

Exploring the Limits of Literal Exegesis: Augustine's reading of Gen 1:26¹

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Abstract: The author aims to examine Augustine's understanding of the literal and figurative approaches to interpreting scripture, using a single verse, Gen 1:26, as a lens to view his changing understanding of what "literal" meant over the course of thirty years of commentaries on the book of Genesis. In his earlier commentaries, he seeks to redeem the verse from the Manichaean charge of anthropomorphism by giving it an allegorical reading. Some years later, now ordained and on the road to being made a bishop, Augustine attempts a literal reading in the Incomplete Commentary on Genesis. In the complete Literal Commentary on Genesis 3.19, he furnishes a Trinitarian reading of "Let us make humankind to our image and likeness". By the completion of his great manual on exegesis, *De doctrina christiana*, he displays a more complex attitude towards the interpretation of scripture: the reader has to determine whether a verse is meant literally or figuratively (or both).

AUGUSTINE'S ATTEMPTS TO WRITE A COMMENTARY on Genesis extended over thirty-eight years, beginning with *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (*Gn. adv. Man.*) (388 or 389) and the incomplete *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (*Gn. litt. imp.*) (391 or 393), later superseded by *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (*Gn. litt.*) (401-415), and culminating in *De doctrina christiana* (*Doc. chr.*) (396-426). His understanding of the limits of literal exegesis underwent significant change over the course of these writings, as his skill in figurative exegesis matured.² His terms for

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2. F. Van Fleteren gives an excellent overview of the hermeneutical principles employed by Augustine in each of his major exegetical works, in the article "Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview", in F. Van Fleteren and J. C. Schnaubelt, OSA (eds.), *Augustine. Biblical Exegete*, Collectanea Augustiniana (New York: Peter Lang, 2001)

the distinction between the literal and the figurative range from the carnal versus spiritual interpretations (*Gn. adv. Man.* 1.19.30), to the proper sense versus the allegorical (*Gn. litt.* 8.2.5); from literal versus metaphorical signs (*Doc. chr.* 2.10.15), to the literal versus the allegorical (*Retractationes* 1.18). In approaching these oppositions, we need to heed Roland Teske's warning that, "Augustine's terminology seems lacking in fixity and precision with different sets of terms that overlap and are remarkably resistant to a systematic presentation"³ In *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.2.3, Augustine speaks of understanding the text literally, "just as the letter sounds", but in *Gn. litt.* the literal sense "seems to involve a highly sophisticated interpretation that is quite metaphysical and not what we would ordinarily call the literal sense".⁴ We are forced to conclude, with French scholars P. Agaësse and A. Solignac, that for Augustine, the literal sense goes beyond the letter of the text.⁵ I would like to explore this ambiguity using his exegesis of a single verse Gen 1:26⁶ as a lens through which to view his changing understanding of what "literal" and "figurative" meant.

De Genesi contra Manichaeos

In his earliest commentary on Genesis, *Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees* (388 or 389), written at the monastic community he established in Thagaste after his return from Italy, Augustine takes an allegorical approach to Genesis. In *Retr.* 1.18, he confesses that in this early attempt he "treated the words of Scripture in accord with their allegorical meaning, not having dared to expound such great secrets of

1-32. For an almost exhaustive bibliography of modern scholarship on Augustine's exegesis, see K. Pollmann, *Doctrina Christiana. Untersuchungen zu den Anfängen der christlichen Hermeneutik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Augustinus De doctrina christiana*, Paradosis 41 (Freiburg in der Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1996).

3. R. J. Teske, "Introduction", *St Augustine on Genesis*, trans. R. J. Teske, Fathers of the Church (FOTC) 84 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991) 17. A comprehensive introduction to Augustine's figurative exegesis can be found in R. Teske, "Criteria for Figurative Interpretation in St Augustine", in D. W. H. Arnold and P. Bright (eds.), *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 9 (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) 109-122.

4. Teske, "Introduction", 17-18, n. 39.

5. P. Agaësse and A. Solignac (eds.), *La Genèse au sens littéral en douze livres*, Oeuvres de s. Augustin 48 (Bruges-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972) 40: "Nous aboutissons donc à cette conclusion paradoxale et pourtant inévitable que chercher le sens littéral, c'est dépasser l'immédiat de la lettre, tout en s'y référant toujours, pour en dégager le sens méta-physique, ce mot étant pris en son acception étymologique de «au-delà de la nature»...."

6. *Et dixit deus, "faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram, et dominetur piscium maris et volatilium caeli et omnium pecorum et omnis terrae et omnium reptilium quae repunt super terram"*. The *Vetus Latina* text used by Augustine has been reconstructed by James O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 345.

natural things literally".⁷ Why did Augustine start with allegory? His attitude to scripture had been much influenced by the Manichees – perhaps he could not see any point in approaching it literally since it was "bad literature".⁸ In response to the excessive literalism of Manichaeism, a figurative reading would have seemed to be his best hope in retrieving the Old Testament from Manichaean condemnation. More specifically, in reference to Gen 1:26, he sought to redeem the verse from the Manichaean charge of anthropomorphism: the Manichees taunted Catholics for believing that since human beings were made to the image and likeness of God, God must therefore have a human body which mirrors human material form.⁹ The Manichees rightly condemned this idea as ridiculous, and therefore rejected the belief that human beings were made in the image and likeness of God, even though they themselves held a materialist conception of the divine.

Such a materialist conception had been shared until recently by Augustine, of course, and it was present also in the Neo-Platonic framework that he adopted from Ambrose,¹⁰ shortly before his "conversion" and baptism. The very idea of humankind being made in the image of God is a radical departure from Neo-Platonism, with its descending hierarchy of three hypostases, The One, Nous and Soul, each being an emanation of the higher one.¹¹ As a recent convert, Augustine was still struggling to refute materialism (as we see in *De quantitate*

7. *Retr.* 1.18 or 1.17, cited by Teske, "Introduction", 36, n. 65. *Sancti Aureli Augustini Retractationum Libri Duo*, P. Knöll (ed.), *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 36 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1902) 86; 1.17.1: *Cum de Genesi duos libros contra Manicheos condidisset, quoniam secundum allegoricam significationem scripturae uerba tractaueram non ausus naturalium rerum tanta secreta ad litteram exponere, hoc est quemadmodum possent secundum historicam proprietatem....*

8. As he recounts in *Confessiones* 3.5.9: "When I studied the Bible and compared it with Cicero's dignified prose, it seemed to me unworthy." (*cum attendi ad illam scripturam, sed uisa est mihi indigna quam tullianae dignitati compararem*). *Confessions*, O'Donnell (ed.), vol. 1, p. 26.

9. *Gn. adv. Man.* 1.17.27, trans. Teske, *FOTC* 84, pp. 74-75: "They look at the shape of our body and ask so infelicitously whether God has a nose and teeth and a beard and also inner organs and the other things we need."

10. We note also that Augustine came to Origen through Ambrose, and was much influenced by Ambrose's discussion of the early books of Genesis in his *Hexaemeron* and *De Paradiso*. On the latter, see J. Patout Burns, "Creation and Fall according to Ambrose of Milan", in Fleteren and Schnaubelt (eds.), *Augustine. Biblical Exegete*, 71-97, at 71-72: "In [Augustine's] attempt to treat the text, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, he used a combination of historical and allegorical techniques which roughly correspond to Ambrose's own method in *De paradiso*."

11. In opposition to the Plotinian notion that the higher part of human beings remains in Nous while the rest falls into Soul at the grosser level of bodies, so that it is this higher part that draws our souls upwards in contemplation towards Nous and The One, for the Augustine of the *Confessions*, it is desire that draws us towards God, out of a love that he calls a "weight" because it pull us towards our gravitational centre, God.

animae),¹² and he found a clear way to do so by a figurative reading of Gen 1:26.

Augustine points out that Scripture speaks about God having bodily form not only in the Old Testament, which the Manichees rejected, but also in the New Testament for the sake of “the little ones”.¹³ There is however a higher interpretation: “All who understand the Scriptures spiritually have learned to understand by those terms (God’s eyes, ears, lips, and feet) not bodily members, but spiritual powers.”¹⁴ This is the basis for rejecting an anthropomorphic understanding of God. “When man is said to have been made to the image of God, these words refer to the interior man, where reason and intellect reside.”¹⁵ The spiritual interpretation is reserved for the spiritual believers, rather than the “little ones”, recalling the distinction between the faithful and the *pneumatikoi* in the great Alexandrian exegetes, Clement and Origen. Although Augustine could not have read Origen’s first homily on Genesis in the translation of Rufinus at this early stage, the mention of *parvuli* is one of a number of striking parallels with Origen’s commentary. We can trace Origen’s influence on the Neo-Platonist circle of Milan, and especially on Augustine’s mentor Ambrose, back to 385.¹⁶

In Book 2 of *Gn. adv. Man.*, we find the first emphasis on the “pious diligence” of those faithful who seek in order to find, as opposed to those impious wretches, the Manichees, who “work only at not finding what they seek”.¹⁷ It is here that Augustine makes the distinction between the discourse of Genesis as history and as prophecy. “According to history events are narrated; according to prophecy future things are foretold.”¹⁸ If anyone could successfully understand Genesis “exactly as the letter sounds” he would be hailed as a genius, but otherwise we have to believe that “these things have been set before us in figures and in enigmas”.¹⁹ The New Testament, and especially the Pauline books, gives exegetes the authority to interpret Genesis as prefiguring Christ.

12. See B. Neil, “Neo-Platonic Influence on Augustine’s Conception of the Ascent of the Soul in *De Quantitate Animae*”, in P. Allen, W. Mayer and L. Cross (eds.), *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church 2* (Brisbane: Australian Catholic University, 1999) 197-215.

13. *Gn. adv. Man.* 1.17.27, trans. Teske, p. 75.

14. *Gn. adv. Man.* 1.17.27, trans. Teske, p. 75.

15. *Gn. adv. Man.* 1.17.28, trans. Teske, p. 76.

16. R. Teske, “Origen and St Augustine’s First Commentaries on Genesis”, in R. Daley (ed.), *Origeniana Quinta*, Boston College, 14-18 August 1989, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 105 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992) 179-185.

17. *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.2.3, trans. Teske, p. 95.

18. *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.2.3, trans. Teske, p. 95.

19. *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.2.3, trans. Teske, p. 95.

De Genesi ad litteram incompletes

Some years later, in the *Incomplete Commentary on Genesis* (391 or 393), Augustine – now ordained and on the road to being made bishop of Hippo – tried to produce a literal reading of the six days of Creation in Genesis verse by verse. He soon gave it up as an impossible task. This book was aimed at believers, rather than Manichees or any other kind of heretic. As Teske points out, “One of the most striking characteristics of *Gn. litt. imp.* is its hesitant and aporetic character.”²⁰ In his first attempts at literal exegesis, Augustine was content to pose multiple possible interpretations of the text without claiming primacy for any of them. Significantly, it is at the very point that Augustine was wrestling with a literal interpretation of Gen 1:26 that he abandoned the work.²¹ In Book 2.16, there is a long disquisition on the verse where Augustine tries to explain the difference between the Son who *is* the image and likeness of the Father, and human beings who are made “to the image and likeness of God”. He later came back to the work, as he related in *Retractationes* 1.18, and added two more chapters which interpret the phrase “our image and likeness” as pertaining not just to God and Christ but also to the Holy Spirit, in line with his later development of a strongly Trinitarian theology. He also added a disclaimer to his incomplete attempt at a literal commentary, referring readers instead to his later *Literal Commentary on Genesis in Twelve Books* begun in 401.²²

De doctrina christiana: First Redaction

Augustine was already a bishop when he started his great manual on exegesis, *De doctrina christiana*, in 396.²³ In this work, he intended to apply the emended rules of the Donatist exegete Tyconius, whom he admired but had difficulty in understanding. In approaching the difficult task of understanding these “rules and keys”, he more than once requested the help of Bishop Aurelius of Carthage.²⁴ Hill con-

20. Teske, “Introduction”, 15-16.

21. R. Teske, “The Image and Likeness of God in St Augustine’s *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus*”, *Augustinianum* 30 (1990) 441-451 at 447-449. Teske posits that Gen 1:27 proved the sticking point for Augustine’s attempts at a literal interpretation, and that this was his reason for abandoning the work.

22. *Retr.* 1.17 or 1.18, ed. Knöll, p. 87: *in hoc libro eadem notare, quae mihi displicent, uel defendere, quae aliis non bene intellecta displicere possunt, superfluum mihi visum est. breuiter enim potius admoneo, ut illi duodecim legantur, quos longe postea feci. ex ipsis de isto iudicetur.*

23. For a recent bibliography of works on *De doctrina christiana* see Lewis Ayres’ bibliography, in Arnold and Bright (eds.), *De doctrina christiana*.

24. *Nam et ego quod iussisti non neglego et de Tychonii septem regulis uel clavibus, sicut saepe iam scripsi, cognoscere quid tibi uideatur exspecto.* Ep. 41.2, *Opere di Sant’Agostino, Le Lettere* 1/1

vincingly proposes that Augustine wrote *De doctrina christiana* as a handbook for clerical exegetes, who were obliged to undertake a new responsibility for preaching under a reform program initiated by Aurelius in Carthage.²⁵ Something caused Augustine to break off in the middle of Book 3, and it was not until he was reviewing his oeuvre for the *Retractationes*, in 426 or 427, that he returned to complete the third and fourth books. Charles Kannengiesser demonstrates that Augustine may well have been waiting for help from Bishop Aurelius in interpreting the schismatic Tyconius.²⁶ We know that Augustine broke off the work when wrestling with the important question of ambiguity in signs, a question which he had resolved by the time he returned to the work thirty years later, thus allowing him to treat the rules of Tyconius with greater confidence.

There is only one mention of Gen 1:26 in this work and it appears in Book 1. In this first book, Augustine makes the distinction, which is crucial for his semiotic theory, between things (*res*) and signs (*signa*).²⁷ In treating biblical ethics regarding "use" (*usus*) and "enjoyment" (*fruitio*) of things, he writes in *Doc. chr.* 1.22.20: "A human being is an important kind of thing, being made 'in the image and likeness of God' not by virtue of having a mortal body but by virtue of having a rational soul and thus a higher status than animals."²⁸

Although Augustine is not explicitly dealing with exegesis here, we see that his theological discourse integrates the conclusions he reached earlier through the figurative exegesis of *Gn. adv. Man.* and the literal exegesis of *Gn. litt. imp.* He again rejects the literal anthropomorphic interpretation in favour of an intellectual similarity between humankind and God, which gives human beings the highest place in the order of creation.

(1-70), edizione Maurina, trans. L. Corrozzini (Rome: Citta' Nuova Editrice, 1969; repr. 1992) 316.

25. E. Hill, "De Doctrina Christiana: A Suggestion", *Texte und Untersuchungen* 81, *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962) 442-446, at 445, cites the previous text, Ep. 41, as evidence for this view.

26. C. Kannengiesser, "The interrupted *De doctrina christiana*," in Arnold and Bright (eds.), *De doctrina christiana*, 3-13, esp. 8-9.

27. On Augustine's semiotic theory, see R. A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996) and J. M. Rist, *Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) esp. Chapter 2.

28. *Magna enim quaedam res est homo, factus ad imaginem et similitudinem dei, non in quantum mortali corpore includitur, sed in quantum bestias rationalis animae honore praecedit.* J. Martin (ed.), *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De Doctrina Christiana*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* [CCSL] 32 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962; repr. 1996) 16. See also, R. P. H. Green (trans.), *Augustine. De Doctrina Christiana*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) ch. 39, p. 29. Further discussion of this distinction can be found in O. O'Donovan, "Usus and Fruitio in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana I*", *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 33 (1982) 361-97.

Throughout Books 2 and 3 Augustine alludes several times to biblical ambiguity, the first reference being at 2.6.7, as he begins his explanation of conventional signs.²⁹ Augustine rejoices in such ambiguity as an antidote to pride and a delightful challenge to the hungry scriptural exegete (2.6.8), since nothing is found hidden in obscurity that cannot be found expressed most plainly elsewhere.³⁰

As the third book of *De doctrina christiana* progressed, Augustine's attitude towards the interpretation of scripture became more nuanced: the reader has to determine whether a verse is meant literally or figuratively or both. A great part of Book 3 is devoted to distinguishing between literal and figurative readings of the text (3.5.9-3.24.34). Some striking observations on the correct interpretation of the Old Testament are found in Book 3.22.32, where he points out that all, or nearly all, of the deeds contained in those books are to be interpreted not only literally but also figuratively. He adds an important caveat:

All the same, when the people in the narratives, which the reader takes in the proper literal sense, were praised for doing things that are abhorrent to the manners of good men and women who keep God's commandments after the Lord's coming, the reader should not take the actual deeds as models for moral behavior, but should try to understand their figurative meaning.³¹

That is to say, it is not to be taken literally in a tropological sense!³²

29. *Sed multis et multiplicibus obscuritatibus et ambiguitatibus decipiuntur, qui temere legunt, aliud pro alio sentientes, quibusdam autem locis, qui uel falso suscipiuntur, non inueniunt.* Cited in translation by Pamela Bright, "Biblical Ambiguity in African Exegesis", in Arnold and Bright (eds.), *De doctrina christiana*, 25-32 at 27.

30. *Doc. chr.* 2.6.8: *Magnifice igitur et salubriter spiritus sanctus ita scripturas sanctas modificauit, ut locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret. Nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non planissime dictum alibi reperitur.* (CCSL 32, p. 36).

31. *Doc. chr.* 22.32, trans. E. Hill, *Teaching Christianity*. *De Doctrina Christiana*, The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century (New York: New City Press, 1996) 183-85.... *figuram ad intellegentiam referat, factum uero ipsum ad mores non transferat* (CCSL 32, p. 97).

32. In 3.24.34, Augustine seems to recall that the rules for arriving at the "true meaning" of a figurative expression are given in Book 1, as in the translation of E. Hill, *Teaching Christianity*, 184: "For on being assured of its figurative nature, it is easy, by applying the rules we set out in the first book, to turn the passage over this way and that until we arrive at its true meaning ..." (emphasis mine). *Nam comperto, quod figurata sit, adhibitis regulis rerum, quas in primo libro digessimus, facile est eam uersare omnibus modis, donec perueniamus ad sententiam ueritatis.* (CCSL 32, p. 97). So also the translation by Green, *Doc. chr.*, ch. 76, p. 167: "When we have worked out that it is figurative, it is easy to study it from various angles, using the rules set out in Book 1, until we reach the true meaning...." If this interpretation of the passage were correct, we would be forced to concede a lapse of memory in Augustine, since the rules for interpreting conventional signs are given rather in Book 2. It makes much more sense to take his reference to the first book as applying not

The true meaning can be arrived at “especially if we have the advantage of experience fortified by the exercise of holiness (*pietas*)”.³³ This recalls his earlier discussion (2.7.9) of the first two of the seven steps to wisdom, namely the fear of God and holiness, based on his reading of the seven gifts of the spirit in Isaiah 11:2-3.³⁴ These are new admonitions to the reader, or prerequisites which Augustine wouldn’t have claimed for himself at the time of writing the two earlier commentaries. Having concluded his discussion of the distinction between sayings that are literal and those that are figurative,³⁵ he can begin his thorough treatment of ambiguity in figurative expressions (3.25). He starts with a brief discussion of signs, such as leaven, which can be used both positively and negatively, through their similitude to other things. It is at this point (3.25.35), according to his own testimony in *Retractationes*, that he left off, after giving the example of the parable of the leaven in Luke 13:21.³⁶

De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim

The *Literal Commentary on Genesis in Twelve Books* was begun some five years later in 401, when Augustine was already a bishop. In it we find a sense of authority to teach that which was lacking in the first redaction of *De doctrina christiana*, judging from his attempt to forestall criticism in the prologue to that work. This lengthy commentary in twelve books covered the first three chapters of Genesis, and took fourteen years to complete.

In his *Retractationes*, Augustine discusses what was meant by the title:

The title of these books is *De Genesi ad litteram*, that is, not according to allegorical meanings but according to the *proper historical sense*. In this work there are more questions raised than answers found, and of the answers found not many have been established for certain...³⁷

to the rules but to the “things” (*rerum, quas in primo libro digessimus*) which he did discuss in Book 1.

33. *Doc. chr.* 3.24.34: *praesertim cum usus accesserit pietatis exercitatione roboratus*. (CCSL 32, p. 97).

34. *Doc. chr.* 2.7.9, trans. Green, ch. 17, p. 63: “It is necessary, through holiness, to become docile, and not contradict holy scripture, whether we understand it...or fail to understand it.” *Deinde mitescere opus est pietate neque contradicere diuinae scripturae siue intellectae...siue non intellectae*. (CCSL 32, pp. 36-37).

35. *Doc. chr.* 3.24.34: *Inuenimus autem, utrum propria sit an figurata locutio, illa intuentes, quae supra dicta sunt*. (CCSL 32, p. 97).

36. *Retr.* 2.30 or 2.4, ed. Knöll, p. 136: *Compleui ergo tertium, qui scriptus fuerat usque ad eum locum, ubi commemoratum est ex euangelio testimonium de muliere, quae fermentum abscondit in tribus mensuris farinae, donec totum fermentaretur*.

37. *Retr.* 2.50 or 2.24, ed. Knöll, pp. 159-160: *titulus horum librorum inscribitur: de Genesi ad litteram, id est non secundum allegoricas significationes, sed secundum rerum gestarum*

This seems to be an admission that his search for the “proper historical sense” of the early books of Genesis was only partially successful.

In Book 1.1 of *Gn. litt.*, he outlines his approach to the fourfold meaning of the text, the allegorical, the historical, the prophetic and the moral sense. A narrative can be legitimately taken in a historical or figurative sense. Indeed, Augustine observes, “No Christian will dare say that the narrative must not be taken in a figurative sense.”³⁸ The text must be read on both levels (historical and figurative) because it is inspired and therefore conveys both human and divine authorial intent.³⁹ As Kathryn Greene-McCreight concludes in her study of the “literal sense” in this work: “Verbal sense anchors literal reading and thus restricts allegorical meaning, for it is on the basis of the literal sense that one can and must authorize doctrine.”⁴⁰ Augustine’s readings were always limited by his concern to avoid any interpretation that contradicted the Rule of Faith. The first principle of the Rule of Faith was that the literal interpretation must be taken as a true and accurate record, as Augustine reminds Jerome in *Letter 28*, where he protests against Jerome’s claim that the author of Galatians had invented the disagreement between the apostles Peter and Paul over the correct attitude to Gentiles (Gal 2:11-21). In *Letter 28*, written between 394 and 395, Augustine rejects Jerome’s claim that the author of Galatians invented the dispute “out of duty”:

For, if a useful lie has once been admitted into so lofty a peak of authority, no section of those books will remain that will not, as soon as anyone finds it either difficult in terms of conduct or incredible in terms of faith, be attributed by the same most deadly rule to the plan and purpose of a lying author.⁴¹

proprietatem. in quo opere multa quaesita quam inuenta sunt et eorum, quae inuenta sunt, pauciora firmata.... Cited in John Hammond Taylor, “Introduction”, *St Augustine. The Literal Meaning of Genesis* vol. 1, trans. J. H. Taylor (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1982) 4 (emphasis mine).

38. Taylor (trans.), *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* vol. 1, p. 19.

39. K. E. Greene-McCreight, “Augustine’s Understanding of the Literal Sense of Scripture in *De Genesi ad litteram*”, ch. 2 of *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the “Plain Sense” of Genesis 1-3*, *Issues in Systematic Theology* 5 (New York–Washington DC: Peter Lang, 1999) 32-80 at 80.

40. Greene-McCreight, “Augustine’s Understanding”, 80.

41. *Ep. 28, 3.3, Opere di sant’Agostino. Le Lettere*, pp. 174 -176: [Mihi enim videtur exitiosissime credi, aliquod in Libris sanctis haberi mendacium; id est eos homines, per quos nobis illa | Scriptura ministrata est atque conscripta, aliquid in libris suis fuisse mentitos. Alia quippe quaestio est, sitne aliquando mentiri viri boni; et alia quaestio est, utrum scriptorem sanctarum Scripturarum mentiri oportuerit: imo vero non alia, sed nulla quaestio est.] Admisso enim semel in tantum auctoritatis fastigium officioso aliquo mendacio, nulla illorum librorum particula remanebit, quae non ut cuique videbitur vel ad mores difficilis vel ad fidem incredibilis, eadem perniciosissima regula ad mentientis auctoris consilium officiumque referatur. E. Hill (trans.), *The Works of Saint Augustine: a translation for the 21st century*. Part 2/1: *Letters 1-99*, ed. J. E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 2001) 93. I am grateful to Tom Pietsch, University of Melbourne, for alerting me to this reference.

In *Gn. litt.* 3.19, he furnishes the Trinitarian reading of the first part of Gen 1:26 (“Let us make mankind to our image and likeness”) that he is to reiterate in the *Retractationes*.⁴² In *Gn. litt.* 3.20, he affirms that “Man was made to the image of God in that part of his nature wherein he surpasses the brute beasts. This is, of course, his reason or mind or intelligence, or whatever we wish to call it.”⁴³ This is no more than a rewording of his interpretation in his first commentary, *Gn. adv. Man.*, where he ascribes this level of understanding to “spiritual believers”. Here, however, the “spiritual” interpretation is presented as the only one possible. It would appear that Augustine now demands more of all readers of scripture, and takes a less elitist approach than he did in *Gn. adv. Man.*

In Book Six, he attempts to integrate the two biblical accounts of the creation of humankind, specifically Gen 1:27 and Gen 2:7.⁴⁴ In Book 6.2, he presents his first hypothesis, explaining the second version of creation as a recapitulation or restatement of the first.⁴⁵ This use of “recapitulation” as a hermeneutical key exemplifies the sixth rule of Tyconius as presented in *Doc. chr.* 3.36.52. There, “recapitulation” is a technique whereby events that seem to be presented in chronological order are correctly understood as the narrative turning back on itself to explain matters which had been passed over earlier.⁴⁶ The application of

42. Taylor notes that *Gn. litt.* was completed in 415, only one year before Augustine’s great dogmatic treatise *De Trinitate* was finished. See Taylor, “Introduction”, 4. The discussion of the *imago Dei* in *De Trinitate* (e.g. *De Trin* VII.vi.12) has fallen outside the scope of this work. We note the excellent discussion of this passage by A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 126-127: “According to Greek theology – and Ambrose and the early Augustine – it is the Son, the Word of God, who is the image of God; man is only created *according to* the image of God: he is therefore a copy of the Word, the true image of God, an image of the Image. For the later Augustine, such an understanding of the doctrine of the image of God is subordinationist: the Son is God, co-equal with the Father, not the image of the Father. The image must be something other than God. For Augustine the image of God is man, or to be precise, man’s rational soul. And since God is the Trinity, the image of God in man’s soul is Trinitarian. That is why in Genesis God says, ‘Let us make man after *our* image, in *our* likeness.’ The reason why Scripture speaks of man being created *after* the image is not because man is not actually the image of God (as earlier theology had argued) but because man is not a perfect, or equal, image of God.”

43. Taylor (trans.), *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* vol. 1, p. 96.

44. Gillian Clark discusses Augustine’s attempt to integrate the various accounts in Genesis 1-3 of the creation of human beings, in her “Adam’s Engendering: Augustine on Gender and Creation”, in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Gender and Christian Religion*, Studies in Church History 34 (Rochester NY: Boydell and Brewer for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 1998) 13-22. Clark notes that “Patristic exegetes started from the assumption that Scripture is a unity and that seeming contradictions can always be explained so as to instruct further” (p. 14).

45. In *Gn. litt.* 6.3, he presents the difficulties inherent in this hypothesis.

46. In *Doc. chr.* 3.123-125, this principle is applied to Gen 2:8-15, to explain how the placing of man in the Garden of Eden really occurred *after* the actions of Gen 2:9-15 (the

this principle in *Gn. litt.* could be taken as evidence that Augustine already had the rules of Tyconius at his disposal in 401 to 415 and was making good use of them.⁴⁷

De doctrina christiana: Second Redaction

After a break of thirty years, Augustine returned in 426 to the analysis of ambiguous signs which he had broken off *in medias res* in Book 3 of *De doctrina christiana*. Already in the first redaction (up to 3.25), he had recognised that both figurative and literal techniques are necessary for arriving at the true meaning of a text,⁴⁸ and that the meaning of figurative expressions is taken "either from things that are similar or things that are in some way connected" (3.25.35).⁴⁹ Now he returns to his discussion of ambiguity with new clarity, showing that signs can be ambiguous in two ways: they can signify contrary things (like the symbol of the leaven), or they can be multivalent, having a plurality of meanings (3.25.36). Of great assistance in determining the correct sense or senses of ambiguous signs are the seven rules or keys of Tyconius.⁵⁰ These should be read with caution, however, not just because Tyconius, being human, gets things wrong, but "especially because of the things which he says as a Donatist heretic" (3.30.43).⁵¹ Augustine has arrived at a point of such confidence that he can accept hermeneutical advice even from a Donatist, in resolving the ambiguities of polyvalent signs. Perhaps because he has been using and recommending the work of a known heretic, he concludes his discussion of Tyconius' rules by again stressing the need for holiness in the understanding of both literal and metaphorical expressions (3.37.56).

creation of different trees, including the Tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; and the creation of the four rivers), although it had already been mentioned in Gen 2:8.

47. See M. Dulaey, "La sixième règle de Tyconius", *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 35 (1989) 83-103. Although the practice of this technique may have been common in ancient rhetoric, the fact that Augustine explicitly discusses it under the title given to it by Tyconius of 'recapitulation' (*Doc. chr.* 3.36.52-54) bears witness to some dependence.

48. Kannengiesser, "The interrupted *De doctrina christiana*", p. 10, n. 15, suggests quite plausibly that the final part of the third book was composed from notes Augustine had kept since 396. If this is so, we should not expect to find any break in continuity of thought.

49. *Doc. chr.* 3.25.35, trans. Green, ch. 77, p. 167.

50. Kannengiesser, "The interrupted *De doctrina christiana*", 9, suggests that Augustine has misunderstood these, and wrongly conflated the "mystical rules" hidden in Scripture with the keys for understanding them. This interpretation is supported by Augustine's description of Tyconius' *Book of Rules*: "in it he developed seven rules which could be used like keys to open up the secrets of the divine scriptures." *Doc. chr.* 3.30.42, trans. Green, ch. 92, p. 173. See also P. Bright, "The Logic of the Mystical Rules", ch. 3 of *The Book of Rules of Tyconius: Its Purpose and Inner Logic* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 53-87.

51. *Doc. chr.* 3.30.43, trans. Green, ch. 97, p. 177.

Would-be exegetes need to pray for understanding, which comes from God, as does their commitment to study, “provided that it is accompanied by holiness”.⁵²

CONCLUSION

In the completed *De doctrina christiana*, then, we find the mature bishop reiterating his insistence on the reader’s responsibility to make the correct distinction between the literal and metaphorical senses of scripture (*propria/translata*), a distinction which he had already identified in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* as the proper sense versus the allegorical (*propria/figurata*). Each verse must be treated *sui generis*, and no verse more so than Gen. 1:26. Augustine put the onus on the reader to determine if its meaning should be taken as literal “in its plain sense”, or as figurative, or both. The reader’s interpretation should be based on careful study, keeping in mind the hermeneutical principles presented in *Doc. chr.* 2 and 3, which include Augustine’s version of the rules of Tyconius. The advantage of experience and the practice of holiness will ensure that God answers the reader’s prayer for understanding. This is a humbler, more modest approach to the interpretation of Scripture, open to the possibility of multiple correct meanings inspired by the Holy Spirit (3.27.38), than was evident in his two earliest commentaries on Genesis (*Gn. adv. Man.* and *Gn. litt. imp.*). It was also a more pragmatic approach for a busy bishop called upon to preach several times a week, in that it gave more responsibility to the individual reader (and hearer) of Scripture, and left more room for the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the “true meaning” of the Word of God.

52. *Doc. chr.* 3.133, trans. Green, p. 195. ...uerum etiam, quod est praecipuum et maxime necessarium, orent ut intellegant...a quo et ipsum stadium, si pietate praeditum est, acceperunt. (CCSL 32, p. 116).