

## Augustine of Hippo's Doctrine of Scripture: Christian Exegesis in Late Antiquity

ROBERT A. ZIEGLER

Throughout his career, Augustine focused considerable attention on the nature and interpretation of Scriptural texts, arguing that apparent errors and contradictions in the canonical books were not problematic, but further supported his orthodox theological commitments. Augustine maintained that human communication was inherently inferior to God's perfect Word. Thus, in revealing himself to human readers through the avenue of Scripture, God had condescended to human forms of communication. God's revelation, delivered through the medium of Scripture, was an invaluable manifestation of divine mercy and required disciplined study in order to be understood. Yet, biblical study was not simply an intellectual exercise predicated upon a set of presuppositions, but was also an act of faith requiring supernatural aid. With his joint commitment to disciplined study and divine guidance, Augustine sought to aid pious readers in identifying historical and prophetic textual themes and in addressing elements of the texts that seemed contradictory or irrelevant to sixth-century orthodox theology. For Augustine, "challenging" elements of Scripture could be attributed to trivial causes or demonstrated as, not problematic, but integral, to the harmony and ultimate purpose of Scripture.

For Augustine, divine speech, like God Himself, exists beyond the confines of time. Mortal speakers necessarily communicate in syllables and in languages. But, verbal communication reflects humanity's subordination to time.<sup>1</sup> Augustine contended that God's communication is not contained within syllables or limited to a single language because God himself is not subordinate to time and therefore possesses no need to communicate in a sequential, verbal manner.<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite the divinely-inspired nature of their work, the biblical authors were not recreating divine speech, which, within Augustine's theological framework, could not be bounded by the grammatical and time constraints inherent in all human communication. Michael Cameron, a specialist on Augustine's reception of Scripture, contends that, while Augustine recognized Scripture as divinely inspired, he did not believe Scripture to be a simple transcription of God's words. Thus, Cameron not only contends that Augustine revered Scripture as divinely inspired, but also writes that, "For Augustine, God's majesty surpasses the Scriptures... Scripture uses human authors and words, and it features the same rhetorical devices that are found in all discourse: figures of speech, staged dialogues, and shifting verb tenses."<sup>3</sup> Augustine certainly presented the Bible as God's Word, both to his congregation and in his bitter polemical struggles with those he deemed heterodox. Yet, Augustine nuanced his perspective by recognizing that Scripture's human authors acted under divine inspiration, but their writings, expressed in mere human words, could not fully encapsulate God's infinite nature.

Yet, the 'human' dimension of the Scriptures was, like all other apparent shortcomings in Scripture, actually an integral part of Scripture's central purpose, directing readers to the divine Word. Cameron notes the role of early Christian incarnational theologies in Augustine's own nuanced understanding of Scripture, stating, "The divine submission to humble speech mirrors the humility of the Incarnation."<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Augustine, the humble, human nature of Scripture paralleled the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. Augustine's biblical theology cannot be anachronistically conformed to modern perspectives on theological questions, such as biblical inerrancy. Indeed, the epistemological underpinning of Augustine's approach was rooted in his understanding that Scripture was finite, lacking divine totality. Yet, at the same time, Augustine clearly regarded the Scriptures as the essence of truth, which had been revealed to its divinely inspired authors. Even God's willingness to condescend and deliver His divine word through human authors reflected God the Son's incarnation and willingness to come to Earth as a man. Therein lies the heart of Augustine's perspective. Scripture served to direct readers' affections to the Word incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth. While Augustine firmly believed that Scripture contained historical narratives and conveyed accurate information about past events, he also contended that these historical accounts functioned prophetically, confirming the presuppositions of sixth-century Christians that the Hebrew Bible served as a harbinger of Jesus Christ's birth and ministry.

Augustine's mature, Christocentric understanding of Scripture was preceded by his more literal, Manichean approach to Scripture. An ancient Christian sect, Manichaeism provided many fifth-century Romans with an alluring and highly illegal alternative to the state-sanctioned, orthodox Christianity.<sup>5</sup> As a youth, Augustine had been an

<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), XI, 2.3.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, 2.4.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Cameron, "Augustine and Scripture," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 203.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Anne-Marie La Bonnadiere, "Augustine's Biblical Initiation," in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 12.

avowed Manichean. Manichean teachers opposed the inclusion of the Old Testament into the Christian canon. While they accepted portions of the New Testament, Manicheans disdained the Old Testament, with its graphic accounts of murder and adultery as fleshly, uninspired text. Anne-Marie La Bonnadiere, a specialist on Augustine's reception of Scripture, argues that Augustine, "Combined with this aberrant presentation of God and man was a persistent criticism of the Old Testament because of its 'scandals.' These included the shameful morality of the Patriarchs and the Kings presented in the Bible as having multiple marriages."<sup>6</sup> As a youthful Manichean, Augustine was appalled by such accounts, which he regarded as incompatible with his society's standards of propriety, writing, "That the old writings of the Law...had previously looked absurd [to him]."<sup>7</sup>

However, as Augustine progressed away from Manichean teaching, he came under the influence of Bishop Ambrose's far more spiritualized understanding of the canonical texts. Augustine continued to acknowledge that a strictly literal reading of a text such as Genesis would leave readers unaware of the text's more significant theological meaning. However, under the preaching of Ambrose, Augustine was presented with spiritualized expositions of Scripture. Ambrose exhorted his congregants to read biblical passages, not only in their literal sense, but also in their spiritual sense. Seemingly scurrilous and wholly unspiritual accounts were held to possess deeper, spiritual meaning.<sup>8</sup> In his *Confessions*, Augustine recounted how, as an intellectual in the Roman imperial court, he began to develop a skeptical attitude toward his once cherished Manichean beliefs, writing, "I began to see that the Catholic faith for which I had thought nothing could be said in the face of the Manichean objections, could be maintained on reasonable grounds: this especially after I had heard explained figuratively several passages of the Old Testament."<sup>9</sup> For Augustine, maintaining a correct perspective on Scripture was essential to one's spiritual progress. Thus, in his *Confessions*, Augustine presents his adoption of an Ambrosian perspective on Scripture as a crucial prerequisite for his providential conversion to orthodoxy.

While Augustine's nuanced understanding of Scriptural interpretation enabled him to resolve potentially problematic biblical passages, his intensely intellectual approach also created a tension between divine guidance in biblical study and conventional, earthly academic study. In Book V of his *Confessions*, Augustine writes, "In the last place everyone who boasts that he through divine illumination, understands the obscurities of Scripture, though not instructed in any rules of interpretation, at the same time believes and believes rightly that this power is not his own, in the sense of originating with himself, but is the gift of God."<sup>10</sup> Augustine, in this sense, firmly believed that a correct exposition of Scripture was contingent upon divine aid. A 'pagan' reading the Scriptures possessed a tremendous disadvantage because he lacked divine help in understanding the text. While Augustine admitted that non-Christian readers could apprehend Scripture, he emphasized that correct Scriptural exposition was predicated upon the reader's commitment to the tenets of orthodoxy.

However, Augustine, apprehensive of the danger that any Christian claiming divine guidance could foist his idiosyncratic and self-serving interpretations upon others, sought to encourage orthodoxy among fifth-century exegetes by developing a framework, through which churchmen could expound the Scriptures to their congregants. To encourage reader acquiescence, Augustine, in his *On Christian Doctrine*, appropriates the story of the Apostle Paul's conversion, stating, "Let us beware of such dangerous temptations of pride, and let us rather consider the fact that the Apostle Paul himself, although stricken down and admonished by the voice of God from heaven, was yet sent to a man to receive the sacraments and be admitted into the Church."<sup>11</sup> By contrasting Paul's humble submission to Ananias with some of his contemporaries' stubborn refusal to embrace an orthodox perspective on Scripture, Augustine developed a compelling moral argument against careless or heterodox interpretations of Scripture. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* demonstrates his commitment to imposing theological unity on the fractious churches of the Ancient Mediterranean world.

With his perspective on Scripture molded by orthodox intellectuals, such as Ambrose, Augustine believed that biblical narratives, such as the Genesis creation accounts, were historically true and inherently communicated theological truths. Augustine, for instance, sought to understand Scripture's literal meaning in *De Genesi ad litteram*, a commentary on the Book of Genesis, in which Augustine attempted to understand the Genesis author(s)' descriptions of divine creation. Yet, one must recognize that Augustine possessed a broader understanding of literal interpretation than many modern readers do. In analyzing Augustine's textual strategies for reading the Pentateuch, Cameron

<sup>6</sup> La Bonnadiere, "Augustine's Biblical Initiation," 13.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VI, 4.6.

<sup>8</sup> La Bonnadiere, "Augustine's Biblical Initiation," 15.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, V, 13. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J.F. Shaw (Mineola: Dover Philosophical Publications, 2009), 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

summarizes Augustine's pluralistic approach to literal interpretation: "Furthermore Augustine asks, since Moses was aware that his words would teach so many different people across so many generations, should we not expect him to make his words allow as many true meanings as possible?"<sup>12</sup> One must recognize that Augustine's belief in a multiplicity of true, literal interpretations was tempered by his theological commitments. While two orthodox expositors could develop two divergent, literal, and equally valid explanations for a single passage, a literalist, Donatist interpretation would be rejected as patently false. Thus, Augustine's approach to literal readings of Scripture is in one sense subjective. A range of literal and orthodox meanings may be wrung from a text, but the validity of one's exegesis is ultimately measured by the orthodoxy of one's conclusion, not by any attempt at objective textual analysis.

Yet, like many elements of his thought, Augustine's understanding of literal readings cannot be taken in isolation. The theologian believed that some texts could be read validly in both literal and figurative senses. The Augustinian scholar, R. A. Markus elaborated on Augustine's dichotomous approach to Scripture, a perspective that enabled him to believe that a single biblical passage contained multiple meanings. In his book, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine*, Markus argues that "Augustine could now speak of the bible as prophetica historia, thus joining in one phrase two terms that had been antithetical."<sup>13</sup> While Markus specifically sought to track the maturation of Augustine's biblical theology from a historical-prophetic dichotomy to a synthesis and even interchangeability of prophecy and history, his insight should strongly shape one's understanding of Augustine's literal reading. An expositor possesses no obligation to interpret a text in just a figurative manner or in just a literal way. Instead, Augustine frees readers to make subjective interpretations of the text, in any way that contributes to orthodox doctrine. Yet, once again, one must avoid over generalization on this matter. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine cautions against the literal interpretations of certain texts, which he feels ought to be viewed only in a figurative, or prophetic, light.<sup>14</sup> However, when one acknowledges Augustine's insistence on doctrinal conformity and his stern admonitions against 'slavish' literal readings, one can recognize that Augustine tolerated a multiplicity of approaches to Scripture.

His pluralist approach reflects his overarching belief that Scripture, with its many interpretations and seeming inconsistencies, was perfectly ordered to focus readers' affections on the incarnate Word. That Augustine advocated a Christocentric reading of Scripture and employed this perspective to overcome interpretive challenges is further illustrated in Augustine's heilsgeschichte, or theologized meta-history, found in books XV-XXIII of *City of God*. For Augustine, the long, seemingly disparate historical narratives of the Old Testament all point to Christ's unfolding plan for the deliverance of the heavenly city and the damnation of the earthly city. In what is, for many modern readers, a bizarre comparison, Augustine compares Canaan's mistreatment of his inebriated and unclothed grandfather Noah in Genesis IX as prophetic foreshadowing of the Jewish rejection of Christ at his first advent.<sup>15</sup> Although Augustine's analysis of the book of Genesis lies far beyond the scope of this report, one may readily recognize that Augustine's primary objective was not to analyze individually the numerous anecdotes of the Old Testament. He was determined to interpret biblical narratives in a way that connected ancient Hebrew stories with his overarching theme of the incarnate Christ redeeming elements of humanity. With a clear understanding of the overall objective of Augustine's Scriptural hermeneutics, one may reasonably presuppose that seemingly problematic elements of Scripture were perceived by Augustine not as causes for concern, but opportunities to further emphasize Scripture's vital function in presenting Christ's central role in human history.

Despite Augustine's pluralistic but orthodox approach to the interpretation of biblical texts, he seems to have maintained a strong commitment to the historicity of all biblical accounts and sought to provide logical, naturalistic explanations for the Bible. In the fifteenth book of *City of God*, Augustine addresses contemporary criticisms of the tremendous physical size which the book of Genesis attributes to antediluvian humans. Augustine's response is two-fold. First, he contends that his personal discovery of a giant tooth provides empirical backing to biblical claims of giants: "On the beach at Utica I myself-not alone, but in the company of several other people- saw a human molar so enormous that if it had been cut into pieces the size of our teeth it would, as it seemed to us, have made a hundred of them." For Augustine, the existence of giant humans prior to the Noahic Flood of Genesis was not remotely fanciful or unreasonable. But, later in the chapter, Augustine notes that biblical claims regarding the extremely long lifespans of pre-flood humans lack supporting evidence. However, he dismisses this paucity of evidence, writing, "Impudence in not believing what it narrates would be as great as the evidence of the fulfillment of its prophecies is clear to our eyes."<sup>16</sup> Augustine did not employ his rhetorical genius to defend every detail of the Bible's supernatural depiction of Earth's prehistory because he believed Scripture's primary function was to narrate Jesus Christ's central role in human

<sup>12</sup> Cameron, "Augustine and Scripture," 208.

<sup>13</sup> R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 158.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XVI, 2. 697.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XV, 9. 650-651.

history, not to provide minute details about Earth's ancient origins. Yet, because the longevity of pre-flood humans was included within the canonical books, Augustine believed that it functioned as a part of Scripture's prophetic history and that, to impugn its historicity, would diminish its relation to the overall Christocentric, meta-historical narrative of Scripture. Although one must not anachronistically reduce Augustine to a proto-young earth fundamentalist, one must also recognize that Augustine believed establishing the historicity of unbelievable claims found in the Hebrew Bible would contribute to his overall objective of linking all of Scripture to the unfolding salvific work of Jesus Christ.

Paradoxically, Augustine's commitment to his Christocentric meta-narrative also led him to believe that many Scriptural passages had hidden, allegorical meanings. In Book XVII of *City of God*, Augustine endeavored to relate several psalms with the larger theological themes of his text. Psalm XLV provides, from a literal perspective, a description of an ancient Near Eastern coronation ritual. Ironically, Augustine himself acknowledges this fact while hastily dismissing the possibility that the text does indeed depict such as ritual, writing that, "I do not suppose that anyone is so foolish as to believe that it is some mere woman who is here praised and described: described that is as the wife of Him to Whom it is said, 'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever.'" <sup>17</sup> Instead, Augustine contends that the psalmist is presenting a vision of Christ, the king, and the city of God, personified by the queen. From Augustine's analysis of this Psalm, one may infer that Augustine felt little tension between history and prophecy. In certain contexts, Augustine employed his rhetorical genius to argue that a passage was 'historical,' while, in a different context or literary genre, Augustine readily argued against a passage's historicity. Such seemingly paradoxical textual strategies should not be attributed to error on the part of Augustine. Rather, Augustine understood the whole of Scripture to constitute prophetic history and accordingly developed a hermeneutic that persuasively appropriated Scriptural texts to correspond to his theological beliefs.

For Augustine the presence of overarching themes within Scripture and a complete narrative of salvation did not constrain his textual analysis by leading him to 'forced' interpretations, but to the contrary, provided his Christian faith with a comprehensiveness and unity that rival philosophical and religious sects lacked. In the first ten books of *City of God*, Augustine analyzed and sought to rebut the various philosophical schools, which offered rival claims to Christianity. While he commended some Neo-Platonists' belief in God, Augustine sought to repudiate non-Christian philosophers, who often advocated polytheistic practice. <sup>18</sup> In Book XVIII, he juxtaposes philosophical authors with the Scriptural authors, writing, "I concede that not a few philosophers, or even most of them, broke with their teachers or fellow pupils simply from love of truth, in order to seek what they conceived to be true... As to our own authors, however: God forbid that they should disagree with one another in any way!" <sup>19</sup> A master of rhetoric, Augustine eagerly highlights the contrasting beliefs and frequent disputes among the rival philosophical schools of antiquity. Augustine also suggests later in the book that the proliferation of disputes is the inevitable consequence of futile human attempts to identify objective truth without God's aid. Augustine contrasts the unguided and discordant efforts of non-Christian philosophers with the monolithic canon of Scripture. Augustine based his voluminous expositions of Scriptural passages on the overarching principle that the many books of Scripture, no matter how apparently divergent, have been harmoniously arranged by divine will to tell the story of God's grand design for humanity. Augustine's commitment to the unity of Scriptural texts did not burden his expositional efforts, but in contrast, ensured that the canonical books were woven together by a unified, textual theme that was infinitely superior to the decentralized corpus of ancient philosophical writings.

In addition to advocating the concordance of Scriptural texts, Augustine also expended tremendous energy to contend that Scripture sets the stage for the apocalyptic climax of all history, which occurs through the damnation of the wicked and the glorification of the elect in the *City of God*. Augustine strongly contended that all Scripture set the stage for a future eschatological climax. Far from reducing his writings to frantic apocalyptic speculation, Augustine's reading of Scripture ensured that his theology provided concrete and satisfying certainty, where other modes of thought lacked an all-encompassing conclusion. In *City of God*, Augustine forcefully contrasts his own theology of history, which he has painstakingly based upon his own interweaving of biblical history with his belief in Christ's plan to save Christians, with the Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry, whom he contends has failed to identify any source of salvation in history. In the *City of God*, Augustine criticizes Neo-Platonism, writing, "Porphyry says that the universal way of the soul's deliverance had never yet come to his knowledge through the study of history. But what more illustrious can be found than that which has taken possession of the whole world?" <sup>20</sup> Augustine argues that Christ's followers possess an authoritative canon of Scriptures, which they rightly interpret as narrating deliverance of the soul from sin into eternal bliss in heaven. In contrast, other religious and philosophical texts are presented as lacking a comprehensive understanding of human history, and, in Augustine's estimation, are bereft of any hope for their eternal souls.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XVII, 16. 805.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, X, 13. 412.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XVIII, 41. 880.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, X, 32. 446.

According to Augustine, this constraining and selective interpretive framework actually granted a sense of finality to Scriptural texts which other religious and philosophical texts lacked.

Despite the clear strengths of his perspective, Augustine acknowledged that his methodology presented considerable difficulties for interpreters who must differentiate between symbolic and literal interpretations. Why, then, Augustine asked, must Scripture be filled with so many seemingly ambiguous passages? Like all other interpretive challenges in the canonical books, Augustine attributed this difficulty to divine will's perfect plan to point biblical readers to the incarnate Word, writing in *On Christian Doctrine* that, "I do not doubt that this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride by toil, and of preventing a feeling of satiety in the intellect, which generally holds in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Augustine brilliantly answers the problem of Scriptural ambiguity. He views ambiguous and difficult language as a positive challenge for highly educated readers to solve. Augustine reasons that the arduous process of Scriptural interpretation will impart a greater sense of humility to educated readers, who must struggle to understand Scriptural texts. Additionally, he reasons that the complexity of the Scriptures provides further evidence of their divine inspiration and that no skeptic can rationally dismiss the Scriptures as simplistic. For Augustine the problem of obscurity, if handled properly, demonstrates the authenticity of the Bible and plays an integral role in the spiritual formation of readers.

Augustine also developed proactive answers to explain seeming inconsistencies among extant biblical manuscripts. Augustine adopted a realistic approach to variant manuscripts. In book XV of *City of God*, Augustine candidly acknowledges that the Genesis chronologies of the Septuagint diverge from the chronologies of Hebrew manuscripts.<sup>22</sup> Augustine dismisses the efforts of zealous Christian readers to attribute genealogical contradictions to the use of the Greek calendar by Septuagint translators, in place of the Hebrew calendar. The Hebrew writers, some pious readers posited, understood years to constitute a smaller length of time than later Greek translators.<sup>23</sup> Augustine dismisses such numerical gymnastics as fanciful. Clear discrepancies exist between the two textual traditions. In Book XV of his *City of God*, Augustine writes that, "Some discrepancy of the kind here discussed might have occurred in one copy, from which, if it was the first such transcription, a widespread error would have emanated, arising from nothing more than an error on the part of a scribe."<sup>24</sup> Augustine did not condone early Christian denials of variant manuscript traditions, but recognized that the scribal process, like all human endeavors, was flawed and apt to propagate incorrect renderings of the original text. But, one must cautiously approach Augustine's admission and, remember that his admission of variant manuscript traditions was not a concession to charges that Scriptural authors produced erroneous texts.

Augustine, always eager to return to Scripture's central purpose of pointing readers to Christ's redemptive history, embraced the existence of variant manuscript traditions, viewing them as complementary parts of divine revelation. Near the end of his magisterial *City of God*, Augustine writes, "Moreover, whatever is found in both the Hebrew and the Septuagint is something which one and the same Spirit wished to say through both, but in such a way that the former took the lead by prophesying, while the later followed with a prophetic translation."<sup>25</sup> For Augustine, divine inspiration was, in one sense, not restricted to the writers of the canonical books. He accepted contemporary belief that the translators of the Septuagint had worked under divine inspiration, producing a 'perfect' translation. However, Augustine denied that a manuscript's perfection was contingent upon its being wholly identical to alternate manuscripts. Instead, Augustine reasoned that the Spirit of God had supernaturally altered the 'conflicting' manuscripts, providing the Septuagint translators with a slightly amended, but still wholly perfect, version of the Hebrew Bible. Augustine founded the understanding of variant manuscripts upon his firm belief that God's Spirit guided the development of biblical textual conditions to ensure that all readers and hearers of Scriptural texts were directed to the incarnate Word, around which the Biblical narrative was woven. Therefore, just he accepted the possibility of divergent, yet equally orthodox interpretations of Scripture, Augustine also acknowledged the existence of variant, but wholly orthodox textual traditions.

While Augustine readily appropriated Scripture to advocate orthodox theological claims, he also intensively used the Bible in debates with rivals, whose interpretations of Scripture he eagerly challenged, by presenting his own perspective as authentically 'biblical.' One of the bitterest polemical disputes of Augustine's career was his battle with Pelagius over the doctrine of Original Sin. Pelagius rejected the notion that men are created sinful. In his reading of Scripture, Pelagius held that Adam's decision to partake of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil harmed him personally but did not result in his ancestors, the whole of the human race, being born into sin. In contrast, Augustine maintained a radically different understanding of human nature. Augustine held that all humans are born into sin as a

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I, 4.

<sup>22</sup> The Septuagint was an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Many early Christian communities employed the Septuagint in their writings.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XV, 12. 655.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XV, 13. 657.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XVIII, 43. 886.

result of Adam's transgression and are utterly dependent upon divine grace. Although Pelagius had already composed a commentary upon Paul's epistle to the Romans, Augustine was undeterred, and in his polemical writings against Pelagius, liberally employed the Pauline corpus. Cameron analyzes Augustine's appropriation of Scripture, writing, "Ephesians 2:3: 'we are by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind'; and notoriously, Romans 5:12: 'in whom all sinned.' Here, Augustine tried to read into the Latin translation "in quo omnes peccaverunt-'in whom [Adam] all sinned.'"<sup>27</sup> Augustine's confident use of highly disputed biblical texts indicates that he refused to allow the existence of conflicting Scriptural interpretations hinder his use of Scripture. Instead, Augustine deployed his rhetorical genius and mastery of biblical texts into polemical battles, a tactic that reflected his overall commitment to converting potentially ambiguous passages into definitive statements of support for his theological commitments.

Augustine's exegetical confidence remained equally strong in the face of exegetical challenges posed by both an ill-defined biblical canon and the inferior Latin Bible translations of the early fifth century. By the fifth century, Christian communities had established a high, though by no means complete, level of agreement, over which texts should be classified as canonical. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine classifies a number of books, such as Job and 1 and 2 Maccabees, as prophetic, but not of canonical status.<sup>28</sup> Yet, many of Augustine's contemporaries, including the churchmen who comprised the 497 Council of Carthage, recognized included books, such as Job and Esther, to be canonical. Augustine's mature position on the precise number of canonical books is unclear and debated by scholars. But, throughout his writings, Augustine never doubted the historicity, if not the canonicity, of 'deuterocanonical' texts.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Augustine also appropriated texts, which he and many of his contemporaries viewed as deuterocanonical, to buttress his many theological arguments.<sup>30</sup> While one cannot authoritatively state Augustine's precise understanding on the canon without venturing into the realm of speculation, one can, with good reason, contend that Augustine confidently appropriated biblical texts, canonical or not, ensuring that his readers would not be apt to dismiss selection of Scriptures as illegitimate.

Augustine also exhibited similar confidence when he encountered ambiguous words in Scripture. While scholarship has demonstrated that Augustine possessed access to the exegetical works of Jerome, much of Augustine's interaction with Scripture occurred through early Latin translations. Scholars remember these formative translations for their poor quality and confusing syntax.<sup>31</sup> Yet, for Augustine, the presence of ambiguous terms and phrases within biblical texts was merely another opportunity to assert the veracity of his doctrinal claims. A sound example of Augustine's creative and confident linguistic analyses may be found in his exposition of Psalm 19. The Psalm's writers extol God's creative power and metaphorically describe the sky as the "tent for the sun, writing, that God has "pitched his tent in the sun." A modern reader might imagine that Augustine would be unable to wring any deep doctrinal truth out of the text. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the Latin word for sun, sole, in the context of the passage, possesses multiple meanings. Even so, Augustine confidently interprets sole as referring to the sun. Augustine then proceeds to interpret tent pitching as a literary sign of Christ's future establishment of the church.<sup>32</sup> While one may, with ample reason, doubt the veracity of some of Augustine's linguistic claims, Augustine effectively presented potentially unclear words in ways that enabled him to relate them to his overall, Christocentric understanding of Scripture.

Augustine of Hippo based much of his theology upon his methodology of Scriptural interpretation. For him, textual difficulties were not to be avoided, but to be exploited and used to support his holistic, Christocentric approach to the Bible. Augustine's desire for Scriptural unity reflects his commitment to a universal Christian Church. Once a Manichean, Augustine reconciled the sordid tales of the Old Testament with his Christian piety by establishing an interpretive framework, which enabled him to interpret ordinary, or even vulgar stories, as somehow related to the overall redemptive plan of Christ. In this, Augustine exhibited tremendous creativity. Skirting contemporary discussions on the extent of the biblical canon and exploiting often ambiguous Latin translations, Augustine skillfully blended together a dizzying array of historical and 'prophetic' interpretations to provide sound Scriptural basis for his theological claims. Finally, Augustine reconciled his belief in the importance of divine illumination of Scripture with his conviction that human guidelines for biblical study were essential. Augustine's biblical theology displayed a remarkably creative range of textual strategies, all of which were based upon his unshakeable conviction that Christ was present in every verse and book of the Bible.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Cameron, "The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis" in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 229.

<sup>27</sup> Cameron, "Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," 232.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Cameron, "Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," 28.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, I, 27. 40.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 31.

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