manner unto fishes and creeping things in the bottom of it. But the entire deep was almost nothing, since hitherto it was altogether formless; yet there was then that which could be formed. For Thou, O Lord, hast made the world of a formless matter, which matter, out of nothing, You have made almost nothing, out of which to make those great things which we, sons of men, wonder at. For very wonderful is this corporeal heaven, of which firmament, between water and water, the second day after the creation of light, Thou said, Let it be made, and it was made. Genesis 1:6-8 Which firmament You called heaven, that is, the heaven of this earth and sea, which You made on the third day, by giving a visible shape to the formless matter which You made before all days. For even already had Thou made a heaven before all days, but that was the heaven of this heaven; because in the beginning You had made heaven and earth. But the earth itself which You had made was formless matter, because it was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep. Of which invisible and formless earth, of which formlessness, of which almost nothing, You might make all these things of which this changeable world consists, and yet consists not; whose very changeableness appears in this, that times can be observed and numbered in it. Because times are made by the changes of things, while the shapes, whose matter is the invisible earth aforesaid, are varied and turned.

## Chapter 9. That the Heaven of Heavens Was an Intellectual Creature, But that the Earth Was Invisible and Formless Before the Days that It Was Made.

And therefore the Spirit, the Teacher of Your servant when He relates that Thou did in the Beginning create heaven and earth, is silent as to times, silent as to days. For, doubtless, that heaven of heavens, which Thou in the Beginning created, is some intellectual creature, which, although in no wise co-eternal unto You, the Trinity, is yet a partaker of Your eternity, and by reason of the sweetness of that most happy contemplation of Yourself, does greatly restrain its own mutability, and without any failure, from the time in which it was created, in clinging unto You, surpasses all the rolling change of times. But this shapelessness — this earth invisible and without form— has not itself been numbered among the days. For where there is no shape nor order, nothing either comes or goes; and where this is not, there certainly are no days, nor any vicissitude of spaces of times.

## Chapter 10. He Begs of God that He May Live in the True Light, and May Be Instructed as to the Mysteries of the Sacred Books.

Oh, let Truth, the light of my heart, not my own darkness, speak unto me! I have descended to that, and am darkened. But thence, even thence, did I love You. I went astray, and remembered You. I heard Your voice behind me bidding me return, and scarcely did I hear it for the tumults of the unquiet ones. And now, behold, I return burning and panting after Your fountain. Let no one prohibit me; of this will I drink, and so have life. Let me not be my own life; from myself have I badly lived — death was I unto myself; in You do I revive. Speak unto me; discourse unto me. In Your books have I believed, and their words are very deep.

## Chapter 11. What May Be Discovered to Him by God.

Already have You told me, O Lord, with a strong voice, in my inner ear, that You are eternal, having alone immortality. 1 Timothy 6:16 Since You are not changed by any shape or motion, nor is Your will altered by times, because no will which changes is immortal. This in Your sight is clear to me, and let it become more and more clear, I beseech You; and in that manifestation let me abide more soberly under Your wings. Likewise have You said to me, O Lord, with a strong voice, in my inner ear, that You have made all natures and substances, which are not what You Yourself art, and yet they are; and that only is not from You which is not, and the motion of the will from You who art, to that which in a less degree is, because such motion is guilt and sin; and that no one's sin does either hurt You, or disturb the order of Your rule, either first or last. This, in Your sight, is clear to me and let it become more and more clear, I beseech You; and in that manifestation let me abide more soberly under Your wings.

Likewise have You said to me, with a strong voice, in my inner ear, that that creature, whose will You alone are, is not co-eternal unto You, and which, with a most persevering purity drawing its support from You, does, in place and at no time, put forth its own mutability; and Yourself being ever present with it, unto whom with its entire affection it holds itself, having no future to expect nor conveying into the past what it remembers, is varied by no change, nor extended into any times. O blessed one — if any such there be — in clinging unto Your Blessedness; blessed in You, its everlasting Inhabitant and its Enlightener! Nor do I find what the heaven of heavens, which is the Lord's, can be better called than Your house, which contemplates Your delight without any defection of going forth to another; a pure mind, most peacefully one, by that stability of peace of holy spirits, the citizens of Your city in the heavenly places, above these heavenly places which are seen.

Whence the soul, whose wandering has been made far away, may understand, if now she thirsts for You, if now her tears have become bread to her, while it is daily said to her Where is your God? if she now seeks of You one thing, and desires that she may dwell in Your house all the days of her life. And what is her life but You? And what are Your days but Your eternity, as Your years which fail not, because You are the same? Hence, therefore, can the soul, which is able, understand how far beyond all times You are eternal; when Your house, which has not wandered from You, although it be not co-eternal with You, yet by continually and unfailingly clinging unto You, suffers no vicissitude of times. This in Your sight is clear unto me, and may it become more and more clear unto me, I beseech You; and in this manifestation may I abide more soberly under Your wings.

Behold, I know not what shapelessness there is in those changes of these last and lowest creatures. And who shall tell me, unless it be some one who, through the emptiness of his own heart, wanders and is staggered by his own fancies? Who, unless such a one, would tell me that (all figure being diminished and consumed), if the formlessness only remain, through which the thing was changed and was turned from one figure into another, that that can exhibit the changes of times? For surely it could not be, because without the change of motions times are not, and there is no change where there is no figure.

## Chapter 12. From the Formless Earth God Created Another Heaven and a Visible and Formed Earth.

Which things considered as much as You give, O my God, as much as Thou excitest me to knock, and as much as You open unto me when I knock, Matthew 7:7 two things I find which You have made, not within the compass of time, since neither is co-eternal with You. One, which is so formed that, without any failing of contemplation, without any interval of change, although changeable, yet not changed, it may fully enjoy Your eternity and unchangeableness; the other, which was so formless, that it had not that by which it could be changed from one form into another, either of motion or of repose, whereby it might be subject unto time. But this You did not leave to be formless, since before all days, in the beginning You created heaven and earth — these two things of which I spoke. But the earth was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep. Genesis 1:2 By which words its shapelessness is conveyed unto us, that by degrees those minds may be drawn on which cannot wholly conceive the privation of all form without coming to nothing — whence another heaven might be created, and another earth visible and well-formed, and water beautifully ordered, and whatever besides is, in the formation of this world, recorded to have been, not without days, created; because such things are so that in them the vicissitudes of times may take place, on account of the appointed changes of motions and of forms.

## Chapter 13. Of the Intellectual Heaven and Formless Earth, Out of Which, on Another Day, the Firmament Was Formed.

Meanwhile I conceive this, O my God, when I hear Your Scripture speak, saying, In the beginning God made heaven and earth; but the earth was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep, and not stating on what day Thou created these things. Thus, meanwhile, do I conceive, that it is on account of that heaven of heavens, that intellectual heaven, where to understand is to know all at once — not in part, not darkly, not through a glass, 1 Corinthians 13:12 but as a whole, in manifestation, face to face; not this thing now, that anon, but (as has been said) to know at once without any change of times; and on account of the invisible and formless earth, without any change of times; which change is wont to have this thing now, that anon, because, where there is no form there can be no distinction between this or that;— it is, then, on account of these two — a primitively formed, and a wholly formless; the one heaven, but the heaven of heavens, the other earth, but the earth invisible and formless — on account of these two do I meanwhile conceive that Your Scripture said without mention of days, In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. For immediately it added of what earth it spoke. And

when on the second day the firmament is recorded to have been created, and called heaven, it suggests to us of which heaven He spoke before without mention of days.

## Chapter 14. Of the Depth of the Sacred Scripture, and Its Enemies.

Wonderful is the depth of Your oracles, whose surface is before us, inviting the little ones; and yet wonderful is the depth, O my God, wonderful is the depth. It is awe to look into it; and awe of honour, and a tremor of love. The enemies thereof I hate vehemently. Oh, if You would slay them with Your two-edged sword, that they be not its enemies! For thus do I love, that they should be slain unto themselves that they may live unto You. But behold others not reprovers, but praisers of the book of Genesis — The Spirit of God, say they, Who by His servant Moses wrote these things, willed not that these words should be thus understood. He willed not that it should be understood as You say, but as we say. Unto whom, O God of us all, Yourself being Judge, do I thus answer.

## Chapter 15. He Argues Against Adversaries Concerning the Heaven of Heavens.

Will you say that these things are false, which, with a strong voice, Truth tells me in my inner ear, concerning the very eternity of the Creator, that His substance is in no wise changed by time, nor that His will is separate from His substance? Wherefore, He wills not one thing now, another anon, but once and for ever He wills all things that He wills; not again and again, nor now this, now that; nor wills afterwards what He wills not before, nor wills not what before He willed. Because such a will is mutable and no mutable thing is eternal; but our God is eternal. Likewise He tells me, tells me in my inner ear, that the expectation of future things is turned to sight when they have come; and this same sight is turned to memory when they have passed. Moreover, all thought which is thus varied is mutable, and nothing mutable is eternal; but our God is eternal. These things I sum up and put together, and I find that my God, the eternal God, has not made any creature by any new will, nor that His knowledge suffers anything transitory.

What, therefore, will you say, you objectors? Are these things false? No, they say. What is this? Is it false, then, that every nature already formed, or matter formable, is only from Him who is supremely good, because He is supreme? . . . Neither do we deny this, say they. What then? Do you deny this, that there is a certain sublime creature, clinging with so chaste a love with the true and truly eternal God, that although it be not co-eternal with Him, yet it separates itself not from Him, nor flows into any variety and vicissitude of times, but rests in the truest contemplation of Him only? Since Thou, O God, showest Yourself unto him, and sufficest him, who loves You as much as You command, and, therefore, he declines not from You, nor toward himself. This is the house of God, not earthly, nor of any celestial bulk corporeal, but a spiritual house and a partaker of Your eternity, because without blemish forever. For You have made it fast for ever and ever; You have given it a law, which it shall not pass. Nor yet is it co-eternal with You, O God, because not without beginning, for it was made.

For although we find no time before it, for wisdom was created before all things, Sirach 1:4 — not certainly that Wisdom manifestly co-eternal and equal unto You, our God, His Father, and by Whom

all things were created, and in Whom, as the Beginning, You created heaven and earth; but truly that wisdom which has been created, namely, the intellectual nature, which, in the contemplation of light, is light. For this, although created, is also called wisdom. But as great as is the difference between the Light which enlightens and that which is enlightened, so great is the difference between the Wisdom that creates and that which has been created; as between the Righteousness which justifies, and the righteousness which has been made by justification. For we also are called Your righteousness; for thus says a certain servant of Yours: That we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 Therefore, since a certain created wisdom was created before all things, the rational and intellectual mind of that chaste city of Yours, our mother which is above, and is free, Galatians 4:26 and eternal in the heavens 2 Corinthians 5:1 (in what heavens, unless in those that praise You, the heaven of heavens, because this also is the heaven of heavens, which is the Lord's) — although we find not time before it, because that which has been created before all things also precedes the creature of time, yet is the Eternity of the Creator Himself before it, from Whom, having been created, it took the beginning, although not of time — for time as yet was not — yet of its own very nature.

Hence comes it so to be of You, our God, as to be manifestly another than You, and not the Self-same. Since, although we find time not only not before it, but not in it (it being proper ever to behold Your face, nor is ever turned aside from it, wherefore it happens that it is varied by no change), yet is there in it that mutability itself whence it would become dark and cold, but that, clinging unto You with sublime love, it shines and glows from You like a perpetual noon. O house, full of light and splendour! I have loved your beauty, and the place of the habitation of the glory of my Lord, your builder and owner. Let my wandering sigh after you; and I speak unto Him that made you, that He may possess me also in you, seeing He has made me likewise. I have gone astray, like a lost sheep; yet upon the shoulders of my Shepherd, Luke 15:5 your builder, I hope that I may be brought back to you.

What do you say to me, O you objectors whom I was addressing, and who yet believe that Moses was the holy servant of God, and that his books were the oracles of the Holy Ghost? Is not this house of God, not indeed co-eternal with God, yet, according to its measure, eternal in the heavens, 2 Corinthians 5:1 where in vain you seek for changes of times, because you will not find them? For that surpasses all extension, and every revolving space of time, to which it is ever good to cleave fast to God. It is, say they. What, therefore, of those things which my heart cried out unto my God, when within it heard the voice of His praise, what then do you contend is false? Or is it because the matter was formless, wherein, as there was no form, there was no order? But where there was no order there could not be any change of times; and yet this 'almost nothing,' inasmuch as it was not altogether nothing, was verily from Him, from Whom is whatever is, in whatever state anything is. This also, say they, we do not deny.

## Chapter 16. He Wishes to Have No Intercourse with Those Who Deny Divine Truth.

## Chapter 16. He Wishes to Have No Intercourse with Those Who Deny Divine Truth.

With such as grant that all these things which Your truth indicates to my mind are true, I desire to confer a little before You, O my God. For let those who deny these things bark and drown their own voices with their clamour as much as they please; I will endeavour to persuade them to be quiet, and to suffer Your word to reach them. But should they be unwilling, and should they repel me, I beseech, O my God, that Thou be not silent to me. Do Thou speak truly in my heart, for Thou only so speakest, and I will send them away blowing upon the dust from without, and raising it up into their own eyes; and will myself enter into my chamber, Isaiah 26:20 and sing there unto You songs of love — groaning with groaning unutterable Romans 8:26 in my pilgrimage, and remembering Jerusalem, with heart raised up towards it, Jerusalem my country, Jerusalem my mother, and Yourself, the Ruler over it, the Enlightener, the Father, the Guardian, the Husband, the chaste and strong delight, the solid joy, and all good things ineffable, even all at the same time, because the one supreme and true Good. And I will not be turned away until Thou collect all that I am, from this dispersion and deformity, into the peace of that very dear mother, where are the first-fruits of my spirit, whence these things are assured to me, and Thou conform and confirm it for ever, my God, my Mercy. But with reference to those who say not that all these things which are true and false, who honour Your Holy Scripture set forth by holy Moses,

placing it, as with us, on the summit of an authority to be followed, and yet who contradict us in some particulars, I thus speak: Be Thou, O our God, judge between my confessions and their contradictions.

## Chapter 17. He Mentions Five Explanations of the Words of Genesis I. I.

For they say, Although these things be true, yet Moses regarded not those two things, when by divine revelation he said, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' Genesis 1:1 Under the name of heaven he did not indicate that spiritual or intellectual creature which always beholds the face of God; nor under the name of earth, that shapeless matter. What then? That man, say they, meant as we say; this it is that he declared by those words. What is that? By the name of heaven and earth, say they, did he first wish to set forth, universally and briefly, all this visible world, that afterwards by the enumeration of the days he might distribute, as if in detail, all those things which it pleased the Holy Spirit thus to reveal. For such men were that rude and carnal people to which he spoke, that he judged it prudent that only those works of God as were visible should be entrusted to them. They agree, however, that the earth invisible and formless, and the darksome deep (out of which it is subsequently pointed out that all these visible things, which are known to all, were made and set in order during those days), may not unsuitably be understood of this formless matter.

What, now, if another should say That this same formlessness and confusion of matter was first introduced under the name of heaven and earth, because out of it this visible world, with all those natures which most manifestly appear in it, and which is wont to be called by the name of heaven and earth, was created and perfected? But what if another should say, that That invisible and visible nature is not inaptly called heaven and earth; and that consequently the universal creation, which God in His wisdom has made — that is, 'in the beginning,' — was comprehended under these two words. Yet, since all things have been made, not of the substance of God, but out of nothing (because they are not that same thing that God is, and there is in them all a certain mutability, whether they remain, as does the eternal house of God, or be changed, as are the soul and body of man), therefore, that the common matter of all things invisible and visible — as yet shapeless, but still capable of form, — out of which was to be created heaven and earth (that is, the invisible and visible creature already formed), was spoken of by the same names by which the earth invisible and formless and the darkness upon the deep would be called; with this difference, however, that the earth invisible and formless is understood as corporeal matter, before it had any manner of form, but the darkness upon the deep as spiritual matter, before it was restrained at all of its unlimited fluidity, and before the enlightening of wisdom.

Should any man wish, he may still say, That the already perfected and formed natures, invisible and visible, are not signified under the name of heaven and earth when it is read, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth;' but that the yet same formless beginning of things, the matter capable of being formed and made, was called by these names, because contained in it there were these confused things not as yet distinguished by their qualities and forms, the which now being digested in their own orders, are called heaven and earth, the former being the spiritual, the latter the corporeal creature.

## Chapter 18. What Error is Harmless in Sacred Scripture.

All which things having been heard and considered, I am unwilling to contend about words, for that is profitable to nothing but to the subverting of the hearers. 2 Timothy 2:14 But the law is good to edify, if a man use it lawfully; 1 Timothy 1:8 for the end of it is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned. And well did our Master know, upon which two commandments He hung all the Law and the Prophets. And what does it hinder me, O my God, Thou light of my eyes in secret, while ardently confessing these things — since by these words many things may be understood, all of which are yet true — what, I say, does it hinder me, should I think otherwise of what the writer thought than some other man thinks? Indeed, all of us who read endeavour to trace out and to understand that which he whom we read wished to convey; and as we believe him to speak truly, we dare not suppose that he has spoken anything which we either know or suppose to be false. Since, therefore, each person endeavours to understand in the Holy Scriptures that which the writer understood, what hurt is it if a man understand what Thou, the light of all true-speaking minds, dost show him to be true although he whom he reads understood not this, seeing that he also understood a Truth, not, however, this Truth?

## Chapter 19. He Enumerates the Things Concerning Which All Agree.

For it is true, O Lord, that You have made heaven and earth; it is also true, that the Beginning is Your Wisdom, in Which You have made all things. It is likewise true, that this visible world has its own great parts, the heaven and the earth, which in a short compass comprehends all made and created natures. It is also true, that everything mutable sets before our minds a certain want of form, whereof it takes a form, or is changed and turned. It is true, that that is subject to no times which so cleaves to the changeless form as that, though it be mutable, it is not changed. It is true, that the formlessness, which is almost nothing, cannot have changes, of times. It is true, that that of which anything is made may by a certain mode of speech be called by the name of that thing which is made of it; whence that formlessness of which heaven and earth were made might it be called heaven and earth. It is true, that of all things having form, nothing is nearer to the formless than the earth and the deep. It is true, that not only every created, and formed thing, but also whatever is capable of creation and of form, You have made, by whom are all things. 1 Corinthians 8:6 It is true, that everything that is formed from that which is formless was formless before it was formed.

## Chapter 20. Of the Words, In the Beginning, Variouslly Understood.

From all these truths, of which they doubt not whose inner eye You have granted to see such things, and who immoveably believe Moses, Your servant, to have spoken in the spirit of truth; from all these, then, he takes one who says, In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,— that is, In His Word, co-eternal with Himself, God made the intelligible and the sensible, or the spiritual and corporeal creature. He takes another, who says, In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,— that is, In His Word, co-eternal with Himself, God made the universal mass of this corporeal world, with all those manifest and known natures which it contains. He, another, who says, In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, that is, In His Word, co-eternal with Himself, God made the formless matter of the spiritual and corporeal creature. He, another, who says, In the beginning God created the

heaven and the earth,— that is, In His Word, co-eternal with Himself, God made the formless matter of the corporeal creature, wherein heaven and earth lay as yet confused, which being now distinguished and formed, we, at this day, see in the mass of this world. He, another, who says, In the beginning God created heaven and earth,— that is, In the very beginning of creating and working, God made that formless matter confusedly containing heaven and earth, out of which, being formed, they now stand out, and are manifest, with all the things that are in them.

## Chapter 21. Of the Explanation of the Words, The Earth Was Invisible.

And as concerns the understanding of the following words, out of all those truths he selected one to himself, who says, But the earth was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep,— that is, That corporeal thing, which God made, was as yet the formless matter of corporeal things, without order, without light. He takes another, who says, But the earth was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep,— that is, This whole, which is called heaven and earth, was as yet formless and darksome matter, out of which the corporeal heaven and the corporeal earth were to be made, with all things therein which are known to our corporeal senses. He, another, who says, But the earth was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep,— that is, This whole, which is called heaven and earth, was as yet a formless and darksome matter, out of which were to be made that intelligible heaven, which is otherwise called the heaven of heavens, and the earth, namely, the whole corporeal nature, under which name may also be comprised this corporeal heaven, — that is, from which every invisible and visible creature would be created. He, another, who says, But the earth was invisible and without form, and darkness was upon the deep,— The Scripture called not that formlessness by the name of heaven and earth, but that formlessness itself, says he, already was, which he named the earth invisible and formless and the darksome deep, of which he had said before, that God had made the heaven and the earth, namely, the spiritual and corporeal creature. He, another, who says, But the earth was invisible and formless, and darkness was upon the deep,— that is, There was already a formless matter, whereof the Scripture before said, that God had made heaven and earth, namely, the entire corporeal mass of the world, divided into two very great parts, the superior and the inferior, with all those familiar and known creatures which are in them.

## Chapter 22. He Discusses Whether Matter Was from Eternity, or Was Made by God.

For, should any one endeavour to contend against these last two opinions, thus —If you will not admit that this formlessness of matter appears to be called by the name of heaven and earth, then there was something which God had not made out of which He could make heaven and earth; for Scripture has not told us that God made this matter, unless we understand it to be implied in the term of heaven and earth, or of earth only, when it is said, 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth,' as that which follows, but the earth was invisible and formless, although it was pleasing to him so to call the formless matter, we may not yet understand any but that which God made in that text which has been already written, 'God made heaven and earth.' The maintainers of either one or the other of these two opinions which we have put last will, when they have heard these things, answer and say, We deny not indeed that this formless matter was created by God, the God of whom are all things, very good; for, as we say that that is a greater good which is created and formed, so we acknowledge that that is a minor good which is capable of creation and form, but yet good. But yet the Scripture has not declared that God made this formlessness, any more than it has declared many other things; as the 'Cherubim,' and 'Seraphim,' and those of which the apostle distinctly speaks, 'Thrones,' 'Dominions,' 'Principalities,' 'Powers,' Colossians 1:16 all of which it is manifest God made. Or if in that which is said, 'He made heaven and earth,' all things are comprehended, what do we say of the waters upon which the Spirit of God moved? For if they are understood as incorporated in the word earth, how then can formless matter be meant in the term earth when we see the waters so beautiful? Or if it be so meant, why then

is it written that out of the same formlessness the firmament was made and called heaven, and yet it is not written that the waters were made? For those waters, which we perceive flowing in so beautiful a manner, remain not formless and invisible. But if, then, they received that beauty when God said, Let the water which is under the firmament be gathered together, Genesis 1:9 so that the gathering be the very formation, what will be answered concerning the waters which are above the firmament, because if formless they would not have deserved to receive a seat so honourable, nor is it written by what word they were formed? If, then, Genesis is silent as to anything that God has made, which, however, neither sound faith nor unerring understanding doubts that God has made, let not any sober teaching dare to say that these waters were co-eternal with God because we find them mentioned in the book of Genesis; but when they were created, we find not. Why — truth instructing us — may we not understand that that formless matter, which the Scripture calls the earth invisible and without form, and the darksome deep, have been made by God out of nothing, and therefore that they are not co-eternal with Him, although that narrative has failed to tell when they were made?

## Chapter 23. Two Kinds of Disagreements in the Books to Be Explained.

These things, therefore, being heard and perceived according to my weakness of apprehension, which I confess unto You, O Lord, who know it, I see that two sorts of differences may arise when by signs anything is related, even by true reporters — one concerning the truth of the things, the other concerning the meaning of him who reports them. For in one way we inquire, concerning the forming of the creature, what is true; but in another, what Moses, that excellent servant of Your faith, would have wished that the reader and hearer should understand by these words. As for the first kind, let all those depart from me who imagine themselves to know as true what is false. And as for the other also, let all depart from me who imagine Moses to have spoken things that are false. But let me be united in You, O Lord, with them, and in You delight myself with them that feed on Your truth, in the breadth of charity; and let us approach together unto the words of Your book, and in them make search for Your will, through the will of Your servant by whose pen You have dispensed them.

## Chapter 24. Out of the Many True Things, It is Not Asserted Confidently that Moses Understood This or That.

But which of us, amid so many truths which occur to inquirers in these words, understood as they are in different ways, shall so discover that one interpretation as to confidently say that Moses thought this, and that in that narrative he wished this to be understood, as confidently as he says that this is true, whether he thought this thing or the other? For behold, O my God, I Your servant, who in this book have vowed unto You a sacrifice of confession, and beseech You that of Your mercy I may pay my vows unto You, behold, can I, as I confidently assert that Thou in Your immutable word hast created all things, invisible and visible, with equal confidence assert that Moses meant nothing else than this when he wrote, In the beginning God created. the heaven and the earth. No. Because it is not as clear to me that this was in his mind when he wrote these things, as I see it to be certain in Your truth. For his thoughts might be set upon the very beginning of the creation when he said, In the beginning; and he might wish it to be understood that, in this place, the heaven and the earth were no formed and perfected nature,

whether spiritual or corporeal, but each of them newly begun, and as yet formless. Because I see, that which-soever of these had been said, it might have been said truly; but which of them he may have thought in these words, I do not so perceive. Although, whether it were one of these, or some other meaning which has not been mentioned by me, that this great man saw in his mind when he used these words, I make no doubt but that he saw it truly, and expressed it suitably.

## Chapter 25. It Behoves Interpreters, When Disagreeing Concerning Obscure Places, to Regard God the Author of Truth, and the Rule of Charity.

Let no one now trouble me by saying, Moses thought not as you say, but as I say. For should he ask me, Whence do you know that Moses thought this which you deduce from his words? I ought to take it contentedly, and reply perhaps as I have before, or somewhat more fully should he be obstinate. But when he says, Moses meant not what you say, but what I say, and yet denies not what each of us says, and that both are true, O my God, life of the poor, in whose bosom there is no contradiction, pour down into my heart Your soothings, that I may patiently bear with such as say this to me; not because they are divine, and because they have seen in the heart of Your servant what they say, but because they are proud, and have not known the opinion of Moses, but love their own — not because it is true, but because it is their own. Otherwise they would equally love another true opinion, as I love what they say when they speak what is true; not because it is theirs, but because it is true, and therefore now not theirs because true. But if they therefore love that because it is true, it is now both theirs and mine, since it is common to all the lovers of truth. But because they contend that Moses meant not what I say, but I what they themselves say, this I neither like nor love; because, though it were so, yet that rashness is not of knowledge, but of audacity; and not vision, but vanity brought it forth. And therefore, O Lord, are Your judgments to be dreaded, since Your truth is neither mine, nor his, nor another's, but of all of us, whom Thou publicly callest to have it in common, warning us terribly not to hold it as specially for ourselves, lest we be deprived of it. For whosoever claims to himself as his own that which Thou appointed to all to enjoy, and desires that to be his own which belongs to all, is forced away from what is common to all to that which is his own — that is, from truth to falsehood. For he that speaks a lie, speaks of his own. John 8:44

Hearken, O God, Thou best Judge! Truth itself, hearken to what I shall say to this gainsayer; hearken, for before You I say it, and before my brethren who use Your law lawfully, to the end of charity; 1 Timothy 1:8 hearken and behold what I shall say to him, if it be pleasing unto You. For this brotherly and peaceful word do I return unto him: If we both see that that which you say is true, and if we both see that what I say is true, where, I ask, do we see it? Certainly not I in you, nor you in me, but both in the unchangeable truth itself, which is above our minds. When, therefore, we may not contend about the very light of the Lord our God, why do we contend about the thoughts of our neighbour, which we cannot so see as incommutable truth is seen; when, if Moses himself had appeared to us and said, This I meant, not so should we see it, but believe it? Let us not, then, be puffed up for one against the other, 1 Corinthians 4:6 above that which is written; let us love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, and our neighbour as ourself. Mark 12:30-31 As to which two precepts of charity, unless we believe that Moses meant whatever in these books he did mean, we shall make God

a liar when we think otherwise concerning our fellow-servants' mind than He has taught us. Behold, now, how foolish it is, in so great an abundance of the truest opinions which can be extracted from these words, rashly to affirm which of them Moses particularly meant; and with pernicious contentions to offend charity itself, on account of which he has spoken all the things whose words we endeavour to explain!

## Chapter 26. What He Might Have Asked of God Had He Been Enjoined to Write the Book of Genesis.

And yet, O my God, Thou exaltation of my humility, and rest of my labour, who hear my confessions, and forgivest my sins, since You command me that I should love my neighbour as myself, I cannot believe that You gave to Moses, Your most faithful servant, a less gift than I should wish and desire for myself from You, had I been born in his time, and had Thou placed me in that position that through the service of my heart and of my tongue those books might be distributed, which so long after were to profit all nations, and through the whole world, from so great a pinnacle of authority, were to surmount the words of all false and proud teachings. I should have wished truly had I then been Moses (for we all come from the same mass; and what is man, saving that You are mindful of him? ). I should then, had I been at that time what he was, and enjoined by You to write the book of Genesis, have wished that such a power of expression and such a method of arrangement should be given me, that they who cannot as yet understand how God creates might not reject the words as surpassing their powers; and they who are already able to do this, would find, in whatever true opinion they had by thought arrived at, that it was not passed over in the few words of Your servant; and should another man by the light of truth have discovered another, neither should that fail to be found in those same words.

## Chapter 27. The Style of Speaking in the Book of Genesis is Simple and Clear.

For as a fountain in a limited space is more plentiful, and affords supply for more streams over larger spaces than any one of those streams which, after a wide interval, is derived from the same fountain; so the narrative of Your dispenser, destined to benefit many who were likely to discourse thereon, does, from a limited measure of language, overflow into streams of clear truth, whence each one may draw out for himself that truth which he can concerning these subjects — this one that truth, that one another, by larger circumlocutions of discourse. For some, when they read or hear these words, think that God as a man or some mass gifted with immense power, by some new and sudden resolve, had, outside itself, as if at distant places, created heaven and earth, two great bodies above and below, wherein all things were to be contained. And when they hear, God said, Let it be made, and it was made, they think of words begun and ended, sounding in times and passing away, after the departure of which that came into being which was commanded to be; and whatever else of the kind their familiarity with the world would suggest. In whom, being as yet little ones, while their weakness by this humble kind of speech is carried on as if in a mother's bosom, their faith is healthfully built up, by which they have and hold as certain that God made all natures, which in wondrous variety their senses perceive on every side. Which words, if any one despising them, as if trivial, with proud weakness shall have stretched himself beyond his fostering cradle, he will, alas, fall miserably. Have pity, O Lord God, lest they who pass by trample on the unfledged bird; and send Your angel, who may restore it to its nest that it may live until it can fly.

## Chapter 28. The Words, In the Beginning, And, The Heaven and the Earth, Are Differently Understood.

But others, to whom these words are no longer a nest, but shady fruit-bowers, see the fruits concealed in them, fly around rejoicing, and chirpingly search and pluck them. For they see when they read or hear

these words, O God, that all times past and future are surmounted by Your eternal and stable abiding, and still that there is no temporal creature which You have not made. And by Your will, because it is that which You are, You have made all things, not by any changed will, nor by a will which before was not — not out of Yourself, in Your own likeness, the form of all things, but out of nothing, a formless unlikeness which should be formed by Your likeness (having recourse to You the One, after their settled capacity, according as it has been given to each thing in his kind), and might all be made very good; whether they remain around You, or, being by degrees removed in time and place, make or undergo beautiful variations. These things they see, and rejoice in the light of Your truth, in the little degree they here may.

Again, another of these directs his attention to that which is said, In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth, and beholds Wisdom — the Beginning, because It also speaks unto us. John 8:23 Another likewise directs his attention to the same words, and by beginning understands the commencement of things created; and receives it thus — In the beginning He made, as if it were said, He at first made. And among those who understand In the beginning to mean, that in Your Wisdom You have created heaven and earth, one believes the matter out of which the heaven and earth were to be created to be there called heaven and earth; another, that they are natures already formed and distinct; another, one formed nature, and that a spiritual, under the name of heaven, the other formless, of corporeal matter, under the name of earth. But they who under the name of heaven and earth understand matter as yet formless, out of which were to be formed heaven and earth, do not themselves understand it in one manner; but one, that matter out of which the intelligible and the sensible creature were to be completed; another, that only out of which this sensible corporeal mass was to come, holding in its vast bosom these visible and prepared natures. Nor are they who believe that the creatures already set in order and arranged are in this place called heaven and earth of one accord; but the one, both the invisible and visible; the other, the visible only, in which we admire the luminous heaven and darksome earth, and the things that are therein.

## Chapter 29. Concerning the Opinion of Those Who Explain It At First He Made.

But he who does not otherwise understand, In the beginning He made, than if it were said, At first He made, can only truly understand heaven and earth of the matter of heaven and earth, namely, of the universal, that is, intelligible and corporeal creation. For if he would have it of the universe. as already formed, it might rightly be asked of him: If at first God made this, what made He afterwards? And after the universe he will find nothing; thereupon must he, though unwilling, hear, How is this first, if there is nothing afterwards? But when he says that God made matter first formless, then formed, he is not absurd if he be but able to discern what precedes by eternity, what by time, what by choice, what by origin. By eternity, as God is before all things; by time, as the flower is before the fruit; by choice, as the fruit is before the flower; by origin, as sound is before the tune. Of these four, the first and last which I have referred to are with much difficulty understood; the two middle very easily. For an uncommon and too lofty vision it is to behold, O Lord, Your Eternity, immutably making things mutable, and thereby before them. Who is so acute of mind as to be able without great labour to discover how the sound is

prior to the tune, because a tune is a formed sound; and a thing not formed may exist, but that which exists not cannot be formed? So is the matter prior to that which is made from it; not prior because it makes it, since itself is rather made, nor is it prior by an interval of time. For we do not as to time first utter formless sounds without singing, and then adapt or fashion them into the form of a song, just as wood or silver from which a chest or vessel is made. Because such materials do by time also precede the forms of the things which are made from them; but in singing this is not so. For when it is sung, its sound is heard at the same time; seeing there is not first a formless sound, which is afterwards formed into a song. For as soon as it shall have first sounded it passes away; nor can you find anything of it, which being recalled you can by art compose. And, therefore, the song is absorbed in its own sound, which sound of it is its matter. Because this same is formed that it may be a tune; and therefore, as I was saying, the matter of the sound is prior to the form of the tune, not before through any power of making it a tune; for neither is a sound the composer of the tune, but is sent forth from the body and is subjected to the soul of the singer, that from it he may form a tune. Nor is it first in time, for it is given forth together with the tune; nor first in choice, for a sound is not better than a tune, since a tune is not merely a sound, but a beautiful sound. But it is first in origin, because the tune is not formed that it may become a sound, but the sound is formed that it may become a tune. By this example, let him who is able understand that the matter of things was first made, and called heaven and earth, because out of it heaven and earth were made. Not that it was made first in time, because the forms of things give rise to time, but that was formless; but now, in time, it is perceived together with its form. Nor yet can anything be related concerning that matter, unless as if it were prior in time, while it is considered last (because things formed are assuredly superior to things formless), and is preceded by the Eternity of the Creator, so that there might be out of nothing that from which something might be made.

## Chapter 30. In the Great Diversity of Opinions, It Becomes All to Unite Charity and Divine Truth.

In this diversity of true opinions let Truth itself beget concord; and may our God have mercy upon us, that we may use the law lawfully, 1 Timothy 1:8 the end of the commandment, pure charity. And by this if any one asks of me, Which of these was the meaning of Your servant Moses? these were not the utterances of my confessions, should I not confess unto You, I know not; and yet I know that those opinions are true, with the exception of those carnal ones concerning which I have spoken what I thought well. However, these words of Your Book affright not those little ones of good hope, treating few of high things in a humble fashion, and few things in varied ways. But let all, whom I acknowledge to see and speak the truth in these words, love one another, and equally love You, our God, fountain of truth — if we thirst not for vain things, but for it; yea, let us so honour this servant of Yours, the dispenser of this Scripture, full of Your Spirit, as to believe that when You revealed Yourself to him, and he wrote these things, he intended that which in them chiefly excels both for light of truth and fruitfulness of profit.

## Chapter 31. Moses is Supposed to Have Perceived Whatever of Truth Can Be Discovered in His Words.

Thus, when one shall say, He \[Moses\] meant as I do, and another, Nay, but as I do, I suppose that I am speaking more religiously when I say, Why not rather as both, if both be true? And if there be a third truth, or a fourth, and if any one seek any truth altogether different in those words, why may not he be believed to have seen all these, through whom one God has tempered the Holy Scriptures to the senses of many, about to see therein things true but different? I certainly — and I fearlessly declare it from my heart — were I to write anything to have the highest authority, should prefer so to write, that whatever of truth any one might apprehend concerning these matters, my words should re-echo, rather than that I should set down one true opinion so clearly on this as that I should exclude the rest, that which was false in which could not offend me. Therefore am I unwilling, O my God, to be so headstrong as not to believe that from You this man \[Moses\] has received so much. He, surely, when he wrote those words, perceived and thought whatever of truth we have been able to discover, yea, and whatever we have not been able, nor yet are able, though still it may be found in them.

## Chapter 32. First, the Sense of the Writer is to Be Discovered, Then that is to Be Brought Out Which Divine Truth Intended.

Finally, O Lord, who art God, and not flesh and blood, if man does see anything less, can anything lie hidden from Your good Spirit, who shall lead me into the land of uprightness, which You Yourself, by those words, were about to reveal to future readers, although he through whom they were spoken, amid the many interpretations that might have been found, fixed on but one? Which, if it be so, let that which he thought on be more exalted than the rest. But to us, O Lord, either point out the same, or any other true one which may be pleasing unto You; so that whether You make known to us that which You did to that man of Yours, or some other by occasion of the same words, yet You may feed us, not error deceive us. Behold, O Lord my God, how many things we have written concerning a few words — how many, I beseech You! What strength of ours, what ages would suffice for all Your books after this manner? Permit me, therefore, in these more briefly to confess unto You, and to select some one true, certain, and good sense, that You shall inspire, although many senses offer themselves, where many, indeed, I may; this being the faith of my confession, that if I should say that which Your minister felt, rightly and profitably, this I should strive for; the which if I shall not attain, yet I may say that which Your Truth willed through Its words to say unto me, which said also unto him what It willed.

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