Hermeneutics and Reading Scripture

I. AN OVERVIEW OF AUGUSTINE'S EXEGETICAL WRITINGS

Augustine began writing commentary on Scripture not long after his conversion.[1] His

first such work, meant as a counterblast to Manichean attacks on the creation account, was *De

Genesi contra Manichaeos* (388-390).[2] In many ways it sets the tone for much of his later

work: Augustine admits an allegorical sense but warns against over-enthusiasm for

allegory and denigration of the literal sense; we see also from the outset Augustine's

interest in Scripture as a controversialist and polemicist. After his ordination to the

priesthood in 391, he seems to have gone through something of a writer's block,[3]

starting but leaving incomplete a treatise on exegetical theory (*De doctrina christiana*,[4]

begun 396 but not completed until 427), another commentary on Genesis (*De Genesi ad

litteram imperfectus liber*, 393-394),[5] and an exposition of Romans (*Epistolae ad Romanos

inchoata expositio*, 394-395).[6] He did manage to finish a verse-by-verse commentary on

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[1]The Patrologia Latina edition of Augustine's works, originally published by Jacque-Paul Migne between 1844 and 1849, is available online at http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm. In the notes on individual works I provide references to more recent Latin editions as well as English translations (where available).

[2]D. Weber, ed., *De Genesis contra Manichaeos*, Corpus Christianorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (hereafter: CSEL) 91 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaftern, 1998); Edmund Hill, trans., *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis,* Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (hereafter: WSA) I/11 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004).

[3] James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I: xlii-xliv, discusses how "one literary project after another fell to pieces in [Augustine's] hands" in the period between his ordination and the writing of the *Confessions*. See also O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 139-142.

[4]R. P. H. Green, trans. and ed., *Augustine: De Doctrina Christiana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[5]J. Zycha, ed., *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus, De Genesi ad litteram, Locutiones in Heptateuchum* CSEL 28/1 (1894); trans. Hill (2004).

[6]J. Divjak, ed., *Expositio quarumdam propositionum ex epistula ad Romanos, Epistulae ad Galatas expositio, Epistulae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* CSEL 84 (1971).

Galatians, giving the literal sense (*Epistolae ad Galatas expositio*, 394-395)[7] and a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (*De sermone Domini in monte*, 393-396).[8] His *Expositio quarumdam propositionum ex epistola ad Romanos* (394)[9] derives from conversations with the monks at Hippo, who recorded his answers to their questions about Romans; Augustine tells us later (*Retract.* 1.23) that he had not yet thought carefully enough about Paul's account of divine election and grace in that epistle.

Augustine found his voice when he came to write the *Confessions* (397), of which Books 11-13 are an extended commentary on Genesis 1. It is often described as an allegorical commentary, but wrongly so: most of it is quite literal by Augustine's standards, which are unlike ours. Only in Book 13, chapter 12, does the real allegory begin: Augustine sees in the story of the divine making of the formless world another story about the divine remaking of the sinful soul. After the *Confessions* came two works not intended as sustained commentary: *Quaestiones evangeliorum* (399-400)[10] is a loose collection of replies to a correspondent's questions about Matthew and Luke; and the *Adnotationes in Job* (399)[11] were compiled and published, not very skillfully, by others. *De consensu evangelistarum* (399-400),[12] by contrast, was a product of more

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[7]Eric Plumer, ed. and trans., *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[8]A. Mutzenbecher, ed., *De sermone Domini in monte,* Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (hereafter: CCSL) 35 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1967); Denis J. Kavanagh, O.S.A., trans., *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, Fathers of the Church, 11 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

[9]CSEL 84.

[10]A. Mutzenbecher, ed., *Quaestiones evangeliorum, Quaestiones XVI in Matthaeum* CCSL 44B (1980).

[11]J. Zycha, ed., *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum, Adnotationes in Iob*, CSEL 28/2 (1895).

[12]F. Weirich, ed., *De consensu evangelistarum*, CSEL 43 (1904); S. D. F. Salmond, trans., in Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Augustin: Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels,* A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, Series I, vol. VI (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1886).

careful composition; in it Augustine discusses the authority and nature of the Gospels and attempts to reconcile apparent contradictions between them.

The greatest of Augustine's exegetical writings, mostly long works composed over the course of many years, came between 400 and 420. *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-415)[13] is a wide-ranging and open-ended work intended to show the consistency of Scripture with the science of the day; polemic against the Manichees no longer figures in the title, but it is by no means forgotten. Perhaps his greatest work on Scripture is the *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* (406-421[14]; the dates are much disputed), a collection of sermons treating the whole text of the Gospel. It is a masterful blend of literal and allegorical exegesis, philosophical speculation, moral exhortation, and theological polemic. The commentary on First John (*Tractatus in Iohannis epistulam ad Parthos*, 406-407)[15] is another collection of exegetical sermons, as is the highly allegorical *Enarrationes in Psalmos*,[16] which Augustine began in 392 and put in final order around 417.[17] (A number of the sermons in the *Enarrationes*, however, were composed specially for the work and were never preached.) Augustine's other sermons are also generally exegetical. An *Expositio epistolae Jacobi ad duodecem tribus*, probably written around 412, is no longer extant.

In 419 Augustine wrote two commentaries on the first seven books of the Bible.

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[13]CSEL 28/1; trans. Hill (2004).

[14]R. Willems, ed., *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus CXXIV*, CCSL 36, 2nd ed. (1990); Edmund Hill, trans., *Homilies on the Gospel of John (1-40)*, WSA III/12 (2009); *Homilies on the Gospel of John (41-124)*, WSA III/13 (forthcoming).

[15]Boniface Ramsey, trans., *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, WSA III/14 (2008).

[16]E. Dekkers and J. Fraipoint, eds., *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (3 vols), CCSL 38-40 (1956); Maria Boulding, trans., *Expositions on the Psalms* (6 vols), WSA III/15-20 (2000-2004).

[17]Rowan Williams offers a compelling account of Augustine's engagement with the Psalms, connecting the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* with central themes of the *Confessions,* in "Augustine and the Psalms," *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 17-27.

Locutiones in heptateuchum deals with obscurities in the Latin text that arise from peculiarities of Hebrew or Greek idiom; *Quaestiones in heptateuchum* offers more developed exposition of difficult passages.[18] Near the end of his life Augustine made a collection of moral injunctions in the *Speculum Scripturae* (*Mirror of Scripture*, 427).[19]

De octo quaestionibus ex veteri testamento* is of uncertain date, and its authenticity is controversial.

II. EXEGETICAL PRACTICE

Augustine's exegetical practice defies easy generalization. A reader who wishes to get a feel for his style as a Biblical commentator can do no better than to follow him through a few representative passages. Here I provide an introduction to that task by exhibiting Augustine's approach to Genesis 1:1-2a in *Confessions* 11.3-12.13. The first thing one notices is that Augustine has squeezed some 8500 words of commentary from a text that runs (in his version) a mere seventeen words. He is not always so prolix, of course, but Augustine finds a great deal in his chosen texts—partly because, being thoroughly convinced of their divine authority, he *expects* to find a great deal in them. He is no cautious scholar, afraid to commit himself beyond the evidence, trained to a gritty skepticism that scours the gloss off the greatest of texts; he brings to his exegesis the full measure of Christian belief. His goal, moreover, is not merely to inform us but to help us see things differently. So he does not (for example) merely offer a quick definition of some difficult term in Scripture and then move on; he asks his readers to look within until, by teasing out the implications of some quite ordinary experience or idea, he brings us to see for ourselves what the term means. And he often breaks off for praise

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[18]J. Fraipont and D. De Bruyne, eds., *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum libri VII. Locutionum in Heptateuchum libri VII. De octo quaestionibus ex veteri testamento*, CCSL 33 (1958).

[19]F. Weihrich, ed., *Speculum, Liber de divinis scripturis*, CSEL 12 (1887).

to God and exhortation to his readers—these not being digressions, in his mind, but an integral part of the exegete's task. These procedures, however, do not make for short commentaries.

"In the beginning God made heaven and earth." In Augustine's view, the change and variation of created things is itself evidence that they have their existence from some source other than themselves. Moreover, the beauty, the goodness, indeed the very existence of heaven and earth points to the perfect beauty, goodness, and being of their Creator, whom they mimic in their fragmentary and defective way. So heaven and earth were made, and it was God who made them: but how? He cannot have used any pre-existing material in order to make them, because all such material is itself part of heaven and earth. Thus, purely rational argument shows that God created *ex nihilo*, and Augustine often relies on such philosophical argument in his commentaries. But rational argument has left us with an unanswered question: '*How* did God create heaven and earth?' To find the answer, Augustine relies on another favorite exegetical technique: he uses one part of Scripture to illuminate another. For Scripture itself tells us how God made heaven and earth: "He spoke and they were made" (Psalm 33:9) and "By the word of the Lord were the heavens established" (Psalm 33:6). What sort of word was this? It could not have been a word produced by a physical voice and having temporal duration, for there were as yet no physical voices and no time. It must have been an eternal word—in fact, the Word of which John the Evangelist wrote. "And so you call us to understand the Word, God with you, O God, the Word that is uttered eternally and by which all things are uttered eternally" (*Conf*. 11.7.9). This Word, as Truth itself, is rightly called the Beginning, since "if he did not abide when we went astray, there would be nowhere for us to return to. Now when we return from going astray, we certainly return through knowing; and in order that we might know, he

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teaches us, since he is the Beginning and also speaks to us"[20] (*Conf.* 11.8.10).

So "in the beginning" means "in the coeternal Word." Since the Word is eternal, the divine act of creation is eternal, and there is no room for questions like "What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?" Augustine accordingly embarks on a long explanation of the nature of eternity and time,[21] all aimed at showing the folly of such questions and providing us with some insight, inevitably dim and partial, into a mode of existence utterly different from our own life in this realm of beginnings and ends.

Having explained "In the beginning," Augustine moves on to "God created heaven and earth." Here he relies on a passage from the Psalms (115:15-16) where Scripture itself comments on Scripture: "May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The heaven of heaven is the Lord's, but the earth he gave to the children of men." Here, "heaven" is identified with the heaven of heaven, and earth means the whole visible creation—including what we conventionally call the heavens (the skies). Augustine understands the "heaven of heaven" to be some sort of intellectual creature that ceaselessly contemplates God and is everlastingly happy in that contemplation. Although it is capable of change, it does not in fact change—so that it is not bound by time.[22]

Then we are told something about the earth (that is, the whole material creation): "The earth was invisible and unformed." That is, the first step of material creation is

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[20]John 8:25 in Augustine's version reads, "So they said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus said to them, 'The beginning, because I also am speaking to you'." Notice again a familiar pattern: by purely philosophical argumentation Augustine shows us what the creative word could not have been, and then through Scripture he shows us what it was.

[21]For Augustine's view of eternity and time, see chapter 4 of this volume.

[22]The classic discussion of this mysterious creature (or possibly creatures) is Jean Pépin, *Archivium Latinitatis Medii Aevi* 23 (1953): 185-274.

formless matter: "Was it not you, O Lord, who taught me that before you gave form and variety to this formless matter, it was not anything: not color, not shape, not body, not spirit? And yet it was not altogether nothing; it was a sort of formlessness, devoid of all beauty" (*Conf*. 12.3.3). It is not that God actually created formless matter first and then proceeded to form it; this is not a case of temporal succession but of logical priority. Rational analysis shows that underlying all change from one form to another there must be some "stuff" that itself has no form but is capable of taking on form; this is the formless matter of which Augustine speaks.

This formless almost-nothing is timeless, because time is present only where there is change in form. The temporality of creatures means mutability, which is in a sense a limitation; but it is also the sphere in which God can work by forming them. The heaven of heaven is also not temporal, because although changeable, it is never in fact changed. Hence, there is no mention of "day" when "God created the heaven [i.e., of heaven] and the earth [i.e., unformed matter]," because neither of these creations is temporal. We get days only when God starts to form matter in various ways.

III. EXEGETICAL THEORY: EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Again, this is what Augustine considers literal exegesis—for he is reading the creation story as a creation story, not as (for example) the story of the Church or of individual salvation, and so he is not reading it allegorically. But even in literal commentary the exegete is free to draw material from altogether different parts of Scripture and from the best of philosophy. The approach is not scholarly in the modern sense—no self-respecting Biblical scholar in our day would offer a reading of Genesis that depended heavily on Saint John the Evangelist and Plato—and the results are often anything but commonsensical. Augustine is aware that the reading he has just given will strike some people as strange: "Others, admirers of the book of Genesis and not fault-finders [he is

thinking of the Manichees in the latter group], say, 'The Spirit of God, who wrote these words through his servant Moses, did not intend for them to be understood in this way; he did not mean what you say, but something else—what we say'" (*Conf.* 12.14.17).

In his response Augustine lays out the theory that legitimates his exegetical practice. He begins by stating some things he is quite sure of, things that "truth says to me with a strong voice in my inward ear" (*Conf.* 12.15.18). Now he had used this expression three times in 12.11, where he was laying out his exegesis in the first place, except there it was "You, Lord, have said to me with a strong voice in my inward ear." Note two crucial differences in the expression as it appears here. First, it has changed from second person to third; the subject now is 'Truth', which to Augustine means specifically God the Son. Second, it is no longer perfect tense ("you have said") but present ("Truth is saying"). These changes hint at some significant elements of the theory that will emerge. What we learn from Scripture is learned from Truth himself. And Truth is not past but present, always accessible. It is in intellectual "memory," where we see not the images of past realities that are now gone (as is the case with sense memory) but the present—in effect timeless—realities themselves.

There is a careful parallelism in Augustine's invocation of what is said to him "with a strong voice in [his] inward ear." In 12.11 he uses that expression to introduce a discussion of (a) God's eternity, then of (b) the relationship between God and creatures, then of (c) the heaven of heaven; he then adds, independently of that expression, a discussion of (d) the timelessness of unformed matter. The sequence recurs in 12.15. These are the three things he is sure of, because Truth himself tells him: (a) God is eternal and immutable, so there is no succession in him, and therefore no change in his will regarding creatures; (b) everything that exists comes from God, who supremely is; and (c) there is a sublime creature, not coeternal with God, but also not temporal. Finally, he says, (d) there was also formless matter, which was created by God and also

was not temporal. At each of these points he imagines asking his objectors, "Is this true?" and they invariably reply, "We do not deny it."

But if the objectors concede all these points—which together constitute almost the whole of Augustine's exegesis—what is their objection? Simply that when Moses wrote of "heaven," he was not thinking of the "heaven of heaven," and when he wrote of "earth," he was not thinking of the whole material creation. So Augustine goes on to consider several rival interpretations of these expressions. What is important for our purposes is not specifically what the different accounts say, but the fact that Augustine maintains that all the accounts are true. He insists that what he says is true, and the objectors should not deny it. But what they say is also true, and he will not deny that either.

This extraordinary generosity towards other interpretations makes perfect sense in light of Augustine's epistemology and philosophy of language. Written words are signs of spoken words, and spoken words in turn are signs of the speaker's thoughts. If all goes well, the written words will exactly capture the spoken words, and the spoken words will perfectly convey the speaker's thoughts; one who reads those words will in turn understand exactly what they mean, and thus the contents of the reader's mind will exactly match the contents of the author's mind. But Augustine is always keen to draw our attention to the many ways in which things might not go so well. A speaker may be lying or self-deceived about what he thinks. The author's thoughts might surpass his skill—perhaps any human skill—to signify them by words. The reader might be too dull or too distracted to make use of the words properly so that they carry his mind to just those realities which they were meant to signify, or the words themselves might be ambiguous. Augustine is, moreover, at least intermittently

mindful that he is reading the Scriptures in Latin translation,[23] and translation complicates the story even further.

The words of Genesis are ambiguous, at least in the sense that as they stand they do not rule out a variety of rival interpretations, all of them plausible. Now what Moses wrote signifies what Moses would have said, so we could reduce the ambiguity if we could get Moses to speak to us—which, of course, we cannot do:

> I want to hear and to understand how in the beginning you made heaven and earth. Moses wrote this. He wrote it and went away; he passed over from here, from you to you, and he is not now in front of me. For if he were, I would get hold of him and ask him and plead with him for your sake to explain these things to me, and I would open the ears of my body to the sounds emanating from his mouth. And if he spoke in Hebrew, he would knock on my senses in vain, and none of what he said would strike my mind; but if he spoke in Latin, I would know what he was saying (*Conf.* 11.3.5).

Ordinarily even this would hardly be satisfactory, for we cannot generally know that a speaker even believes what he is saying; "who knows the thoughts of a man but the spirit of the man within him?" Moreover, it is normally of no great moment to find out what someone is thinking: "Surely teachers do not profess to offer their own thoughts for their students to learn and memorize, rather than the actual subject matter that they take themselves to be propounding when they speak. For who would be so foolishly curious as to send his child to school in order to find out what the teacher thinks?" (*De mag.* 14).

With Moses matters are somewhat different, since we can assume that Moses knew his own mind and intended to communicate his thoughts faithfully, and since we have a prior commitment to believing that whatever Moses thought and said under divine inspiration was true. Even so, would an interview with Moses be all we needed

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[23]See, for example, *De doct. christ.* 2.11.16-2.15.22.

to overcome the deficiencies of signs? It would not. If he spoke in Latin, Augustine says,

> I would know what he was saying. But from what source would I know whether what he was saying was true? And if I were to know that, I wouldn't know it from him, would I? No indeed: the inward Truth, within me in the dwelling-place of my thought, would say to me—not in Hebrew or Greek or Latin or any barbarous language, without any organ of mouth or tongue, without the rattling of syllables—"What he says is true." And I with certainty and confidence would immediately say to him, "What you say is true" (*Conf.* 11.3.5).

The argument thus far offers two reasons why Biblical exegesis is not, after all, concerned with figuring out the author's intention. The first is that our ability to get at the author's intention is limited. Moses is not around for us to ask him questions, and any difficult text might bear more than one plausible and defensible interpretation. The second, and deeper, reason is that what guarantees the veracity of the author, and thus the text, is the divine truth; and that same divine truth is available to us even apart from our interpretation of the text.

Suppose, then, that Augustine says Genesis 1:1 means *x*, and I say it means *y*; suppose further that upon consulting Christ as Inner Teacher we find that both *x* and *y* are true. The only question is, which did Moses *mean*, *x* or *y*? Augustine asks, why not both?

> So when one person says "He meant what I say," and another says "No, he meant what I say," I think it would be more pious to say "Why not both, if both are true?" And if someone should see in his words a third truth, or a fourth, or indeed any other truth, why not believe that Moses saw all these truths? (*Conf.* 12.31.42)

Somewhat surprisingly, it is not pride but just good Augustinian theology (and epistemology) to suspect that we might find truths in Moses' writings that had never crossed his mind:

Finally, Lord, you who are God and not flesh and blood, even if one who was merely a man did not see all there was to be seen, did not your good Spirit, who will lead me into the land of uprightness, know everything that you would reveal through these words to later readers, even if the one who uttered them was perhaps thinking of only one of the many true meanings? If so, let us suppose he was thinking of whichever meaning is most exalted. O Lord, show us that meaning; or if you please, show us some other true meaning. In this way, whether you show us just what you showed your servant, or something else that emerges from the same words, we will in any event be fed by you, not mocked by error (*Conf*. 12.32.43).[24]

By now it would seem that Scripture is entirely unnecessary: if we have independent access to the truth, what need do we have of a written revelation? Augustine's answer is twofold. First, the written words of Scripture are signs, and they help direct our mind's eye to the realities they signify. Suppose I want to draw your attention to something, so I point to it and say "Look over there." You see it, and thereby come to know it. I begin to congratulate myself on my success as a teacher, but you retort, "My vision was working perfectly well, thank you. I am the one who looked, and I am the one who saw for myself. So what I know, I know from myself, not from you." "True enough," I reply, "but would you ever have looked if I had not pointed?" Scripture is such a pointer. We do not learn intelligible things from Moses or Paul or the Evangelists; we learn them by seeing them for ourselves in the eternal Truth. But the words of Scripture are signs that direct our attention to what we could, but rarely ever would, see without them.

Second, notice that I have been speaking thus far only of intelligible realities, since those are the timeless and unchanging realities of which Truth speaks to us in our inward ear. There are also truths that belong to the realm of time and change, and our only independent access to those truths is through our senses. I do not consult Christ

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[24]Augustine makes a similar argument at *De doct. christ.* 3.27.38.

the Inner Teacher in order to find out whether my office door is open; I just look. The senses can tell me only about the present; sense memory also tells me about the past—only my own past, though, and not even all of that. This means that most of the past is not merely unknown but unknowable: I cannot know it through the Inner Truth, because it is not a timeless intelligible reality, and I cannot know it through sense or sense memory, because it is not now and never was present to my senses. In that unknowable past are truths that, Augustine believes, I desperately need to be aware of; the most important, of course, is that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The words of Scripture make us aware of such truths in the unknowable past; if we did not believe them on the authority of Scripture, we could not have any beliefs about them at all. Thus, Scripture is indispensable not only because it directs our reason to see what we might otherwise miss, but because it informs us of things that neither reason nor sense can now reveal to us.

IV. EXEGETICAL THEORY: MORAL DIMENSIONS

The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is bankrupt, as far as Augustine is concerned. Such a pursuit springs from curiosity, which for him is no admirable trait but a vice; he identifies it with that "lust of the eyes" of which John wrote, "For all that is in the world—the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:16). So it is not surprising that when Augustine discusses the legitimacy of rival interpretations of Scripture, he reveals a deep concern with the morality of exegetical disputes. Undue attachment to one's own exegesis manifests a sort of pride, the love of one's own opinion simply because it is one's own opinion. In *Confessions* 10 Augustine describes this as a form of the "pride of life," the third of the unholy trinity of sins from 1 John 2:16. It is more grievous still when the exegete is driven by the desire for a reputation as a brilliant scholar; "this is a miserable

life and revolting ostentation" (*Conf.* 10.36.59). Moreover, since truth is common property, one's own opinion is not really one's own at all if it is true; it is the common property of all right-thinking people, and no one has any individual stake in it: "No one should regard anything as his own, except perhaps a lie, since all truth is from him who says, 'I am the truth'" (*De doct. christ.* Prologue, 8). Also, only temerity and insolence could justify such confidence in something we cannot actually know. We can know what Truth itself says, but we cannot know with any degree of certainty what Moses or Paul was thinking when he wrote the biblical text we are expounding. Most important of all, charity demands that we abstain from all such "pernicious disputes."

For charity is the ultimate aim of all worthy exegesis. "Whoever thinks he has understood the divine Scriptures or any part of them in such a way that his understanding does not build up the twin love of God and neighbor has not yet understood them at all" (*De doct. christ.* 1.36.40). Charity is, moreover, the unifying and animating theme of Augustine's treatise on biblical interpretation, *De doctrina christiana* (*On Christian Teaching*). Its message is this: Be always mindful of the end, and be on your guard against the pernicious tendency of means to encroach upon the ends. The end of all things, Augustine insists, is God. He alone is to be loved for his own sake—"enjoyed," in Augustine's terminology. Whatever else is to be loved should be "used," that is, loved for the sake of God. Even human beings, including ourselves, should be "used" in this sense, which does not mean "exploited." But Augustine cannot quite bring himself to talk consistently of "using" ourselves and our fellow human beings, and he defines charity as "the motion of the soul toward enjoying God for his own sake and oneself and one's neighbor for God's sake" (*De doct. christ.* 3.10.16). Its opposite, cupidity, is "the motion of the soul toward enjoying oneself, one's neighbor, or any bodily thing for the sake of something other than God" (Ibid.). Scripture, Augustine says, "commands nothing but charity and condemns nothing but cupidity"

(*De doct. christ.* 3.10.15).

Interest in Biblical interpretation for its own sake is one such form of cupidity; exegesis is to be used for the sake of charity, not enjoyed for its own sake. In Augustine's metaphor, it is not the distant land where we will be happy, but merely a vehicle by which we may be conveyed there:

> The fulfillment and end of the Law and of all divine Scripture is the love of a being that is to be enjoyed [i.e., God], and of a being that can share that enjoyment with us [i.e., our neighbor]. . . . That we might know this and be able to achieve it, the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine providence for our salvation. We should use it not with an abiding but with a transitory love and delight like that in a road or conveyances or any other means. . . . We should love those things by which we are carried for the sake of that towards which we are carried (*De doct. christ.* 1.35.39; see also 1.4.4).

So overriding is this end that even misreadings of Scripture are scarcely objectionable if they build up charity. Someone guilty of such a misreading is to be corrected only on pragmatic grounds, not in the interest of scholarly correctness (an ideal to which Augustine shows not the slightest allegiance):

> He is deceived in the same way as someone who leaves a road by mistake but nonetheless goes on through a field to the same place to which the road leads. Still, he should be corrected and shown how much more useful it is not to leave the road, lest his habit of wandering off should force him to take the long way around, or the wrong way altogether (*De doct. christ.* 1.36.41).

V. EXEGETICAL THEORY: PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS

As we have seen, Book 1 of *De doctrina christiana* concerns things; it explains which things are to be enjoyed and which are to be used. Books 2 and 3 discuss signs, and in particular the conventional signs or words found in the Biblical writings. (Note again Augustine's concerns that means not encroach upon ends. Signs exist for the sake of things, and not the other way around, so he must first explain the nature of things

before he can sensibly discuss the signs that point us toward those things.) Augustine's aim is to provide practical precepts for interpreters of the Bible to aid them in understanding both unknown signs (Book 2) and ambiguous signs (Book 3).[25]

The most important tool for understanding unknown literal signs is a thorough knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, so that the interpreter can resolve any doubts that arise from conflicting translations.[26] To understand unknown figurative signs the interpreter needs a wide grounding in the nature of the plants, animals, and other things that Scripture uses in its figures; otherwise we will not know (for example) why the dove brought an olive branch back to the ark or why the Psalmist says, "You shall sprinkle me with hyssop." Interpreters must also understand the figurative significance of numbers and should know something of secular history. They should be acquainted with music, the arts, various trades and professions, and sports—not as practitioners, but in order to understand the Scriptures when they use figurative expressions drawn from these areas. Astronomy is only tangentially useful and is too closely allied with the pernicious superstitions of the astrologers to be quite safe. "The science of disputation is of great value for understanding and solving all sorts of questions that arise in the sacred writings" (*De doct. christ.* 2.31.48), although interpreters must be on their guard against the love of controversy and "childish showing-off in deceiving an adversary" (Ibid.). Moreover, a clever person will recognize fallacious arguments even without studying the rules of inference, and a stupid person will find it too hard to learn the rules. If you can recognize a bad argument when you see it, you do not need to know the technical name for the fallacy it exhibits; and such specialized knowledge is

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[25]Book Four discusses rhetorical strategies for teaching and preaching and therefore falls outside our concern in this essay.

[26]Augustine's precept is better than his practice: his Greek was mediocre, and he had no Hebrew at all. Consequently, he knew Scripture chiefly in Latin translation. For an overview of what we know about Augustine's version of the Bible, see O'Donnell, 1992, I: lxix-lxxi.

always a temptation to pride in oneself and disdain for others.

In acquiring the knowledge that will permit an intelligent reading of the Scriptures, the Christian exegete is free to draw upon pagan wisdom, even pagan philosophy—especially the Platonists. When the Israelites fled from Egypt, they left behind the idols but took with them the gold and silver, treasures of Egypt that the Israelites could put to better use. So also the Christian must repudiate the "fraudulent and superstitious imaginings" of the pagans but appropriate whatever truths they might have found, the gold and silver that the pagans "extracted from the mines of divine providence" (*De doct. christ.* 2.40.60). After all, "every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's" (*De doct. christ.* 2.18.28). Still, just as the treasures of Israel under Solomon surpassed the Egyptian gold, so also the truths to be found only in Scripture are far more precious than any that can be appropriated from the pagans.

Having discussed the interpretation of unknown signs in Book 2, Augustine proceeds to consider ambiguous signs in Book 3. Ambiguities of punctuation and construction are to be corrected according to the "rule of faith" as it is found in unambiguous passages of Scripture and the teaching of the Church, and by attention to the context, since any good interpretation must preserve internal consistency.[27] More difficult are the ambiguities of figurative words. We need some principle for determining whether a locution or a story is literal or figurative, and here Augustine recurs to the theme of charity. "For figurative expressions a rule like this will be observed: what is read should be given careful consideration until an interpretation is produced that contributes to the reign of charity. If such a reading is already evident in

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[27]Augustine emphasizes this requirement in a number of places. See, for example, *Conf.* 12.29 and *De doct. christ.* 1.36.41, 3.2.2, and 3.3.6.

the text taken literally, the expression should not be considered figurative" (*De doct. christ.* 3.15.23). For example, when Scripture says "If your enemy is hungry, give him to eat; if he is thirsty, give him to drink," we should take the admonition literally. But when it goes on to say, "For in so doing you shall heap coals of fire on his head" (Proverbs 25:21-22, Romans 12:20), we must take this figuratively. A literal heaping of coals of fire would, after all, harm our enemy. We cannot even take the expression figuratively—but uncharitably—as meaning that our act of kindness will shame and confound our enemy; rather, "charity should call you to beneficence, so that you understand the coals of fire to be burning sighs of penitence that heal the pride of one who grieves that he was an enemy of a man who relieved his suffering" (*De doct. christ.* 3.16.24).

By the same principle, even stories of the evil deeds of great men and women of the faith can be taken literally, since they stand as a warning against pride in our own goodness. (The stories can be taken figuratively as well, but such readings do not take the place of a literal reading.) On the other hand, "no one would seriously believe that the Lord's feet were anointed with precious ointment by a woman, as is the custom among extravagant and worthless men whose entertainments we abhor" (*De doct. christ.* 3.12.18). The only reading conducive to charity is a figurative one: "the good odor is the good fame that anyone leading a good life will have through his deeds, when he follows in the footsteps of Christ, as if anointing his feet with a most precious odor" (Ibid.).

VI. EXEGETICAL THEORY: SPIRIT AND LETTER

Yet although Augustine in *De doctrina christiana* emphatically rejects a literal interpretation of the stories of the anointing of Jesus' feet, in *De consensu evangelistarum* 2.79 he treats the stories as historical. Indeed, Augustine is largely responsible for the tradition that identifies the sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50 with the woman in Bethany

described in Matthew 26:6–13 and Mark 14:3–9 and named in John 12:1–8 as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.[28] So by 405 Augustine had come to believe something that in 396/97 he had said "no one would seriously believe." This development illustrates Augustine's increasingly nuanced approach to the relationship between the spirit and the letter.

In *Confessions* 6.4.6 Augustine gives great prominence to the use that Ambrose made of 2 Corinthians 3:6, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life":

> I also rejoiced that the old writings, the law and the prophets, were no longer put before me to read with the same eyes that had once seen them as absurd, when I criticized your holy ones for holding views that in fact they did not hold. And I was delighted to hear Ambrose in his popular sermons frequently urge us most emphatically to adopt as our rule, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life." He would draw aside the veil of mystery, opening up the spiritual meaning of texts that, taken literally, seemed to teach perversity.

Because Augustine credits Ambrose's spiritualizing interpretations with such a crucial role in rescuing him from the Manichees and making Catholic Christianity seem intellectually tenable, it is easy to fall into the mistake of thinking that Augustine himself went on to adopt the rule that Ambrose so emphatically urged upon his congregation. He did so only in a highly qualified way, and with decreasing enthusiasm as his engagement with Scripture matured.

As early as 388–390, in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 2.2.3, Augustine says that if someone can manage to interpret a text literally "and can avoid blasphemies and preach everything that accords with the Catholic faith, not only should we not look askance at him, but indeed we should regard him as an exceptional and highly praiseworthy

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[28]The further identification of Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene, though a natural outgrowth of this tradition, is not found in Augustine. Note that although Augustine reads the four accounts as involving the same woman, he does not think they all relate the same event; he argues for two episodes of anointing, one recorded by Luke and another recorded by the other three evangelists.

exegete." But if one cannot hit upon a successful literal interpretation, a figurative interpretation is permissible, "without prejudice to any better and more careful interpretation that the Lord might see fit to bring to light through us or through others." The point is not quite that spiritual interpretations as such are objectionable – for Augustine notes that we have apostolic authority for figurative readings of the Old Testament – but that spiritual interpretations as a way of avoiding the difficulties of literal interpretations are interim measures at best. His spiritualizing interpretation of the anointing stories seems to illustrate this point. In early works such as *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (392) and (as we have seen) *De doctrina christiana* (396/97), we find only a spiritual interpretation. By the time of *De consensu evangelistarum* (405) Augustine has found a way to understand the events literally so that they no longer represent debauchery but instead speak of humility, repentance, and forgiveness. The letter no longer kills. Yet the spirit continues to give life, and spiritual interpretations persist alongside the literal reading in late works such as *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 50 (c. 410–420).

So Augustine, never as enthusiastic a follower of Ambrose's rule as one would expect from reading the *Confessions*, has by this point strayed very far indeed from the use of 2 Corinthians 3:6 that Ambrose had urged upon him. Yet a more decisive break is still to come. In *De spiritu et littera* (412) Augustine argues that the verse is not primarily about spiritual interpretations of Scripture at all:

> I mean to prove, if I can, that the Apostle's words, "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life," are not about figurative expressions (though one can extract a reasonable meaning from them along those lines) but clearly about the law, which forbids what is evil. . . . The letter of the law, which teaches us not to sin, kills if the life-giving Spirit is not present, because it causes sin to be known rather than avoided, and thus increased rather than diminished, because transgression of the law is added to the evil of concupiscence. (*De spir. et litt.* 5.7–8)

Augustine's contemptuous rejection of the historical sense of the anointing stories thus turns out to be a casualty not merely of his improved facility in literal exegesis but also of his increasingly critical approach to Ambrose's rule.

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