THE HERMENEUTICS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

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Augustine

When speaking of the hermeneutics of Aurelius Augustinius, more commonly known as St. Augustine of Hippo (or in Eastern traditions Blessed Augustine), we cannot overlook his famous work, “On Christian Doctrine”, which is his preliminary treatise on how to interpret scripture. He started it in 396 but did not complete it until 427. This work is as Augustine himself would put it, an attempt to teach the clergy and devout lay people of North Africa how they, as professing Christians, should read the Bible for the profit of themselves and others, and to the glory of God.

We have here a master-teacher (Augustine was a true man of learning) aiming to make us competent interpreters and teachers of the Bible. He did not so much as care if those he taught understood everything he said as he was concerned about training them to live more like Christ. Augustine thus locates the study of the Bible squarely in the context of discipleship. In this sphere there is no learning that does not involve personal teaching, and so when we read Augustine we must be aware of our lack of connection with him. We read as students far removed from his personal involvement in the world, not as ones who read and listened directly from him.

As a preliminary, we must understand the person of Augustine before we can delve into his hermeneutic. One’s environment and upbringing have more to do with our philosophy than just about anything else, it is in response to our own story and the stories of those around us that shape the “Why?” of how we see life and see the Bible. Augustine was no different.

McKinn notes,

In analyzing Augustine’s place in the long line of Biblical interpreters, it must be noted that the Bible helped Augustine interpret himself as much as he became an interpreter of the Bible. Therefore a biographical outline is an indispensable starting point for understanding how Augustine’s inner journey became interwoven with his personal appropriation of Scripture.¹

¹ David McKinn, Historical Handbook of Interpreters, Augustine of Hippo.
Biography

Augustine was born in 354 in the city of Thagaste (Algeria) in Roman Africa. His mother was a devout Christian; his father Patricius was a Pagan who converted to Christianity on his deathbed. In Confessions 3.4.8 Augustine writes that he had the Gospels in his hands since childhood under his mother’s influence. It is thus easy to say that Augustine had an understanding of who Jesus was and a basic idea of Jewish society very early. Augustine, however was a true Roman. His family name, Aurelius, suggests that his father's ancestors were freedmen of the gens Aurelia given full Roman citizenship by the Edict of Caracalla in 212. Augustine's family had been Roman, from a legal standpoint, for at least a century when he was born. At the age of 11, he was sent to school to a school about 19 miles south of Thagaste. There he became familiar with the Latin language, Latin literature, as well as pagan beliefs and practices. While at home in 369 and 370, he read Cicero's dialogue Hortensius (a document that is now lost), which he described as leaving a lasting impression on him and sparking his interest in philosophy.

Not too long after this, Augustine joined a religious sect known as the Manicheans. This was nothing more than a branch of Gnosticism that appealed to youth and intelligence, which quite understandably drew Augustine in. Though it is not clear how much this sect influenced Augustine in his later years it does shed light on why his conversion back into the church was so emotional for him. It was during this time that he began an affair with a young woman in Carthage. Possibly because his mother wanted him to marry a person of his class, the woman remained his lover for


over thirteen years\(^4\) and gave birth to his son Adeodatus, who was viewed as extremely intelligent by his contemporaries.\(^5\)

After several years of education he travelled to Milan in the summer of 386, to teach rhetoric. Very quickly he became fascinated by the sermons of the Bishop of Milan, Ambrose and converted to Catholic Christianity. As he later told it, his conversion was prompted by a childlike voice he heard telling him to "take up and read", which he took as a divine command to open the Bible and read the first thing he saw: Romans 12-15. He later wrote an account of his conversion – his very transformation, as Paul described in Romans–which has since become a must-read classic of Christian theology. He abandoned his lover upon his conversion and took his son to live with him in Hippo where his son died from an illness. In 395 he was named Bishop of Hippo where he remained until his death in 430.

**Principles of Interpretation**

Augustine was a restless wanderer; he was a man of great spiritual turmoil roaming far and wide around the philosophical-religious spectrum looking for peace. The motif of the restless wanderer is a central theological concept for Augustine. In a famous expression at the beginning of the Confessions, he cries out to God, “Our heart is restless until it rests in you.” He used this motif of restlessness throughout the work, as he narrates the story of his own life’s journey. This restless wanderer showed up in City of God as well. I believe this tells us something of how he read scripture. Though very allegorical and even categorical at times, he didn’t miss the narrative. Scripture was a story to him, a story that interwove with his own story so much so that at the end of his life he could not separate the two. This is deeply rooted into Ambrosian approach as well, they

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\(^5\) Confessions 4.2
both considered the whole of scripture as a consistent message, best understood with allegorical intertextuality.

He was also not one to be afraid of scriptural ambiguity, he stated in *De Genesis ad Litteram*: “Obscurity is beneficial.”⁶ He believed that scripture would never contradict other scriptures nor would it go against widely known facts. When this seemed to be the case he was a proponent of using either an allegorical method or interpreting based off of other similar passages.

Unlike the other leading exegetes of antiquity Augustine had not been immersed within a traditional Christian community from youth, but rather he had to endure trial after trial and many crises before finding peace at the feet of Ambrose. You could say that he believed he had a lot of catching up to do, as well as a lot of bad theology to unlearn before learning about Christ again. His exegesis would become influential for these very reasons: the task of interpreting Scripture rightly meant for Augustine a total investment of his education. In short, Augustine’s hermeneutics were deeply personal, driven by personal passion for learning.

Augustine clarified the nature of biblical study. As I mentioned already, he establishes from the outset that this endeavor was not to be undertaken outside of the context of a passing-on of knowledge. He was a teacher first and foremost, everything he did came out of a desire to gain and then to pass on knowledge. In fact, for Augustine, genuine learning could not take place outside of the context of service toward others. He wrote in his *Confessions* that, “Every kind of thing, you see, which does not decrease when it is given away, is not yet possessed as it ought to be, while it is held onto without also being given out to others”.⁷

As a second important point: Augustine adopted some terminology about means and ends, the two basic ways we comport ourselves toward objects in the world. There are things which are to

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⁶ The Complete Works of Augustine.

⁷ Confessions 1.1
be used (means) and things to be enjoyed (ends), and still some things which are both used and enjoyed.

Augustine starts by extrapolating an ontology from the central reality of the Christian faith—the Triune God’s rescue of fallen sinners through the incarnation of the Son. This ontology provided a meta-narrative within which he interpreted the narratives of scripture as well as pointing out the spiritual life that scripture draws us into, and the spiritual life which is itself necessary for scriptural interpretation. In short, this is what Augustine’s foundation was for a hermeneutic of love. When he looked into the Trinity, he saw that the chief end of man was to enjoy God.  

I very much appreciate Augustine’s hermeneutic of love and its source. It pointed him to the main purpose of studying the Bible: transformation into the image of our Lord, who loved the Father and the world so supremely.

**Conclusion**

As stated earlier, we cannot look at the principles Augustine laid out for us without studying his work On Christian Doctrine. Though I have not read it, I studied some commentary on it from Augustinian scholars and came away with the organization and breakdown of this paper. For Augustine, scripture interpretation was a journey he peered into the secret recessives of Scripture before moving into the nature of its complex language and difficult texts. All of this rested on a belief that scripture taught us to love God and love one another more intimately derived from his thoughts on the Trinity. He wrote about his appreciation for unsolved ambiguities and the mysteries of the Christian faith and ended his treatise with an immense revision of Tyconius’s essay, “Book of Rules,” which brought out the teacher in Augustine to no other degree. He wrote practically in giving his church doctrinal directions for preaching Scripture.  

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8 Matt Willcoxen, *The Hermeneutics of St. Augustine*, Augustine’s Institute for Biblical Hermeneutics.

Augustine taught love out of love. It is evident that his early years and years involved in Gnosticism paved his desire for knowledge about God and his desire to teach it. The church is indebted to him for his relentless study and many writings from doctrines all across the spectrum. I am especially grateful for Confessions, as I am reading through it currently and his evident pursuit of knowing God intimately.