

## Augustine's Evolving Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles\*

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

The late fourth and early fifth centuries' close concern for Paul was appropriately termed by Peter Brown as 'the generation of S. Paul'.<sup>1</sup> Brown was referring to divergent readers and commentators, the Christian Platonist Marius Victorinus, an anonymous layman known to us as 'Ambrosiaster', the Donatist layman Tyconius, Manichaeans and Pelagius, as those who were 'made ... closer to each other than to their predecessors'<sup>2</sup> by their own and common interest in Paul. In the case of Augustine, his continuing and deep attention to Paul is equally explicit: 'nothing would be more revealing for an understanding of Augustine's theology than a full study of what Paul meant for him'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, after

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<sup>1</sup> P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new edn. with an epilogue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 144.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> 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. For the remarkable and outstanding concern for the letters of Paul, particularly in the late fourth century, in the Latin church, see also C. Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 115–121; E. Plumer (ed. and trans.), *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 5–59.

his first significant 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 the mutually exclusive readings by Manichaeans and by Christians.<sup>4</sup> Or, the conflict of interpretations might be a reason for Augustine's continuous commitment to those texts.<sup>5</sup> Several years after his decisive return to Christianity in a Milanese garden, where he was convinced by a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, in a brief time, between 394 and 395, Augustine concentrated on writing the mutually different kinds of commentary on Pauline epistles:<sup>6</sup> *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, and *Unfinished Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Around the same time, he also put together and published various types of philosophical, theological and exegetical questions posed to him by his monastic confreres, that is, *On Eighty-Three Varied Questions*, in which some problems address the passages from Pauline epistles. Toward the end of his priesthood, how did Augustine work to show the readers his reading of Pauline texts?

In this paper, I confine myself to the framework of both the ages of human history and the stages of the individual's spiritual development in some of these expositions.<sup>7</sup> I shall first argue about these descriptions

<sup>4</sup> See *Gen. adv. Man.* 1.2.3. For the Manichaean reading of Paul in the early works of Augustine, see also C. Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*, 121–126.

<sup>5</sup> L. Ayres, 'Augustine', in S. Westerholm (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Paul* (Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011) 345–360.

<sup>6</sup> For the origin of these commentaries, see *Retr.* 1.23(22).1: 'While I was still a presbyter, it happened that the Apostle's Epistle to the Romans was read among us who were together at Carthage, and I was asked some things by the brothers. When I responded to them as well as I could, they wanted what I said to be written down rather than be spoken without being recorded.' See also E. Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 76 n. 103.

<sup>7</sup> For Augustine's view of the (four) stages of human history, see esp. A. Luneau, *L'Histoire du salut chez les Pères de l'Église: La doctrine des âges du monde*, *Théologie historique* 2 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1964) 357–383; see also W. S. Babcock, 'Augustine's Interpretation of Romans (A.D. 394–396)', *AugStud* 10 (1979) 55–74 at 59–60; J. M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 131 n. 5; P. Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 43–45; P. Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 227–231; P. Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) 155–189, 197, 240–243.

For Tyconius' significant effect on Augustine's view of salvation history, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to give details, see U. Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und systematischer Struktur der Zweireichelehre* (Stuttgart: Ernst

and then consider Augustine's spiritual sensitivity and the yearning for wholeness and fulfilment.

## 2 FRAMEWORK FOR BOTH AGES OF HUMAN HISTORY AND INDIVIDUAL'S STAGES

After his compulsory ordination to the priesthood in 391 at Hippo, Augustine requested his bishop, Valerius, to give him a sabbatical to concentrate on scriptural studies.<sup>8</sup> Augustine made this request because he would be painfully aware of his own shortcomings. This request seems to have been received. He tells us in his *Reconsiderations*<sup>9</sup> that during the last years (394–395) immediately before his ordination as coadjutor bishop of Hippo, 'the Apostle's Epistle to the Romans was read among us who were together at Carthage'<sup>10</sup> and he turned his attention to 'the same Apostle's Epistle to the Galatians not piecemeal—that is, omitting some thing—but continuously and in its entirety.'<sup>11</sup> Although the third, more ambitious work on Romans was unfinished, three works are available to us.

Among these expositions, *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, and *Unfinished Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, the first and the second mark Augustine's position on the framework for both ages of human history and the stages of the individual's spiritual development. First, *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*, quoting a passage from Romans 3:20 ('For no flesh will be justified before him [God] by the Law, for through

Klett, 1970) 259–261; P. Fredriksen Landes, 'Tyconius and the End of the World', *REAug* 28 (1982) 59–75; W. S. Babcock, 'Augustine and Tyconius: A Study in the Latin Appropriation of Paul', *StudPatr* 17 (1982) 1209–1220; P. Fredriksen, 'Augustine and Israel: *Interpretatio ad litteram*, Jews, and Judaism in Augustine's Theology of History', in W. S. Babcock (ed.), *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990) 91–110.

<sup>8</sup> See *Ep.* 21.3. See also J. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005) 24–26; E. Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 83.

<sup>9</sup> *Retr.* 1.23(22)–25(24).

<sup>10</sup> *Retr.* 1.23(22).1; CCSL 57,66–67: 'apud Carthaginem inter nos qui simul eramus ad Romanos apostoli epistula legeretur'. English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Revisions*, R. Teske (ed.), WSA I/2 (2010) 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Retr.* 1.24(23).1; CCSL 57,71: 'eiusdem apostoli epistulam ad Galatas non carptim, id est aliqua praetermittens, sed continuanter et totam.' English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Revisions*, 95–96.

the Law comes knowledge of sin'),<sup>12</sup> Augustine did not hold the view that Paul had denied human free will and had condemned the 'Law'. In reply to this misinterpretation of Paul's texts, Augustine immediately provided a fourfold scheme for understanding both human action and divine grace.

[L]et us distinguish these four stages of man: prior to the Law; under the Law; under grace; and in peace. Prior to the Law we pursue fleshly concupiscence; under the Law, we are pulled by it; under grace, we neither pursue nor are pulled by it; in peace, there is no concupiscence of the flesh. . . . Thus here he [Apostle] shows we still have desires but, by not obeying them, that we do not allow sin to reign in us. But these desires arise from the mortality of the flesh, which we bear from the first sin of the first man, whence we are born fleshly. Thus they will not cease save at the resurrection of the body, when we will have merited that transformation promised to us. Then there will be perfect peace, when we have been established in the fourth stage.<sup>13</sup>

In the first stage, that is, before the law (*ante legem*), people do not know the meaning of sin and unaware that they are sinners. They live according to the flesh, with no experiences of the conflict between the law and their sinful behaviour. In the second stage, under the law (*sub lege*), people acquire the knowledge of sin through the law. But those who wish to live according to the law cannot resist their habitual desires. They are overcome and drawn by their carnal desires knowingly. In the third stage, under grace (*sub gratia*), although their struggle against themselves still continues, people are able to believe that God helps them resist their inertial desires. They now live justly, insofar as they are no longer conquered by their own consent to those perverse desires. The fourth and

<sup>12</sup> *Exp. prop. Rom. 12*; CSEL 84,6: 'Quia non iustificabitur in lege omnis caro coram illo, per legem enim cognitio peccati . . .'. 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) 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Exp. prop. Rom. 12*; CSEL 84,6–8: 'quattuor istos gradus hominis distinguamus: ante legem, sub lege, sub gratia, in pace. Ante legem sequimur concupiscentiam carnis, sub lege trahimur ab ea, sub gratia nec sequimur eam nec trahimur ab ea, in pace nulla est concupiscentia carnis. . . . Hinc enim ostendit esse desideria, quibus non oboediendo, peccatum in nobis regnare non sinimus. Sed quoniam ista desideria de carnis mortalitate nascuntur, quae trahimus ex primo peccato primi hominis, unde carnaliter nascimur, non finientur haec, nisi resurrectione corporis immutationem illam, quae nobis promittitur, meruerimus, ubi perfecta pax erit, cum in quarto gradu constituemur.' English trans. in P. Frederiksen Landes (trans. and ed.), *Augustine on Romans*, 5,7.

final stage, in peace (*in pace*), comes when their mortal bodies are renewed in the resurrection (Rom. 8:10–11). Consequently, there is no more struggle, because they are not captured by all carnal desires. This cannot be executed in this life, thus being designated as the eschatological perfection of humanity.

The fourfold stages (*gradus*) are formed by the correlation between the different states of humanity corresponding to the morally good and evil, and the scriptural points in the history of salvation. This scheme begins with humanity before the law of Sinai and terminates in the second coming of Christ. The incarnation of Christ is a pivotal moment in salvational history, the point that shifts humanity from the revelation to Israel into the revelation in Christ. Hence, with the sequential and spiritual progress of humanity toward perfection, the crucial point to grasp is that for Augustine, there is a break between the second and the third stages: How do those who, while serving the law of sin, will and do the morally good? What does it make possible for those who wish to liberate themselves from the old disposition of the self? It is clearly admitted that the understanding of this transition requires careful and sustained attention to the readings of Paul's texts, especially those of Romans 7 (24–25) and 9 (11–13), which, after telling us about these stages, Augustine considered in this exposition.<sup>14</sup> Another important point to note is that the decisive transition from the second to the third stage is given by the coming of Christ, that is, the salvational moment in the human history. His understanding of this transition helped him forge a hinge into the problems of divine grace, human will and law. This concern for the individual's interior progress is primarily and continually motivated by his own experience of conversion. However, when configured within the historical and collective experience of a salvational event, it allowed Augustine to see it as the shared incident in the history. The purposeful transition is, thus, moved historically and communally, thereby permitting those who read it to hope and encourage their own steps toward eternal peace.

The second of these expositions, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, is his 'only complete scientific (as opposed to homiletic) commen-

<sup>14</sup> *Exp. prop. Rom.* 45–46 and 60. See also W. S. Babcock, 'Augustine's Interpretation of Romans', 58–64; P. Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 165–169.

tary on any book of the Bible'.<sup>15</sup> When he proceeded with the commentary on Galatians 5 in this exposition,<sup>16</sup> Augustine told the audience about a misunderstanding (by Manichaeans')<sup>17</sup> of Paul's text (Galatians 5: 17): 'People think that the Apostle is here denying that we have free choice of the will. They do not understand that this is said to them if they refuse to hold on to the grace of faith they have received'.<sup>18</sup> Then, associating it with the passages from Romans 7–8, especially quoting Romans 8: 7: 'The wisdom of the flesh is hostile to God, for it is not subject to God's law, nor can it be',<sup>19</sup> Augustine employed a scheme to explain the function of divine grace. As such, the believer's humanity is divided into four stages, which correspond to the four *gradus* of the scriptural history of salvation: 'prior to the law' (*ante legem*), 'under the law prior to grace' (*sub lege ante gratiam*), 'under grace' (*sub gratia*), and 'in ... eternal peace' (*in pace ... aeterna*).<sup>20</sup> Similarly as mentioned previously in the first of his expositions,<sup>21</sup> Augustine designated the stages of humanity in terms of the soul's struggle against carnal desires. Because these (first) two stages ('*ante legem*' and '*sub lege*') represent only the existential dimension of humanity in life, he emphasised the transition from the second stage to the third stage. Not only did he mention the individual, subjective mode of the believers' experiences, but he also revealed the objective and historical epoch through human history, thereby defending the divine dispensation through the history of salvation.<sup>22</sup> These two expositions were written at almost the same time. They share the characteristics of his view of the four-stage scheme, the common vocabularies and the scriptural passages from the Pauline texts.

<sup>15</sup> E. Plumer, 'Expositio epistulae ad Galatas', in *ATA*, 345.

<sup>16</sup> *Exp. Gal.* 41–55.

<sup>17</sup> E. Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 208 n. 224

<sup>18</sup> *Exp. Gal.* 46.1; CSEL 84,120: 'putant hic hominem liberum voluntatis arbitrium negare apostolum nos habere nec intelligunt hoc eis dictum, si gratiam fidei susceptam tenere nolunt'. English trans. in E. Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 208.

<sup>19</sup> *Exp. Gal.* 46.2; CSEL 84,121: 'Prudentia carnis inimica in deum, legi enim dei non est subiecta neque enim potest.'

<sup>20</sup> *Exp. Gal.* 46.4–9.

<sup>21</sup> See *Exp. prop. Rom.* 12.

<sup>22</sup> See on this the comprehensive and balanced assessment of the 'pastoral purpose' of the commentary to the Galatians by E. Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 71–88 and, for the comparison of the origin of *Exp. prop. Rom.* with that of this commentary, 76 n. 103.

### 3 THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONFIRMATION IN *ON EIGHTY-THREE VARIED QUESTIONS*, Q. 66

Next, I shall consider this four-stage scheme in the seemingly different structure of work, *On Eighty-Three Varied Questions*, which was composed during the years between his return to North Africa (388) and his ordination as a bishop (396).<sup>23</sup> With regard to the chronological ordering of several groups of questions that Augustine compiled in one volume, it might be difficult to date each of them precisely. Gustave Bardy, an eminent French scholar, edited and translated this work into French in 1952. He examined five groups of these questions and found that the fourth group (qq. 66–75), in which Augustine exhibited the result of his intensive study of the Pauline letters, dates back to the years 394–395.<sup>24</sup> In the first of the fourth group of questions, that is, question 66, after declaring his intention to explicate the texts from Romans 7: 1 to 8: 11,<sup>25</sup> issues of human sin and divine grace come to the fore. Augustine proceeded with an analogical interpretation of these passages, thereby referring to ‘a wife, a husband and the law’<sup>26</sup> as the ‘soul, sin and the law of sin’<sup>27</sup> and revealing the entanglement of the law in sin and death.

From this we understand that there are four phases even in a single person and, when they have been experienced in sequence, eternal life will be attained. . . . we should be born as animals and fleshly beings, there is a first period that is before the law, a second that is under the law, a third that is under grace, and a fourth that is in peace.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For the corresponding setting of these works, that is, *Exp. prop. Rom.*, *Exp. Gal.*, and *Div. qu.*, particularly for Augustine’s intended audience involving his fellow monks, see E. Plumer, *Augustine’s Commentary on Galatians*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> G. Bardy, J.-A. Beckaert, and J. Boutet (ed. and trans.), *Mélanges doctrinaux*, BA 10 (1952) 11–50. Cf. A. Mutzenbecher (ed.), *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus, De octo Dulcissimi quaestionibus*, CCSL 44A (1975) xli; D. L. Mosher (trans.), *Saint Augustine: Eighty-Three Different Questions*, FC 70 (1982) 18–19; D. C. Alexander, *Augustine’s Early Theology of the Church: Emergence and Implications*, 386–391 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 186 n. 38 and 340–341.

<sup>25</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.2.

<sup>26</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.2; CCSL 44A,153: ‘mulierem, uirum et legem’.

<sup>27</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.2; CCSL 44A,153: ‘animam, peccatum et legem peccati’.

<sup>28</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.3; CCSL 44A,154: ‘Ex quo comprehendimus quattuor esse differentias etiam in uno homine, quibus gradatim peractis in vita aeterna manebitur. . . . animales carnalesque nasceremur, prima est actio ante legem, secunda sub lege, tertia sub gratia, quarta in pace.’ English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, R. Can-

At the end of this question, he recapitulated the four-stage scheme of humanity as follows:

In the first period, then, which is before the law, there is no struggle with the pleasures of this world. In the second, which is under the law, we struggle but are overcome. In the third we struggle and overcome. In the fourth we do not struggle but rest in perfect and eternal peace, for what is beneath us is subjected to us; ...<sup>29</sup>

With regard to the schematisation of human history and dividing an individual's development into four stages, there might be no difference among the views expressed in these three works: *Commentary on Statements in the Letter to the Romans*, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, and the question 66 of his *On Eighty-Three Varied Questions*. In the question at issue, although Augustine would give a detailed description of the inner struggle with fleshly desires in each of the souls, he did not deny the importance of the transition from the second stage to the third stage. He quoted the key passages from Romans 7 at the end of the second stage: 'For when he has been liberated and recognises the grace of his liberator he says, *Wretched man that I am, who will liberate me from the body of this death? The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.* (Rom 7: 24–25)'.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note that in his explanation of the next and third stage, he thought of 'the grace of his liberator' in this key passage as the one who, 'teaching how we should live, ... aflame with the love of eternal things'.<sup>31</sup> This is a moral 'example' to follow that would be taken as the outward, not the inward, exemplar of Christ's death on the cross: 'he [scil. Christ] condemned sin in the flesh itself, so that the spirit, ...

ning (ed.), WSA I/12 (2008) 105.

<sup>29</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.7; CCSL 44A,163: 'In prima ergo actione, quae est ante legem, nulla pugna est cum voluptatibus huius saeculi; in secunda, quae sub lege est, pugnamus sed vincimur; in tertia pugnamus et vincimus; in quarta non pugnamus, sed perfecta et aeterna pace requiescimus. Subiugatur enim nobis quod inferius nostrum est, ...'. English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, 110.

<sup>30</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.5; CCSL 44A,158: 'Iam enim liberatus agnoscens gratiam liberatoris sui dicit: *Miser ego homo, quis me liberabit de corpore mortis huius? Gratia dei per Iesum Christum dominum nostrum.*' English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, 108.

<sup>31</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.6; CCSL 44A,159: 'docendo quemadmodum uiueremus, ... aeternorum caritate ... flagrans'. English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, 108.

would not be taken captive by yielding to lust'.<sup>32</sup> In the *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, he also referred to this example: 'no temporal comfort is preferred to righteousness. This is possible, only through spiritual love, which the Lord taught *by his example* and gave by his grace.'<sup>33</sup> In this regard, Augustine might concur in the view that the teaching and example of Christ are defined externally, not as the divine grace poured into our soul and changing human will from the inside.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Through the early works before his reading of the scriptures and of Paul, in particular, Augustine continually expounded the seven stages of an individual progress toward contemplation. These stages correspond to soul-centred spirituality (*On the Greatness of the Soul* 33.70–76, written in 387/388), the seven days of the scriptural week of creation (*On Genesis, Against the Manicheans* 1.25.43, in 388/389), the two types of spiritual life in the economy of salvation (*On True Religion* 48–49, in 390/391) and the eight maxims in Matthew 5: 3–10 (*On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount* 1.2.4–4.12, in c. 392/396).<sup>34</sup> These repeatedly expressed schemes seem to indicate his intention to incorporate the discipline of the *artes liberales* into the discipline of divine providence on the whole human race. The former originates in a Platonic view of the ascent through the grades of human growth to perfect fulfilment. The latter derives from a biblical view of the historical education by which God liberates people from the enslavement of the law into the freedom of the spirit. His deep commitment to the ascending scheme is the amalgamation of basically and fundamentally different types of tradition. Thus, a gap would continue to exist in his view of the human desire for wholeness, rest and peace. By his intensive study of the Pauline epistles, he came to articulate this fourfold scheme in the representations of the course of human history. However, the point to emphasise is not if Augustine used the traditional

<sup>32</sup> *Div. qu.* 66.6; CCSL 44A,159: 'peccatum in ipsa carne damnauit, ut ... spiritus ... non duceretur captiuus in consensionem libidinis.' English trans. in B. Ramsey (trans.), *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> *Exp. Gal.* 46.6; CSEL 84,121: 'nihil temporalis commodi iustitiae praeponitur, quod nisi caritate spirituali, quam dominus *exemplo suo* docuit et gratia donavit, fieri non potest.' English trans. in E. Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 211. Italics mine.

<sup>34</sup> On this see Chapter 5.4 above and 49 n. 31.

septenary scheme. He became aware of the shift in his belief in human behaviour, from the teleological perspective, essentially governed by human rationality. Despite Augustine's immaturity of thinking of divine grace as the inner gift, found in some of his Pauline interpretations of Romans 7, both his spiritual sensitivity and yearning for wholeness and fulfilment are more immediately combined with divine mercy working in mysterious ways.