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The Interpretation of a Passage from Romans in the Early Works of Augustine*

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1 INTRODUCTION

In *Confessions*, after describing the now-famous ‘*tolle lege*’ incident in a garden at Milan, Augustine told his readers that he happened to read a codex of Paul’s letters and took the ‘first heading I cast my eyes upon: *Not in riotousness and drunkenness, not in lewdness and wantonness, not in strife and rivalry; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its lusts* (Rom. 13.13–14).’¹ It is generally admitted that this passage from Romans provides a scriptural basis for his renunciation of the world. His reading, followed by his friend Alypius’ encounter with Paul’s instruction from the immediately next line in Romans 14: 1, may have had considerable significance for his internal struggle with desires. However, prior when Augustine started writing *Confessions*, Augustine’s works are intentionally silent and reveal a remarkable indifference to this crucial passage. Although he wrote different kinds of commentary

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¹ *Conf.* 8.12.29; BA 14,66: ‘quo primum coniecti sunt oculi mei: *non in comessationibus et ebrietatibus, non in cubilibus et impudiciis, non in contentione et aemulatione, sed induite dominum Iesum Christum et carnis prouidentiam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis.*’ English trans. in P. Burton (ed. and trans.), *Augustine: Confessions* (London: Everyman’s Library, 2001) 183.

on the Pauline epistles shortly before his consecration as bishop,² this passage does not feature in any notable way for at least some ten years after Augustine wrote *Confessions*. What does the early Augustine think about this decisive passage? Is there any substantial progress in his understanding of Romans 13: 13–14? Or does he approach this passage from an entirely different viewpoint?

It is my intention in this paper to consider his view of this passage in some of his early writings. To determine the worth and significance of books or articles dealing with the specifics of his reading of this decisive passage, first, I shall focus on some studies on the topic, and then I shall turn to some explanations in his early writings chronologically. Finally, I shall venture to explain the significance of Paul's passage in his thoughts on the retrospective self.

2 RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF AUGUSTINE'S USE OF ROMANS 13: 13–14

Many studies on Augustine's conversion scene have not offered a perceptive and constructive discussion of his use of Romans 13: 13–14, of which hardly anything is known in his writings preceding *Confessions*, except for one of his early letters, that is, *Letter 22*.³ Because of its importance in a consideration of what meaning he gave to this passage before committing himself to his eventual conversion in *Confessions*,⁴ some scholars are concerned about discussing the implications of the use of Romans 13: 13–14 in *Letter 22*. Some of the other studies on his conversion prefer to suggest how the problems that Augustine was faced with in Paul's

² With regard to the significance of his interpretation of the Pauline epistles, see e.g., R. Markus, 'Augustine's Pauline Legacies', in W. S. Babcock (ed.), *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990) 221–225 at 224: 'nothing would be more revealing for an understanding of Augustine's theology than a full study of what Paul meant for him'. Indeed, after his first encounter with Paul, as a young Manichaean auditor or hearer, Augustine was tirelessly and continually seeking to express his understanding of Paul's texts, despite of the mutually exclusive readings by Manichaeans and by Christians. See further on this Chapter 7 below.

³ Probably written between 391 and 393. See R. J. Teske (trans.), *Letters 1–99*, J. E. Rotelle (ed.), WSA II/1 (2001) 59; J. Divjak, 'Epistulae', in *AL* 2:5/6 (2001) 893–1057 at 950; S. Lancel and E. Bermon (eds. and trans.), *Lettres 1–30*, BA 40/A (2011) 361. On this see also Chapter 2.4 above and 18 n. 30.

⁴ *Conf.* 8.12.28–30.

admonition in this passage were interwoven with difficulties concerning the renunciation of the world.

Leo C. Ferrari's insightful studies of Augustine's conversion scene have thoroughly attempted to prove that—provided that prior to *Confessions* Augustine was little stimulated by the Pauline passages—the famous conversion scene was 'obviously quite fundamentally fictional in nature'.⁵ Ferrari's consideration is led to this idea by his supposition that since Augustine's depiction of the conversion scene of 386 emphasised the divinely inspired reading of Romans 13: 13–14, Augustine must have referred to them in his ensuing writings soon after that date. How did Ferrari approach this problem? It is just through the entire scriptural citations in all of Augustine's works up to the completion date of *Confessions* that Ferrari came to claim that 'no new significant references to either of these verses'⁶ were observed in them: accordingly, *Confessions* is a narrative document of the decisive event at a garden. Although Ferrari does not ignore the reference to Romans 13: 13–14 in *Letter 22*, he explains that the use of Romans in this letter would be intended to condemn the moral lapses and the blasphemy of the African church. Therefore, it does not contribute significantly to the consideration of Augustine's use of Pauline texts in the conversion scene.

With regard to the indifference to Romans 13: 13–14 in *Letter 22*, Ferrari's view is similar to that of Paula Fredriksen,⁷ who explores the possibility of collating Augustine's earlier accounts of his conversion in the

⁵ L. C. Ferrari, 'Book Eight: Science and the Fictional Conversion Scene', in K. Paffenroth and R. P. Kennedy (eds.), *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions* (Louisville KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 127–136 at 135. Ferrari's continued analyses of the conversion scene are found in the following papers: 'Paul at the Conversion of St. Augustine (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29–30)', *AugStud* 11 (1980) 5–20; 'Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus', *AugStud* 13 (1982) 151–170; *The Conversions of Saint Augustine* (Villanova PA: Villanova University Press, 1984); 'An Analysis of Augustine's Conversional Reading (*Conf.* 8.12,29)', *AugStud* 18 (1987) 30–51; 'Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of A Modern Debate?', in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *StudPatr* 22 (1989) 235–250; 'Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene', in J. Schnaubelt and F. van Fleteren (eds.), *Collectanea Augustiniana. Augustine: Second Founder of the Faith* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990) 9–19; 'Augustine's "Discovery" of Paul (*Confessions* 7.21.27)', *AugStud* 22 (1991) 37–61; 'Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene', in J. McWilliam (ed.), *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian* (Waterloo ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1992) 97–107.

⁶ See L. C. Ferrari, 'Book Eight: Science and the Fictional Conversion Scene', 135.

⁷ P. Fredriksen, 'Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narrative, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self', *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 37 (1986) 3–34.

Cassiciacum dialogues with his later explanation in *Confessions*. Fredriksen takes much notice of the Paul illustrated in both Acts and Galatians rather than what Augustine made of his own narrative, thereby, first, showing the close relationship between Luke's account of the Paul in Acts and the Paul in Galatians presented by his first-person narrative. Second, she explores the same parallel between Augustine's earlier observations about his conversion in the Cassiciacum dialogues and his later representation in *Confessions*. Thus, though she devotes much attention to the comparable part of the Paul in both Acts and Galatians, Fredriksen proposes a general theory about what Augustine did in constructing his conversion narrative and encourages us to make sense of 'his description from his reading of Acts 9'.⁸ Augustine seems to have given his conversion narrative along with Paul's story in Acts. What Fredriksen claims to be 'a theological reinterpretation of a past event'⁹ represented in *Confessions* provides us a clear account of his conversion scene. However, her argument for Augustine's conversion narrative hinges upon the unwarranted assumption of its connection with his reading of Acts. Nowhere did Augustine offer any possible interpretation of Acts 9, which may be stimulus for his idea of the conversion scene.

One of the most thoughtful comments on his use of Romans 13: 13–14 comes from Felix Baffour Asare Asiedu's 'Paul and Augustine's Retrospective Self: The Relevance of *Epistula XXII*'.¹⁰ His attention to Augustine's use of Romans in *Letter 22* enables us to appreciate the significance of the background for *Letter 22*, thereby apparently giving a positive value to Augustine's Milanese experience. Given the situation of being forcibly ordained as a priest in Hippo (391), around the time when he wrote *Letter 21* to Valerius, bishop of Hippo,¹¹ Augustine intentionally stayed away from Hippo. During his absence from the Catholic community of Hippo, not only did he spend his precious time studying the scriptures,¹² but he also entered into the preparation of his new role as

⁸ P. Fredriksen, 'Paul and Augustine', 24.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ F. B. A. Asiedu, 'Paul and Augustine's Retrospective Self: The Relevance of *Epistula XXII*', *REAug* 47 (2001) 145–164.

¹¹ See R. J. Teske (trans.), *Letters 1–99*, 55; J. Divjak, 'Epistulae', 950; S. Lancel and E. Bermon (eds. and trans.), *Lettres 1–30*, 351

¹² See *Ep.* 21.3.

a priest. He also reflected on his past experiences of which he would provide fuller descriptions later in *Confessions*. Consequently, as Asiedu explains, in *Letter 22*, we catch ‘a fascinating glimpse into aspects of Augustine’s past and his understanding of the inextricable link between his conversion and the vocation he had now entered’.¹³ Augustine already suggested the ‘inextricable link’¹⁴ between his conversion narrative and the passage of Romans in *Letter 22*.

3 AUGUSTINE’S USE OF ROMANS 13: 13–14 REVISITED

In his early writings prior to *Confessions*, despite the fact that Romans 13: 13–14 scarcely appears, a few cases remain in which Augustine made partial quotations from this scriptural verse. What does the scarcity in his use of the passage mean? Did Augustine deliberately refer to Romans 13: 13–14 in his early writings?

With reference to his earlier idea about the Christian life, it is interesting to note that in a significant passage of *On Order* (written in 386), one of the Cassiciacum dialogues, Augustine referred to this view as a double order of the discipline, that is, ‘of life’ and ‘of learning’, depending on his interpretation of divine order.¹⁵

To those who wish to know it, this discipline imposes a double order: of life and of learning. You, its youthful students, must begin by abstaining from sex, from the enticement of gluttony and drunkenness, the immodest undue care of body and dress, vain sports and games, the torpor of excess sleep and laziness, ill-natured rivalry, detraction, envy, ambition for office and power, down to excessive desire for simple praise.¹⁶

¹³ F. B. A. Asiedu, ‘Paul and Augustine’s Retrospective Self’, 164.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See G. Heidl, *Origen’s Influence on the Young Augustine: A Chapter of the History of Origenism*, Eastern Christian Studies 3 (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003) 47–61. For the significance of the discipline in *Ord.*, see also N. Kamimura, ‘Self-knowledge and the Disciplines in Augustine’s *De ordine*’, in K. Demura and N. Kamimura (eds.), *Patristica* supplementary vol. 2 (Tokyo: Japanese Society for Patristic Studies, 2006) 85–109.

¹⁶ *Ord.* 2.8.25; CCSL 29,121: ‘Haec igitur disciplina eis, qui illam nosse desiderant, simul geminum ordinem sequi iubet, cuius una pars uitae, altera eruditionis est. Adolescentibus ergo studiosis eius ita uiuendum est, ut a uenereis rebus, ab illecebris uentris et gutturis, ab immodesto corporis cultu et ornatu, ab inanibus negotiis ludorum ac torpore somni atque pigritiae, ab aemulatione obtrectatione inuidientia, ab honorum potestatumque ambitionibus, ab ipsius etiam laudis immodica cupiditate se abstineant’. English trans. in S.

The idea of moral prescription being dependent on the immutability of divine order had already been expressed in a similar form in the prefatory letters of the Cassiciacum dialogues,¹⁷ which is why Augustine referred to them here as having a particularly personal resonance for him. If we compare the letters with the passage of Romans 13:13–14, it is noticeable that all the moral lapses appear, though expressed in a variety of ways:

Not in riotousness and drunkenness [A], not in lewdness and wantonness [B], not in strife and rivalry [C]; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its lusts [D];¹⁸

abstaining from sex [B'], from the enticement of gluttony and drunkenness [A'], the immodest undue care of body and dress [D'], ... ill-natured rivalry, detraction, envy [C'], ...¹⁹

Thus, with further allusions to his struggle against the secular ambitions from his youth—'ambition for office and power, down to excessive desire for simple praise'—, he attempted to read Romans 13:13–14 as a divine admonition with which Augustine and his friends were exhorted to observe the commandment of love, that is, of God and of neighbours, thereby receiving instructions for their renunciation and exemplary purity of life. He linked his reading of Romans with what his group experienced in Milan: Alypius' renunciation of the world, Augustine's conversion experience and their readings of Romans.

In Book 2 of *On the Catholic and the Manichean Ways of Life* (written in 387/388), as far as I have been able to ascertain, Augustine's direct and the earliest reference to a part of Romans 13:13–14 is found: 'Do not make provision for the flesh with its concupiscences'.²⁰ After sketching the contours of the problematics generated by Manichaean asceticism, he

Borruso (trans.), *St. Augustine: On Order* (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2007) 83.

¹⁷ *C. Acad.* 2.2.5; *Beata vita* 1.4.

¹⁸ Rom 13:13–14 in *Conf.* 8.12.29: 'non in comessationibus et ebrietatibus [A], non in cubiculis et impudiciis [B], non in contentione et aemulatione [C], sed induite dominum Iesum Christum et carnis providentiam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis [D].'

¹⁹ *Ord.* 2.8.25; CCSL 29,121: 'a ueneriis rebus [B'], ab inlecebris uentris et gutturis [A'], ab immodest corporis cultu et ornatu [D'], ... ab aemulatione obtreccatione inuidientia [C'], ...'. See G. Heidl, *Origen's Influence on the Young Augustine*, 55–56.

²⁰ Rom. 13:14 in *Mor.* 2.14.31; CSEL 90,114–115: 'Et carnis curam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis'. English trans. in R. J. Teske (trans.), *The Manichean Debate*, B. Ramsey (ed.), WSA I/19 (2006) 82.

described in detail the Manichaeans' moral errors classified under three false symbols:

let us now look at those three seals, which you [Manichaeans] claim with great praise and boasting are found in your conduct. What, then, are these seals? They are, of course, those of the lips, of the hands, and of the breast.²¹

Concerning the seal of the lips, Augustine claimed that the Manichaean 'Elect' who practise abstinence from meat and some wine would satisfy the appetite for further indulgence.²² Thus, in quoting from both Romans 13:14 and the whole of Romans 14 (and the long passages from 1 Corinthians 8:4–13 and 10:19–11:1), he provided the rationale for abstinence, focusing on the control of the desire for sensual delight.²³ It is also noteworthy that in his other anti-Manichaean treatise, *Against Adimantus, a Disciple of Mani* (394), he criticised Manichaean asceticism and again quoted from both the whole of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10:19–31.²⁴ It is the harmony and compatibility of the scriptural passages seemingly opposed to one another that are crucial, in contrast with their reading of single passages out of context. These references are inspired by the context of Pauline theology that describes what he takes to be the difficulty with worldly renunciation.

Letter 22 was written in between 391 and 393, before Augustine's return to Hippo to perform his pastoral duties with the congregations of the church. Because Valerius accepted his request for his study of the scriptures, Augustine deepened a sense of his pastoral vocation as a priest.²⁵ It is generally admitted that in this letter addressed to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, Augustine managed to face the difficulties of a Christian life in Africa. He says to Aurelius that 'by the heavy sword of councils and by your earnestness the many carnal diseases and ill-

²¹ *Mor.* 2.9.19; CSEL 90,104: 'nunc uideamus tria illa signacula, quae in uestris moribus magna laude ac praedicatione iactatis. Quae sunt tandem ista signacula? Oris certe et manuum et sinus.' English trans. in R. J. Teske (trans.), *The Manichean Debate*, 77.

²² See *Mor.* 2.13.30.

²³ See *Mor.* 2.14.32–34.

²⁴ *C. Adim.* 14.1–2. See N. Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire: A Study of Augustine's Contra Adimantum* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen, 2009) 296–298.

²⁵ S. Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, A. Nevill (trans.) (London: SCM Press, 1999) 151–152. For the increasing concern for priestly ministry in the letters of Augustine, see also E. Plumer (ed. and trans.), *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 82–85.

nesses that the African church suffers in many' would be cured.²⁶ At the beginning of this letter, in the confident hope of receiving Aurelius' reply, Augustine informed him of Alypius' outstanding personality at their monastic community in Thagaste, from which Augustine would move to Hippo. Why did he refer to Alypius' life of renunciation as an example to their fellows? If he did so to draw a sharp distinction between his renunciation and the lack of interest in some of the vices shown by the Africans, this distinction was not made sufficiently clear in what he said about the concurrent action of the African church. It is true that Augustine would rather stress his personal deficiency and compare the limited practice of the African church with what he found in the church of Italy: 'If Africa were first to try to eliminate these practices, it would deserve to be worthy of imitation by the other lands, but since through the greater part of Italy ...'.²⁷ Augustine appeared to mingle his personal experiences with his solicitude for the troubles in Africa, for which he decided to take on his duties as a priest. Before quoting the passage of Romans 13: 13–14 as a tripartite injunction against the church, he made an illuminating comment: 'the apostle briefly mentioned in one passage three kinds of vices that are to be detested and avoided and from which there arises a crop of countless vices'.²⁸ This remark represented significantly his own struggle against sensual desires in Milan. It is consequently clear that Alypius' exemplary mode of life, the Christian spirituality Augustine encountered in Italy, his consciousness of moral defects and the passage of Romans 13: 13–14 are the elements teach us about his desire to reveal his state of mind to Aurelius, in which we realise the anticipation of the confessional narrative of his conversion.

Within a relatively narrow range between 394 and 395, Augustine concentrated on writing mutually different kinds of commentary on Pauline epistles: *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*, *Commentary*

²⁶ *Ep.* 22.1.2; CCSL 31,53: 'multas carnales foeditates et aegritudines, quas Africana ecclesia in multis patitur ... conciliorum grauitate et tua uiuacitate'. English trans. in R. Teske (trans.), *Letters 1–99*, WSA II/1 (2001) 59.

²⁷ *Ep.* 22.1.4; CCSL 31,54: 'Haec si prima Africa temptaret auferre, a ceteris terris imitatione digna esse deberet. Cum uero et per Italiae maximam partem ...'. English trans. in R. Teske (trans.), *Letters 1–99*, 59.

²⁸ *Ep.* 22.1.2; CCSL 31,53: 'apostolus tria breuiter genera uitiorum detestanda et uitanda uno in loco posuerit, de quibus innumerabilium peccatorum exsurrexit seges, ...'. English trans. in R. Teske (trans.), *Letters 1–99*, 59.

on the Letter to the Galatians, and Unfinished Commentary on the Letter to the Romans. Around the same time, he also put together various types of philosophical, theological and exegetical questions posed to him by his monastic confreres, and published *On Eighty-Three Varied Questions* in which some questions addressed passages from the Pauline epistles.²⁹ It is thus quite strange that, among these exegetical treatises, Romans 13:13 was not selected for comment and that only one reference to Romans 13:14 was found in *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*: 'Make no provision for the flesh in its appetites'.³⁰ from which Augustine chose only the last few words for exegesis. First, he explained the adequacy of some preoccupation with material goods and then remarked on an excessive occupation with them as the nature of concupiscence and, thus, to be censured. It may be difficult to accept that Augustine mentioned this passage very briefly. But if Augustine were to correlate his use of Romans 13:13–14 with the retrospective aspect of his experiences already found in his earlier writings, what room would there be for his reflection in the critical and exegetical commentaries?

4 CONCLUSION

Augustine's use of Romans 13:13–14 in his early writings considered so far gives a brief insight into the development and progress of his understanding of his past experiences. Already in one of his earliest works is an allusion to Romans 13:13–14, where Augustine recalled his small (monastic) community's experiences and provided a reflective account of what he and his friend Alypius did together in the pursuit of the exemplary purity of life. Not only did he interpret Romans 13:13–14 as the basis for his attack on the errors of Manichaean moral discourse, in which he was involved for around nine years as a 'auditor', but when enlisted into the future vocation as a priest in Hippo, he also read the passage as a divine warning against the state of the African church. It

²⁹ For information on chronological matters of *Div. qu.*, see G. Bardy, J.-A. Beckaert, and J. Boutet (ed. and trans.), *Mélanges doctrinaux*, BA 10 (1952) 11–50. On this see also Chapter 7.3 below and n. 24.

³⁰ *Exp. prop. Rom.* 69; CSEL 84,47: 'Et carnis providentiam ne perfeceritis in concupiscentiis'. English trans. in P. Frederiksen Landes (trans. and ed.), *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Chico CA: Scholar Press, 1982) 45.

can be seen that in *Letter 22*, the configuration of both his and his friend's past for a retrospective evaluation is crucial for understanding Romans 13: 13–14: his friend's exemplary mode of life, the Christian spirituality he encountered in Italy and his moral consciousness of moral defects. Augustine took them as the primary motivation for constituting a decisive statement from which his soul goes forth on its another pilgrimage of vocation. His use of Romans 13: 13–14 can be seen, thus, as a prelude to the story that Augustine would show us in *Confessions*.