

Article

The Emergence and Implication of the Role of Angels in Augustine's Understanding of Creation: The Extension and Mirroring of Christ

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Abstract: Angels take on a unique role in Augustine's understanding of creation. Traditionally, researchers have focused on *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, *Confessiones*, and *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* to generate a descriptive account of the angelic role in creation. As such, not much attention has been paid to the *emergence* of his understanding of angels in his earlier texts. The largely descriptive accounts have also left the theological *implication*, specifically the linkage between Augustine's angelology and Christology, unaddressed. This paper offers a two-fold contribution. First, this paper argues that the often-overlooked text *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* represents the pivotal moment in the development of Augustine's germinating thoughts on angels and creation. Augustine's mature notions of angels as created light and created wisdom, as well as angelic noetic movement, find their roots in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*. Second, this paper argues that, from *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* to his more mature works, angels extend Christ's work in creation. Augustine solves the problem of fashioning the corporeal from the spiritual by locating the production of intellectual prototypes *within* angels. Together with the designation of angels as "knowledge", "light", and "wisdom", angels mirror Christ's activity as creator.

Keywords: Augustine; angel; angelic knowledge; creation; Christology; *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*; Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis



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1. Introduction

The angels play a unique role in Augustine's doctrine of creation and interpretation of Genesis 1. Scholarly attention has traditionally focused on a detailed description of this angelic role in creation as conceived by Augustine in his later works, such as *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim I–II, IV, Confessiones XII–XIII*, and *De Civitate Dei contra paganos XI–XII*. This paper builds on these commendable efforts.¹

This paper specifically asks two questions concerning the emergence and implication of Augustine's angelology within his doctrine of creation. First, from where can one trace the emergence of Augustine's understanding of the angelic role in creation? Second, what is the implication of the role Augustine assigned to angels amidst his wider theological framework, especially his Christology?

This paper addresses these two questions by first considering the *status quaestionis* (Part 2). After that, Part 3 will trace the emergence of Augustine's angelology in relation to creation. Part 3 will propose that Augustine's early text *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* represents the turning point in his intellectual journey in search of the role of angels in creation.² In this often-neglected text, Augustine has already displayed his nascent thoughts on angels as created light and created wisdom, as well as angelic movement as creational knowledge. Part 4 will expand the textual scope to include Augustine's later texts, in order to address the *implications* of his developing angelology. Specifically, this paper will argue that angels fulfill the Christological mandate, playing a unique role in creation. The problem of fashioning the corporeal from the incorporeal is solved by forming

the prototypical formula within the angels. The angelic role can thus be seen as an extension of Christ's role. Furthermore, the specific characterization and explicit designation of angels as knowledge, light, and wisdom, which are normally reserved for the Second Person of the Trinity, point to angels' mirroring of Christ. This angelic mirroring of Christ has remained opaque all through Augustine's writings. Part 4 will conclude by noting that this opacity is likely due to Augustine's intentional distancing of himself from Neo-Platonic angelic worship.

2. Status Quaestionis

The cross-section between Augustine's angelology and his doctrine of creation has been discussed by Klein (2018) and Wiebe (2015, 2021) as the opening sections of their monographs on Augustine's angelology. Klein has written a specific chapter on "Angels and Creation" where all five primary texts are discussed (Klein 2018, pp. 10–56). Klein has focused on Augustine's mature thoughts for a grasp of his overall angelology in relation to creation and to other doctrines. A corollary is that the discussion of *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, like *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, occupies no more than three or four pages (Klein 2018, pp. 12–18). Klein's idea that angels are "eyewitnesses" deserves recognition. However, as this paper argues, one wonders whether more can be said in terms of angelic involvement in creation. For example, how are the angels related to Christ being the creator of the universe? In what ways do angels mirror Christ's thoughts and work alongside God? Towards an eventual discussion of fallen angels and demonic bodies, Wiebe, in his doctoral dissertation and monograph, starts with the creation of angels, singularly focusing on Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (Wiebe 2015, pp. 11–55; 2021, pp. 16–52). Wiebe insightfully points out the "plurality of actors" in "the historical drama of salvation" and in scriptural revelation (Wiebe 2021, pp. 18–19; for Augustine's demonology, see also Wekenmann 2022).

Few works specifically focus on *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*. Textual-critical analyses have been conducted, including Gorman's (1985). Marin (1992) has drawn attention to Augustine's overall literal interpretative strategy of Genesis 1 in this text, while Kamimura (2010) highlights the consequence of this literal exegesis to Augustine's later texts. Teske is commended for the analysis of Augustine's late update to the final sections of *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* concerning Genesis 1:26 (Teske 2009c, pp. 271–80). Teske argues that Augustine's mature Trinitarian thought has driven this late update. In addition to the above essay, Teske has also written a two-page concise introduction to *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, reading it from the perspective of Augustine's *Retractationes* (Teske 2009a, pp. 377–78). Slightly more recent is Weber's entry in *Augustinus-lexikon* 3 (Weber 2010, pp. 126–32). Works on *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* are sporadic; the above represent much welcomed efforts to lay foundations for understanding this text. As far as the theme of this paper is concerned, the above studies have not focused on the important role of angels, nor the theological implication of such. Nonetheless, they have accentuated the *ad litteram* aspect of Augustine's interpretation of Genesis 1. This paper builds on this recognition.

Fiedrowicz's various introductions in *On Genesis* are helpful, especially in painting the context and themes of the three translated texts—*De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, and *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (Fiedrowicz 2002, pp. 13–22, 25–35, 105–11, 155–56; so are Moro 2018's introductions). Fiedrowicz points out that, for Augustine, the *intellectus fidei* should not be restricted to the biblical text only. Augustine was constantly searching for "the truth which the text expressed" (Fiedrowicz 2002, p. 15)—truth as a wider notion but nonetheless built upon a literal reading of scripture—since *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*.³ This paper notes that Fiedrowicz's analysis may explain why Augustine speculates on, say, the creation and role of angels in Genesis 1; Augustine is searching for a holistic explanation despite Genesis 1 not explicitly mentioning the angels. Regarding Augustine's interpretation of the creation account, Blowers (2012, esp. pp. 106–07, 121–23), Muehlberger (2013, pp. 29–88), and Ployd (2017, pp. 421–39) situate

Augustine along the patristic tradition of reading Genesis 1–3. In particular, Muehlberger has presented a convincing case that angels, for Augustine and his patristic counterparts, are not “the focus of some separate discourse” but rather “fully integrated into the programs of salvation” (Muehlberger 2013, p. 56).⁴ Muehlberger has also enlisted texts from less-quoted sources, such as *Enchiridion IX* and newly translated sermons (Muehlberger 2013, pp. 44, 49–50). Ployd supplements Muehlberger by arguing for the stability of the angels who, though mutable, know that they will continue participating in God (Ployd 2017, pp. 431–38). Madec (1986, pp. 304–15) and Van Fleteren (2009, pp. 20–22) concisely deal with “angels” in the Augustinian corpus—beyond Augustine’s handling of the creation account. Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis, on the other hand, is taken up by Teske in his encyclopedic entry without a specific focus on angels (Teske 2009b, pp. 379–81). Valuable as all the sources mentioned in this paragraph are, specific discussions of the creation of angels and their roles in the overall creation account are brief. The passing mention, if not conspicuous absence, of *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* in their discussion may also reveal an unwarranted downplay of this crucial primary text. This contrasts with the attention *De Genesi ad litteram* receives (see very recent examples such as Brachtendorf and Drecoli 2021; Drews 2022). TeSelle should be highlighted for his attention to *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, yet the focus is on Augustine’s evolving exegetical approach instead of his emerging doctrine of creation (TeSelle 1970, pp. 132–35, 199).

There are scholarly contributions on Augustine’s concept of creation coupled with a focal interest on angelology; the aforementioned Klein (2018) and Wiebe (2015, 2021) are notable examples. However, the focus on angels within creation remains the minority. Cameron (2012, pp. 43–76) has launched a detailed study on Augustine’s rhetorical techniques in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* without touching on angelology. Torchia (1999) interprets the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* and *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* without a focal interest on angels. Van Riel (2007, pp. 191–228) asks the philosophical tradition behind the “heaven and earth” discussed in *Confessiones XII*. Simuț (2021, pp. 57–74), restricting himself to *De Civitate Dei contra paganos XI* and *XII*, describes how Augustine’s angelology comes through the long line from Irenaeus down to the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine.

Several researchers tangentially touch on Augustine’s creation theology and angelology in their study of other figures or interests. Cessario (1999, pp. 583–94) draws on the “evening” knowledge of angels—knowledge of things in themselves—to shed light on Roman Catholic philosophy. Kuntz (1987, pp. 41–53) borrows the phrase “from the angel to the worm” when introducing the Augustinian view of creational hierarchy (*conf. 8.3.7*). O’Neill (2016, pp. 1–18) and Reynolds (1982, pp. 190–215) draw parallels between Augustine and Anselm and Bonaventure, respectively.

Overall, the evolving interplay between Augustine’s theology of creation and angelology has received less scholarly attention than it deserves. This paper seeks to fill this gap and draw further implications from Augustine’s Christology. A sustained discussion of *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* as the starting point of Augustine’s thought on creation also contributes to Augustinian research by drawing attention back to this important text.

3. Origin of the Role of Angels in Creation—*De Genesi Ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*

As early as in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine already notices a change in textual pattern when interpreting Genesis 1:6–7. In the creation of the dome, there exists a three-fold textual pattern—“Let it be made”, “and thus it was made”, eventually followed by “and God made”. Such a three-fold pattern repeats itself in the subsequent days of creation. Markedly different is the creation of light on the first day, as recounted in Genesis 1:3. There, Augustine observes that it is only a two-fold pattern—the *fiat lux* and there was light.

What is this light, and what is so special about this created light that scripture narrates with a unique textual pattern? Augustine ponders:

Or does this just show that we should not understand that light as being of the bodily variety, and so the impression was to be avoided that God made it through the intermediary of some creature (in original Latin, *aliqua creatura interposita*)—by “God” here I mean the Trinity; whereas this solid structure of the sky, being corporeal, may be supposed to have received its specific form through some incorporeal nature? So that first the incorporeal nature would receive from the Truth the intelligible impression (in original Latin, *rationaliter a Veritate impressum*) of what was to be physically impressed on the basic material, to make the solid structure of the sky; accordingly, where it stated, “and God said, Let it be made, and thus it was made”, it was first made perhaps in that rational nature, for the actual species to be impressed from that upon bodily material. (*Gn. litt. imp.* 8.30. Note that this is a question left open by Augustine. It nonetheless shows his early struggle with Genesis 1:3.)

The above comes from *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine’s first attempt to literally interpret Genesis 1, which is often overlooked—and for good reason. Augustine himself refers to his mature work *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* for his comprehensive treatment of creation (*retr.* 1.18). In addition, *Confessiones* XII–XIII and *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* XI–XII also reflect his mature thoughts on Genesis 1 and the roles of angels therein. For his early attention to Genesis 1, his anti-Manichean polemic *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* deservedly receives much attention, not least for Augustine’s allegorical approach (see, for example, [Cameron 2012](#), pp. 43–76).

However, in order to trace Augustine’s emerging thoughts on the roles of angels in creation, one needs to turn to this often-neglected *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*. This book is Augustine’s first verse-by-verse commentary on Genesis 1, which he eventually gives up when arriving at 1:26. In his own words, this text offers *rudimenta* (“first attempts” in Hill’s translation, yet may be better understood as “rudimentary” exercises or building blocks for his mature works) to expound Genesis 1:1–26 *ad litteram*, a task which Augustine had previously shied away from (*retr.* 1.18). The text represents the pivotal moment when Augustine decisively formulated his thoughts on the creation of angels and their role in creation, given half of the text focuses on Genesis 1:1–5.

The block-text quoted above contains various identifiable lines of thoughts—(i) angels as created light and created wisdom, (ii) angelic knowledge as the prototypical form of corporeal creation. These two lines of thoughts culminate in angels’ unique involvement alongside the Trinity in creation. These themes would germinate and later constitute his mature doctrines of angelology and creation. This paper takes these notions as a point of departure and will now examine each of them in relation to *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*.

3.1. Angels as Created Light and Created Wisdom: An Emerging Certainty Since *De Genesi Ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*

In Augustine’s mature writings, angels are created incorporeal light and created wisdom. By contemplating the Light, an angel “becomes light itself” (*conf.* 12.15.20). These spiritual beings are “illuminated” (*conf.* 13.3.4); “converted and enlightened”, they became light in God (*Gn. litt.* 1.3.7; 1.5.10; *civ. Dei* 11.9), thus “perfected, illumined, and beatified” (*conf.* 13.4.5). The status of created light, for Augustine, links the angels with the wisdom of God. Why? The eternal Light is the immutable Wisdom of God (*civ. Dei* 11.9); angels partake in the former, thus naturally in the latter. Therefore, these intellectual beings are also “created wisdom”; they are “the first of all creatures” (*conf.* 12.15.20).

When, then, were they created? Their creation is not mentioned in the sequence of Genesis 1. However, for Augustine, it is impossible, given the existence of angels all through scripture, that the creation of angels has been omitted in Genesis 1 (*civ. Dei* 11.9). If the angels are already praising God when stars are created, per Job 38:7, and if it is absurd to read angelic origin on the second or third day of the creation account, the natural choice, according to Augustine, is Genesis 1:3 (*civ. Dei* 11.9).

Relatively early in his career, Augustine already begins formulating his interpretation of “light” in Genesis 1:3 as angels. Pondering on Genesis 1:3, as quoted in block previously, Augustine asks, “does this just show that we should not understand that light as being of the bodily variety”? (*Gn. litt. imp.* 8.30) Far from an exegetical expediency, in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine gives serious theological attention to the possibility of angels as intelligent light, first created within the created order. What kind of light in Genesis 1:3 can be? Earlier in this text, Augustine has given himself three options—a bodily light extending into the outer space, a sensual light which enables both humans and animals to perceive and make judgment on the external environment, or a higher, rational light which “reveals itself in the power or reasoning, from which everything that has been created has its beginning” (*Gn. litt. imp.* 5.20). Upon counting the last possibility, Augustine’s reflex is an immediate confession that such a light is made, not born of God, preserving the coeternity of the Second Person with the Father. Yet given the incorporeal nature of this light, Augustine deems it *convenientissime* and *decentissime* (“most aptly and suitably”) to read Genesis 1:3 as the creation of angels—angels as created light and created wisdom—even though scripture only indicates it “very briefly” there (*Gn. litt. imp.* 5.21).

This identification of angels as the light in Genesis 1:3 marks a sharp contrast with his silence on the same verse in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*. There, Augustine’s only concern is to argue for darkness as the absence of light, instead of a substantial entity. Darkness and evil could not have been divinely created (*Gn. adv. Man.* 1.4.7). Other than that, since “the Manichees are not in the habit of finding fault with this [Genesis 1:3]”, Augustine does not press for interpretive possibilities for this verse (*Gn. adv. Man.* 1.8.13). The origin of angels, and the attribution of created incorporeal light and created wisdom to them, should rightly be traced to *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*. Albeit brief, Augustine’s conception of angels as created light and reasoning power leaves an early, and often unnoticed, mark.

3.2. Angelic Movement as Creational Knowledge: A Credible Possibility Since *De Genesi Ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*

In *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* II and IV and *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* XI, Augustine famously interprets the sequence of “day”, “evening”, and “morning” as the oscillation of angelic knowledge. During the day, angels first behold the idea of a creature in the Word of God. Upon their contemplation, the things to be created first have their spiritual, prototypical creation in angels (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.19; 4.26.43). In the “evening”, the angels turn their gaze to the creatures, thus knowing the creatures in themselves. In the subsequent “morning”, the angels turn back to God for the praise of the Creator (*Gn. litt.* 4.22.39; 4.26.43; 4.32.50). The process through which the created order comes into being is captured by these cycles in daylight and twilight knowledge (*Gn. litt.* 4.24.41). Augustine repeats this proposal in *De Civitate Dei contra paganos*, when he discusses the origin of the heavenly citizens (*civ. Dei* 11.7; 11.29; 11.31).

Augustine finds in Genesis 1 a neat biblical-textual pattern that correlates the process of creation with this revolving angelic knowledge. “And God said . . . let it be made” refers to angels’ contemplation of the Word of God; “And thus it was made” refers to the spiritual creation of the prototypical formula or idea in the angels. “And God made . . . ” refers to the actual creature being made, on whom the angel had their evening gaze. Finally, “and God saw that it was good” refers to the pleasure that fittingly matches angels’ returning praise to the Creator (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.19; 4.26.43; 4.32.50).

It was the missing “and God made” from Genesis 1:3 that caught Augustine’s attention—as early as when he wrote *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (8.30). The created light differs from the rest of the creation because it is an incorporeal, intelligent entity—and thus there was no such “and God made” phase of material concretization. Augustine further postulates that the corporeal items, such as the firmament, were first created in their spiritual nature—a prior “intelligible impression” before their material bodies came to be. Thus, the corporeal, including the material sky, is “first made perhaps in that rational nature” (*Gn. litt. imp.* 8.30). This notion would later become the “daylight knowledge” of

the angels (*Gn. litt.* 4.24.41; *civ. Dei* 11.29; 11.31)—a notion that finds its root in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*.

In *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, one may detect another motivation, apart from a satisfactory explanation of Genesis 1:3, behind Augustine's mature proposal of alternating angelic knowledge—the question of time. Augustine wonders how to coherently explain the designations “night” and “day” in Genesis 1:5 before the sun, moon, and stars are created. How could the alternation of “night” and “day” occur solely in the rational (or sensual, since Augustine has not finally decided on his interpretation at that time) light created according to Genesis 1:3? (*Gn. litt. imp.* 6.27) To further complicate matters, Augustine needs to circumscribe his interpretation within the bounds of Sirach 18:1, a key verse which Augustine reads in its Latin version a simultaneous creation of the world (*Gn. litt. imp.* 7.28).⁵ Is creation, then, simultaneous, or sequential in time—and if sequential, what to do with the designations of night and day on the first day?

In his mature works, Augustine equates the six-day sequential designation with the cycles of alternating angelic knowledge. Creation is simultaneous in the sense of such alternation taking place on the purely intellectual plane, all at once (*Gn. litt.* 4.34.53).⁶ Earlier in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine has already started to tackle the question of simultaneity, time, “night” and “day”—with a proposal that is strikingly similar to his mature angelology. Augustine first recognizes that time corresponds to movements. He then asks who are possibly moving:

There would be none of these times, you see, if there were no movement of bodies . . . there can be time in the movements of an immaterial creature such as the soul is, or the mind itself . . . If we accept this, then it can be readily understood that there was time even before heaven and earth, if the angels were made before heaven and earth because that means there was already a creature which would move time along by immaterial movements . . . (*Gn. litt. imp.* 3.8)

Movements were triggered by the angels during the six days of creation, though they moved *motibus incorporeis* (“with/by immaterial, incorporeal movements”). Time was ticking because someone was moving, though the time-telling celestial bodies were not yet in place. This notion of angels moving in an immaterial manner paves the way for Augustine's mature thoughts on angelic knowledge, as will be unfolded later in this paper. Here, it should be highlighted that Augustine has made a ground-breaking move. The importance lies in the fact that Augustine has not forced a reading where celestial bodies feature before being introduced by the text. The respect to the literality of the biblical text—his stated aim for *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* and its progenies—has persuaded Augustine to seek logical coherence—an implicit assumption to his literal interpretation—in speculative elements not mentioned in the text. This is not dissimilar to his postulation that the heaven and earth of Genesis 1 contain the seeds of material and immaterial creation. Yet there, Augustine merely reinterprets the properties of the “heaven” and “earth”. The notion of angelic movements, on the other hand, is an explicit example where Augustine prefers the addition or insertion of unmentioned players or theological notions over the apparent logical inconsistency of the text or a non-literal reading. This demonstrates the great extent to which Augustine seeks to preserve literal interpretation of Genesis 1. Augustine has made the significant step to move away from allegorical interpretation and to embark on a new journey of literally interpreting Genesis 1. Such a journey starts not anywhere else but in the pivotal text *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*.

3.3. Summary: The Role of Angels in Creation—An Unanswered Question throughout Augustine's Life

Part 3 has traced Augustine's thoughts on the origin of angels, with special attention to his *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*. This often-overlooked text is pivotal in understanding the evolvement of Augustine's understanding of angels as created light and created wisdom. This text also paves the way for his later elaborate conjecture of alternating angelic knowledge during the six days of creation.

In *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, after reiterating the “bounds of Catholic faith” for scriptural interpretation, Augustine immediately moves on to discuss about angels (*Gn. litt. imp.* 3.7). For Augustine, angels certainly serve a special role in God’s creation story. This conviction remains unchanged all through his life, as evidenced in *De Civitate Dei contra paganos*. While recognizing this conviction, Augustine has left much unaddressed. Angels

adhibent uel iussi uel permissi operationem suam rebus quae gignuntur in mundo (“do indeed take part, whether by God’s command or with His permission, on the things that come into being in the world”) . . .

However,

I do not, then, know what kind of service the angels, themselves created first, gave to the Creator in making other things. I dare not attribute to them something that they perhaps cannot do. Neither, however, ought I to deny what they can do. (*civ. Dei* 12.25–26)

Augustine has not further elaborated what this role exactly is, except for noting the “turning” of angelic knowledge.⁷ The exact role of angels and the precise service they rendered to God during creation remain opaque all through Augustine’s career—likely to avoid any hints of angelic worship (more on this in Part 4.3). One may point to angelic knowledge; yet can one say more? If Part 3 traces the emergence of Augustine’s angelology in relation to creation, Part 4 of this paper probes the implication of such. To do this, in addition to *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine’s mature works need to be read along to build the case. Part 4 will argue that, from the various acts and traits Augustine ascribes to the angels, there exists a coherent reading of the angelic role within his doctrine of creation. Specifically, angels extend the work of Christ; they mirror Christ’s activity as creator in creation.

4. Angels as a Reflection of Christ in the Creation Narrative?

While angels feature in a wide range of divine activities and miracles as, for example, in *De Trinitate* III and IV, they take on a particularly prominent role in creation. Angels as light, wisdom, and the locus of creational knowledge point to their undeniable roles in creation. In what follows, this paper first argues that the angels, for Augustine, serve as an extension of Christ’s work in the process of creation. It will then further argue that the angels even mirror Christ in the creation story.

4.1. Angels as Christological Extension: The Means of Creation

To state upfront, Augustine deems the creational act a sole act of God. God made all things, visible and invisible, by himself from nothing—this is a non-negotiable point since his early writing (*Gn. litt. imp.* 1.2; see also *conf.* 12.7.7). Creation is a Trinitarian act as well. As early as in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine has already proposed the Trinitarian pattern for explaining Genesis 1:2.⁸ As his thoughts mature, Augustine reads in the creation account a “complete indication of the Trinity” (*Gn. litt.* 1.6.12) and that “in symbolic form a Trinity now dawns clear for me” (*conf.* 13.5.6).

However, for Augustine, there exists a lingering question of alignment between the spiritual and the corporeal. How was the corporeal made from the spiritual? This question can be seen, on a miniature scale, in Augustine’s struggle with Genesis 1:3. Indeed God spoke the world into being. Yet what kind of voice did God speak with? Was it purely spiritual, or was it embodied? What then is the implication for the creation of the remaining creatures? It is a struggle that he has dealt with since *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*. Given that the corporeal has not yet been made, the divine command must have been said “in a manner that defies expression”, that is, non-material and non-literal (*Gn. litt. imp.* 5.19). Furthermore, since the words have both a start and an end, the word which God spoke could not have been the Son, who is coeternal with the father (*Gn. litt. imp.* 5.19). As such, Genesis 1:3 refers to God speaking inexpressible, non-corporeal words to the

Son. This question resurfaces later in *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*. There, Augustine reaffirms that the words in Genesis 1:3 are neither audible (*Gn. litt.* 1.2.5) nor corporeal (*Gn. litt.* 1.9.16). Such a discussion of “voice” reflects Augustine’s strict demarcation of the immaterial from the corporeal. With an acute awareness of differentiating the bodily from the immaterial, it is only natural for Augustine to ask how the material world could be made—especially given that the intra-Trinitarian, creational commands are distinctively immaterial and inexpressible.

In pinning down the notion of a Trinitarian creation, Augustine explains

the suggestion of the Trinity expressed in the works of God as if by a veiled mode of speech . . . Who made it? By what means did He make it? And, Why did He make it? For it is the Father of the Word Who said, Let it be. And that which was made when He spoke was beyond doubt made by means of the Word . . . And if this goodness is rightly understood to be the Holy Spirit, then the whole Trinity is revealed to us in the works of God. (*civ. Dei* 11.24)

Here, Augustine’s early awareness of the problematic bridging of the immaterial to the corporeal, as hinted in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* and discussed above, is now accentuated with the Trinitarian picture coming in. The Son is “beyond doubt” the “means of the Word”—the Son as the Word is the means of creation. Yet how exactly did the Second Person channel the creative command to engender materiality? For Augustine, as will be shown below, such “channelling” was realized through the angelic office; the creational actions were concretized by the angels. The bridging of the immaterial to the bodily, a conundrum first raised in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, thus finds its resolution. The necessary transformation from the immaterial idea to the embodied materiality of all creations took place within angels. Angels took on a special role in creation—a Christological extension as the subcontracted “means of creation”. How so?

The creation of the corporeal firmament serves as the paradigm for subsequent days. Its creation underwent three stages. First, “in the Word of God in terms of begotten Wisdom” (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.16). Christ indeed was the means of creation—creatures first existed in Christ’s perfect knowledge. Yet they remained immaterial. Then, “it was made next in the spiritual creation, that is, in the knowledge of the angels, in terms of the wisdom created in them” (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.16). This was the transitional phase where the perfect form is impressed upon the angels. Elsewhere it is more direct in asserting that the locus of such rational creation was within these rational beings, that is, the angels—“*in creatura intellectuali* (‘in the intelligent creation’) knowledge is being produced of the formula or idea . . . of the creature to be fashioned” (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.19). Such knowledge as prototypical formula or idea took place within angels which “only next after that was the heaven made, so that the actual created heaven might be there in its own specific kind.” (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.16; cf. *Gn. litt.* 2.8.19) The Christologically perfect knowledge was transformed and prepared for concretization. This transition corresponds to the middle phase of angelic knowledge during the daylight. This transition also fits into the repeated phrase “and thus it was made” scattered among the various days of creation in Genesis 1 (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.19; 4.26.43).

Such a prototypical formula or idea originated in the perfect Wisdom—angels first partook in the eternal Light for the Wisdom “by which all things were made” (*civ. Dei* 11.9). However, to borrow a biological metaphor, the enzymic fashioning of concrete things from the perfect Wisdom took place in and was taken up by the angels. If Christ is said to be the means of creation—a theological confession which Augustine would never relegate—this means of creation was at least partly encapsulated by his angels. TeSelle agrees that the exploitation of potentialities within the formless bodies was done “not even by God alone” (TeSelle 1970, p. 215). At the least, the angels extended the work of Christ in creation; Christ’s mandate to bring about the creaturely order took place within the angels and was accomplished by the angels. For Augustine, certainly nothing could have been made without Christ. Yet at the same time, creatures under the angels “are not made without its [the angel’s] knowledge.” (*Gn. litt.* 4.22.39)

4.2. Angels Mirroring Christ: Knowledge, Light, and Wisdom

Critics may argue that angels are nothing more than instruments in creation. Angels are God's "ministers and messengers" (*civ. Dei* 10.15).⁹ Their instrumentality is also illustrated by the agricultural and child-bearing metaphors in *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* 12.25–26.

This paper does not argue against the instrumentality of angels. This paper instead proposes that, in creation, such angelic instrumentality takes on a unique shape. The incorporation of knowledge within angels and the attribution of the Christological labels—"light" and "wisdom"—portray the angels as mirrors of Christ. In other words, these three angelic designations and features—knowledge, light, and wisdom—point to angels mirroring Christ as creator. These three themes are now treated in sequence below.

In Augustine's reading of Genesis 1, the perfect creational knowledge is not only impressed upon the angels—they themselves are transformed into a prototypical formula of this knowledge within angels:

... So then, just as the formula or idea on which a creature is fashioned is there in the Word of God before it is realized in the fashioning of the creature, so also is knowledge of the same formula or idea first produced in the intelligent creation which has not been darkened by sin, and only then it is realized in the fashioning of the creature.

... it was from him [God] that the angels learned, when knowledge was produced in them of creatures to be made from then on, and after that these were made in their own specific kind. (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.17–18)

Such creational knowledge *prius fit in creatura intellectuali*. ("first produced in the intelligent creation", *Gn. litt.* 2.8.17, see full quote above.) Angels in themselves embody creational knowledge and complete the fashioning of corporeal entities. There exists, albeit opaquely, an overlap between the roles of the Second Person and the angels. While Augustine painstakingly differentiates between the "daylight knowledge"—the wisdom of God—and the "twilight knowledge"—knowledge of things in themselves (*Gn. litt.* 4.24.41; 4.28.45; *civ. Dei* 11.29, 31), the angels possess both types of knowledge. The attribution of knowledge to angels mirrors the Christ who is similarly attributed as "knowledge" within the psychological analogy for trinity (*conf.* 13.11.12; *Trin.* 9). If Christ is the "intellect" among the Trinitarian analogy of memory, intellect, and will (*Trin.* 10), angels indeed mirror Christ as the excellent "rational, intelligent mind" and the foremost "intellectual order of being" (*conf.* 12.15.20). Angels are certainly not Christ, but they take on the designation usually reserved for Christ. They are not the supreme intellectual creature that Genesis 1:1 "in the beginning" refers to, as Augustine in his early interpretation has already argued (*Gn. litt. imp.* 3.6). Yet, as the enlightened source, "things are so created that first of all they are made in the knowledge of the rational creation, and then in their concrete specific kind" (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.16). Angels—knowledge-bearers in the most literal sense—mirror the role of Christ as divine knowledge for creation.

In addition to the theme of knowledge, angels mirror Christ given Augustine's designation of angels as light. As early as in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, Augustine already juxtaposes Christ the Light with the angels as created light (*Gn. litt. imp.* 5.20–21). This theme remains constant throughout Augustine's mature works (for example, in *civ. Dei* 11.9). Different as they are, angels "by contemplating the Light becomes light itself" (*conf.* 12.15.20), and in turn light up the heaven's heaven (*conf.* 13.8.9; see also *Gn. litt.* 1.17.32). Angels are not Christ the Light itself, yet they are nonetheless lights—a specific designation to the former that echoes the latter. Furthermore, for Augustine, light is inextricably linked with truth and the intellectual mind. Recounting his mystical ascent experience, he said, "I saw the incommutable light far above my spiritual ken, transcending my mind" (*conf.* 7.10.16). Immediately, he recognized Truth with the voice saying "I am who am" (*conf.* 7.10.16). Light represents Truth. The designation of angels as light, albeit created, mirrors the designation reserved for the ultimate Word of Truth, Christ the True Light.

Closely associated and equally revealing is the designation of “wisdom”. Christ is God’s very own Wisdom, the coeternal wisdom born of God—a confession as early as in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (*Gn. litt. imp.* 5.20; *conf.* 12.15.20; 13.5.6). What may be more surprising is that angels are also designated “wisdom” as well—“a created wisdom” indeed—and Augustine explicitly compares Christ and angels in the attribution of wisdom:

Before its [the spiritual structure’s] creation we find no mention of time, for wisdom is known to be the eldest of all created things. The wisdom here referred to is obviously not the Wisdom who is fully coeternal with you, his Father, who are our God, and equal to you . . . The wisdom of which I speak is a *sapientia, quae creata est* (“wisdom, which was created” or “created wisdom”), the intellectual order of being which by contemplating the Light becomes light itself . . . Well then, the first of all creatures was wisdom understood in this way, created wisdom, which is the rational, intelligent mind of your chaste city.” (*conf.* 12.15.20)

Such a comparison between Christ the Wisdom and angels the created wisdom is astonishing—to the extent that Augustine deems it necessary to repeatedly clarify their differences. The citizen of the chaste city—the angelic order—is wisdom. Yet this wisdom is to be distinguished from Christ the Wisdom. The former, though the eldest (or oldest, if “time” is ever meaningful at that moment) of all things, is unlike Wisdom, who is coeternal with the Father. Augustine treasures the transferred designation of wisdom to angels, so much as to risk confusing the angels with the Second Person—a confusion that necessitates Augustine’s lengthy clarification.

It should also be noted that this overlapping designation of wisdom, for Augustine, features also in the transmission of the Genesis text. In Augustine’s discussion of Genesis 1:1, the “Wisdom of God” befriends the holy souls, “makes them the friends and prophets of God” and “speaks soundlessly within them of His works” (*civ. Dei* 11.4). Immediately after that, Augustine points to the “angels of God”, who “also speak to them, and proclaim His will to those whom it befits.” (*civ. Dei* 11.4) The angels and the Wisdom of God carry out the same task of inspiring or speaking to the prophets. While angels are only created wisdom, they nonetheless mirror Christ the Wisdom in terms of both designation and actual work. Overall, the parallels of Light and created light, Wisdom and created wisdom point, at least, to a blurred mirroring between Christ and the angels.

4.3. The Blurred Mirroring between Christ and the Angels: Augustine’s Dilemma

For Augustine, this is necessarily a blurred mirroring between Christ and the angels.

The “two-stage” ontology of angels, who were directly enlightened by the divine Light and did not undergo the stage of “and thus it was made”, differs from the “three-stage” ontology of all other created beings (*Gn. litt.* 2.8.19; 4.22.39; 4.26.43; [Blowers 2012](#), p. 122). These angels sit high up on the ontological ladder, as recognized by Augustine (*civ. Dei* 11.16). As Wiebe observes, God has subjected all creatures under the angels, possibly except resurrected humans and distorted wills ([Wiebe 2021](#), p. 42).

Augustine’s admission of angelic superiority may have made him uncomfortable. He resists any traces of Neo-Platonic worship of intermediary gods—the lesser gods responsible for the creation of this world. Augustine freely equates angels to these Neo-Platonic “gods”—“those whom the Platonists call gods, and to some of whom they give the name either of good demons or, as we do, of angels.” (*civ. Dei* 10.1, similarly see 12.25)¹⁰ While the Neo-Platonists suggest worship and sacrifice to the angels, for Augustine, *Latreia*—the Greek word which he labors to explain as religious service and worship—should only be rendered to God alone (*civ. Dei* 10.1–5). The holy angels would have directed all worship to God, not to themselves (*civ. Dei* 10.7, 10.16).

To untangle the false piety of the Neo-Platonists, Augustine seeks to demolish the Neo-Platonic notion that “whereas the immortal part was derived from God Himself, the lesser gods added the mortal part, and are therefore the creators not of our souls, but of our bodies” (*civ. Dei* 12.27) and that such works of creation were carried out “with his [God’s]

permission or at His command" (*civ. Dei* 12.25). To combat these teachings, Augustine repeatedly highlights that the prototypical formulae were already produced by God in angels when the material was fashioned—the angels did not merely add the mortal parts as a seemingly missing piece. Angels are a Christological extension in that they participate in the well-planned Trinitarian creation as the undetachable mirrors of Christ. Whether Augustine has successfully downplayed the prestige the Neo-Platonists had ascribed to angels, though, is another issue. The angels in Augustine's paradigm enjoy a similarly, if not more, prestigious role in creation. The angels were external agents according to the Neo-Platonists, as "parents and makers" of creatures (*civ. Dei* 12.27). Ironically, Augustine uses the same analogy of parenthood in describing the roles of angels (*civ. Dei* 12.26).

For Augustine, he faces the dilemma of resolutely maintaining Christ as the means of creation while at the same time letting angels take on distinctive roles—roles with Neo-Platonic echoes. Augustine thus juggles an angelology that satisfactorily explains all the textual intricacies of Genesis 1 and a careful separation from Neo-Platonic worship of angels. The result is an agnosticism that leaves students of Augustine wondering: "I do not, then, know what kind of service the angels, themselves created first, gave to the Creator in making other things" (*civ. Dei* 12.26). This explains the blurriness of the mirror between Christ and the angels. This mirroring is necessarily blurred, to distance Augustine from any hints of angelic worship.

5. Conclusions

"It is, after all, a most abstruse matter, quite impenetrable to human guesswork".
(*Gn. litt. imp.* 3.8)

When Augustine first postulated the angelic intellectual movement in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, he concluded that it was "a most abstruse matter". Nonetheless, Augustine developed this abstruse matter as a pillar of his mature doctrine of creation and angelology. This initial postulation, as with the text that contains it, proves pivotal in Augustine's emerging understanding of the angelic role in creation. This paper has traced such emergence of Augustine's angelology in relation to creation. Specifically, this paper has argued that the *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, though often overlooked, incubates his nascent thoughts on the role of angels in creation.

Angels, for Augustine, are created light, created wisdom, and the locus of creational knowledge and take on a unique role in creation. As such, the angels extend the work of Christ, who is the means of creation. The angels even mirror Christ with designations that are usually reserved for the Second Person—light, knowledge, and wisdom. Where Augustine has remained strategically opaque, this paper has attempted to reconstruct how he understands the holy angels in Genesis 1:1–5. This reconstruction is important as its implication sheds light on the connection between Augustine's angelology and Christology—holy angels as the extension and mirrors of Christ in creation. This connection and conception of angels may have been overlooked in both classical and recent studies of Augustine's angelology. While Klein has highlighted the angelic role of witness in creation (Klein 2018, p. 56) and Wiebe has hinted at a "suggestive" connection between the Trinity and angels (Wiebe 2021, p. 36 note 100), the Christological conception of angelology argued in this paper should offer a new angle to approach both Augustine's Christology and angelology. The holy angels are not only witnesses in observing the Trinity in action; they extend and mirror the Second Person in Augustine's reading of Genesis 1.

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Notes

- ¹ See further in *Status Quaestionis* for a concise review. In this paper, the English translations for *De Genesi adversus Manicheos*, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* and *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* follow Hill (2002). The English translations for *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* follow Dyson (1998). The English translations for *Confessiones* follow Boulding (2012). Latin texts are from the standard CSEL corpus.
- ² The even earlier text, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, represents Augustine's allegorical interpretation of Genesis 1, with which Augustine seeks to establish the plausibility of Genesis 1 in face of Manichean derision. In that text, angels do not feature in the Genesis 1 creation account.
- ³ Blowers qualify this literal reading as “theologically ‘literal’” where Augustine inserts physical, metaphysical or even typological analyses that serve a theological end (Blowers 2012, p. 107; cf. Solignac 1973, pp. 154–71). The maneuver may have caused Torchia to argue that “Augustine's supposedly literal interpretation bears a striking resemblance to an allegorical one” like *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (Torchia 1999, p. 102).
- ⁴ This echoes Williams' insistence that creation as a whole, of which angels are part of, “shares or participates in God by being a coherent system.” (Williams 2016, p. 62).
- ⁵ This can still be found in the Latin Vulgate version, *Qui vivet in aeternum creavit omnia simul*. The *simul* (“simultaneously”) differs from the *κοινῇ* of Septuagint; the latter means “commonly” without necessarily forcing a “simultaneous” temporal sense.
- ⁶ The literal portrayal of the six days is a kind of divine accommodation for readers of scripture to grasp “step by step, to the goal to which it [scripture] is leading them.” (*Gn. litt.* 4.33.52).
- ⁷ Solignac fittingly describes such noetic turning as angels' constant “conversions” of the angels; such conversions represent movements as transcending, descending and ascending (Solignac 1973, p. 164).
- ⁸ The entity that hovers over the water was possibly the Holy Spirit, “whom we venerate in the inexpressible and unchangeable Trinity” (*Gn. litt. imp.* 4.16). Augustine admits that it is possible to interpret the breath-wind as a “vital force”, yet he prefers an interpretation as the unchanging Holy Spirit (*Gn. litt. imp.* 4.17).
- ⁹ Madec observes that the role of messenger is an “office”, not the nature of angels. Here we only note that this office is a Christ-like office where angels complete the creation where Christ is professed as the means of creation (Madec 1986, pp. 304–5).
- ¹⁰ The term “angels” could possibly be used by Neo-Platonists such as Porphyry. See especially DeMarco (2021) for his convincing arguments.

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