THE QUESTION

What did the early church teach about the shape of the earth and the sun, moon and stars?

Asked by a THF member on April 8, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 11 numbered quotations · the 19 early Christian passages and 39 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-the-early-church-teach-about-the-shape-of-the-earth-and-the-sun

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

The early writers agreed that God made the earth, sun, moon and stars, and that these are his servants, not gods. On the exact shape of the world they did not speak with one voice. Some pictured heaven as a dome or arch over the earth, while Athenagoras spoke of the world as made spherical.

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HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
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POINT 1 OF 8

The sun, moon and stars are God's works

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The first thing early Christians said about the sky was who made it. Aristides argues the sun cannot be a god, because it moves by the will of another. Tatian says the sun and moon were made to serve people, so it would be foolish to worship them.

1 “Therefore it is impossible that the sun should be a god. It is the work of God, and so also are the moon and the stars.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Aristides,** *Apology* 6 (c. 125–140 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2 “I refuse to adore that workmanship which He has made for our sake. The sun and moon were made for us. How, then, can I adore my own servants?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Address to the Greeks* 4 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Theophilus pictured heaven as a dome-like roof

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Theophilus follows the words of Genesis closely. He compares heaven to a roof or lid that covers the waters and the earth. He reads the firmament as a real dividing line, with waters above and below it. He uses everyday pictures to explain the creation story.

3 “Therefore the prophet also said that the creation of the heavens happened first of all, like a kind of roof, saying, "In the beginning God created the heavens."”

later in the same passage

“And he speaks of "darkness" because the heaven that God made covered the waters and the earth like a lid.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Theophilus of Antioch,** *To Autolycus* 13 (c. 169–183 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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4 “And God made the firmament, and separated the waters under the firmament from the waters above the firmament.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Theophilus of Antioch,** *To Autolycus* 11 (c. 169–183 AD) **Source 5, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 3 OF 8

Church prayers praised heaven arched over us

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

A thanksgiving prayer in the Apostolic Constitutions praises God for setting the sky over us like an arch full of stars. It says the sun was made for the days and for growing food, and the moon marks the seasons as it grows and shrinks. The tone is worship, not science.

5 “The heaven is fixed like an arch over us and made glorious with stars for our comfort in the darkness.”

later in the same passage

“The light also and the sun were begotten for the days and for the producing of fruit, and the moon for the changing of the seasons by its waxing and waning.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 14, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

Athenagoras speaks of a spherical world

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

While arguing that there is only one God, Athenagoras mentions in passing that the world was made spherical and is surrounded by the circles of heaven. He uses this common picture to show there is no room for a second god. It is a side remark, not a lesson on the earth's shape.

6 “For if the world, being made spherical, is enclosed within the circles of heaven, and the Creator of the world is above the things created, managing that by His providential care for these, what place is there for the second god, or for the other gods?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Athenagoras,** *A Plea for the Christians* 8 (c. 170–190 AD) **Source 6, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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POINT 5 OF 8

A flat earth appears as a pagan opinion

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Hippolytus lists the teachings of Greek thinkers so he can trace where false ideas came from. One of them, Anaxagoras, said the earth was flat and held up by the air. Hippolytus only reports this view. He does not present it as Christian teaching.

7 “He said that the earth is flat in shape, and that it remains suspended aloft because of its size, because there is no vacuum, and because the air, which was most powerful, bears along the earth as it is carried.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hippolytus,** *Refutation of All Heresies* 7 (c. 200–236 AD) **Source 11, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

Some spoke of lands beyond the ocean

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Origen notes that Clement, a disciple of the apostles, spoke of other parts of the earth that no one could reach across the ocean. Clement called them worlds, still ruled by the same God. This shows early Christians were willing to think about places they could not see.

8 “The ocean is impassable to men; and those are worlds which are on the other side of it, which are governed by these same arrangements of the ruling God.””

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 3 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 13, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 8

The heavenly lights keep the order God set

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The same church prayer says the lights in the sky rise and set at God's command, marking seasons and years. Irenaeus asks false teachers which stars or orbits they ever made. Both point to God as the one who placed the lights and keeps their courses.

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9 “And the shining lights, which nourish those plants, keep their unchanging course and do not depart at all from Your command.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 14, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

10 “What stars have they called into existence? Or what lights of heaven have they caused to shine? In what orbits have they placed them?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book II* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

Arnobius admits nobody fully understands the sky

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Arnobius turns hard questions back on the pagans who mocked Christians. How is the world held up? What are the moon and stars? Why does the moon change shape? His point is that the pagan thinkers could not answer these things with certainty either.

11 “Is it supported by an axis resting in sockets at its ends, or does it instead support itself by its own power, and hold itself up by the spirit within it?”

later in the same passage

“What is the moon, and what are the stars? Why, on the one hand, does it not remain the same shape?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Arnobius,** *Against the Heathen* 2 (c. 290–330 AD) **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not give one official church teaching on whether the earth is round or flat.
- Pictures like a roof, lid or arch come from worship and Bible study, and the writers do not say how literally they meant them.
- They say nothing about the size or distance of the sun, moon and stars.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

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WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 19 early Christian passages and 39 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–19, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 20–38, in Bible order), then 20 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF's updated English unless marked "1885 English" (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). "… [continues online]" marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *19 passages from 15 writers*

Aristides, *c. 125–140 AD · source 1*

1 *Apology* 6 (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "in like manner also the moon and the stars… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · source 2*

2 *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* (1885 English) "so also, of the heaven which was created, he thought that the heaven which was created—and which he also called the firmament—was that creation which the senses perceive… [continues online] **read ›**

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · source 3*

3 *Address to the Greeks* 4 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** "can I speak of stocks and stones as gods… [continues online] **read ›**

Theophilus of Antioch, *c. 169–183 AD · sources 4–5*

4 *To Autolycus* 13 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** "18:27 Wherefore, also, the prophet mentioned that the creation of the heavens first of all took place, as a kind of roof, saying: At the first God created the… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *To Autolycus* 11 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven, to give light upon the earth: and it was so… [continues online] **read ›**

Athenagoras, *c. 170–190 AD · source 6*

6 *A Plea for the Christians* 8 (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 3** "if the world, being made spherical, is confined within the circles of heaven, and the Creator of the world is above the things created, managing that by His providential care… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 7*

7 *Against Heresies: Book II* **Quote 10, page 5** "heavens have they established? What earth have they founded… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · source 8*

8 *Stromata* 6.14 (1885 English; on point 1) "He gave the sun, and the moon, and the stars to be worshipped… [continues online] **read ›**

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Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · source 9*

9 *Against Hermogenes* 26 (1885 English; on point 2) “that God both separated the water which was below the firmament from that which was above the firmament, Genesis 1:7 and called the firmament heaven, — the very thing He… [continues online] **read ›**

Early Liturgies, *c. 200–400 AD · source 10*

10 *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 (1885 English; on point 3) “has made the heaven out of waters, and adorned it with choirs of stars… [continues online] **read ›**

Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · sources 11–12*

11 *Refutation of All Heresies* 7 **Quote 7, page 4** “that the moon is eclipsed when the earth is… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Refutation of All Heresies* 14 (1885 English; on point 5) “heaven and the earth have a figure similar to the womb, having a navel in the midst… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 13*

13 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 3 **Quote 8, page 4** “another heaven and another earth are shown to exist besides that firmament which is said to have been made after the second day, or… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 14–15*

14 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quotes 5, 9, pages 3, 5** “One was called Night, and the other Day… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) “fixed the firmament, and prepare the night and the day… [continues online] **read ›**

Arnobius, *c. 290–330 AD · sources 16–17*

16 *Against the Heathen* 2 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** “the moon is, what the stars? Why, on the one hand, it does not remain of the same shape, or why it was right and necessary that these particles of… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Against the Heathen* 3 (1885 English) “moon, the sun, the earth, the ether, the stars, are members and parts of the world… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · source 18*

18 *Divine Institutes* 4 (1885 English; on point 1) “they regard as gods only the sun and moon, but you the stars also… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *source 19*

19 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 7) “sun and moon, with the companies of the stars, roll on in harmony according to His command, within their prescribed limits, and without any deviation… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *19 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

20 **Genesis 1:1** In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. **read ›**

21 **Genesis 1:6** Then God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, and let it divide between water and water.” And it was so. **read ›**

22 **Genesis 1:7** God made the firmament, and God divided between the water that was under the firmament and the water that was above the firmament. **read ›**

23 **Genesis 1:8** God called the firmament Heaven, and God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day. **read ›**

24 **Genesis 1:15** Let them be for light in the firmament of heaven, to shine on the earth.” And it was so. **read ›**

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25 **Genesis 1:16** God made the two great lights: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night; and he made the stars. **read ›**

26 **Genesis 1:17** God set them in the firmament of heaven to shine on the earth, **read ›**

27 **Genesis 2:1** So the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. **read ›**

28 **Genesis 2:4** This is the book of the generation of heaven and earth, when they came to be, in the day that the Lord God made the heaven and the earth, **read ›**

29 **Job 26:10** He has encircled the face of the water by a command, until the end of light with darkness. **read ›**

30 **Psalms 8:3** For I will look at the heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have founded. (Septuagint Psalm 8:4 (Psalm 8:3 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

31 **Psalms 148:3** Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you stars and light. **read ›**

32 **Psalms 148:4** Praise him, you heavens of heavens, and the water that is above the heavens. **read ›**

33 **Isaiah 13:10** For the stars of heaven and Orion and all the array of heaven will not give their light; and it will be dark when the sun rises, and the moon will not give her light. **read ›**

34 **Jeremiah 4:23** I looked upon the earth, and behold, it was nothing; and I looked to heaven, and its lights were not there. **read ›**

35 **Joel 3:15** The sun and the moon will be darkened, and the stars will withdraw their light. (Septuagint Joel 4:15 (Joel 3:15 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

36 **1 Corinthians 15:40** There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; but the glory of the heavenly is one kind, and that of the earthly another. **read ›**

37 **Colossians 1:16** For by him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth, visible things and invisible things, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things have been created through him and for him. **read ›**

38 **Revelation 21:1** I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and the sea is no more. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *20 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Genesis 49:9

Job 38:11

Psalms 104:9

Daniel 7:13

Matthew 15:13 · 16:19

Mark 7:13

Luke 9:48 · 18:27 · 22:31

John 5:19 · 17:16

Romans 13:1

1 Corinthians 7:31 · 15:44

2 Corinthians 4:18 · 5:1

Ephesians 3:15

Colossians 1:15

1 John 5:19

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “What did the early church teach about the shape of the earth and the sun, moon and stars?” on April 8, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY