

Augustine's Scriptural Exegesis in *De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*

Naoki KAMIMURA, Tokyo Metropolitan University

INTRODUCTION

DE GENESI AD LITTERAM IMPERFECTUS LIBER

During his long writing career Augustine tried to write commentaries on Genesis at least five times. He started writing the second of these, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (hereafter *Liber Imperfectus*), about 393. In his *Retractations* chapter 1 section 18 Augustine described the origin and end of his first literal reading of the six days of Creation. When he undertook the literal interpretation in *Liber Imperfectus*, Augustine found himself still unskilled at Scriptural exegesis. It is at this point that he was working his way up to Genesis 1:26 that he gave up his plan.

QUESTIONS

Little attention has been focused on this work. It has been covered by his full commentary, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecimalm*. And Augustine advised his readers “to read the twelve books that I composed much later” in order to judge what he found dissatisfied with the unfinished commentary. Before revising his works in 427 he had once decided to destroy it. Why then can we read the commentary? Of course it is because he did not abandon it and finally published it.

after I had re-examined this book, I decided to keep it so that it might serve as evidence, useful in my opinion, of my first attempts to explain and search into the divine Scriptures.

Although concerning his early views we must consider his first literal exegesis, is there any other significance of the unfinished commentary? Does it only fall short of his considered views in the later commentary? In this paper I first suggest Augustine's two-sided explanation of a literal reading in his works. Next I explore his way of exposition in *Liber Imperfectus*. Finally I shall argue some significance and consequences of his first literal interpretation.

AUGUSTINE'S COMMITMENT TO THE LITERAL INTERPRETATION

AUGUSTINE'S TESTIMONIA

It appears from *Retractations* when Augustine began writing *Liber Imperfectus*, he attended to the difference between the method of his present commentary and that of his former one, *De genesi contra manichaeos* which was written about four or five years

before. As he stated the distinction in chapter 1 section 18, he intended to explain “the words of Scripture according to their allegorical meaning” in *Contra manichaeos*: that is, he had recourse to an allegorical approach. Although at that time the literal interpretation didn't make avoided what he considered blasphemy, he didn't admit the anti-manichean commentary was a failure. With regard to *Liber Imperfectus*, Augustine considered it as a challenging programme for his ability.

presuming to explain such great mysteries of natural things literally — that is, in what sense the statements there made can be interpreted according to their historical signification — I wanted to test my capabilities in this truly most taxing and difficult work.

At the point where he tried to comment on Genesis 1:26, Augustine didn't resort to a figurative way of reading. Instead it remained unfinished until 427. It can thus be seen how in *Liber Imperfectus* the literal interpretation came to be more highly demanded and more closely linked to his understanding of Genesis rather than being in conflict with it. In *Liber Imperfectus* Augustine firmly adhered to its exegetical method.

MEANINGS OF “AD LITTERAM”

The title words of the commentary “ad litteram” show the high consciousness of his method-centred approach. When he planned to publish it, Augustine “determined that its title should be *One Unfinished Book on the Literal Meaning of Genesis*”. But nowhere in the commentary did Augustine mention the words “ad litteram”. And he never made clear what he defined by such a phrase. Why did he choose the word? Apart from such lexical absence, what evidence is there for his view of the literal interpretation around 393? It must be seen his evaluation of a literal reading had been constantly negative. Reading text “according to the letter” is defined as “to understand it exactly as the letter sounds”. If anyone wanted to take what was said, “there is nothing more pernicious than to take whatever is there literally”. Augustine plainly stated his objection to the exposition.

Another important texts are found later in *De genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*. He repeatedly expressed the need for discovering the literal meaning. Although he didn't deny the meaning intended by the author had an allegorical as well as literal sense, he was mainly concerned with the literal interpretation. Augustine's creative devotion to the literal meaning moved away from his early view. And this corresponds to what he finally decided to entitle his small commentary. With his attitude stressing the importance of a literal reading, I assume the very words “ad litteram” would comprise another aspect of meaning which he felt the need to accept. Though his later revision seems to present a proper picture of his failure, it also cautions us against reading earlier texts in view of later development. But *Liber Imperfectus* certainly gave a literal reading for 25 verses. Hence, if Augustine regarded its method as useful, what did he consider to be its features and how did he refer to it?

EXEGETICAL METHOD IN *LIBER IMPERFECTUS*

FOUR WAYS OF INTERPRETATION

He didn't mention the words "ad litteram" there. On the other hand, he offered us four manners of expounding the scriptures.

Four ways of expounding the Law are handed down by certain men who treat the Scriptures. ... in accord with history, allegory, analogy, and etiology. It is a matter of history when deeds done — whether by men or by God — are reported. It is a matter of allegory when things spoken in figures are understood. It is a matter of analogy, when the conformity of the Old and New Testament is shown. It is a matter of etiology when the causes of what is said or done are reported.

We find here the idea that, despite its uniqueness in his corpus except in *De utilitate credendi* chapter 3 section 5, the way of reading "according to history" intends for the sense of what has happened and is being narrated. And in *Liber Imperfectus* Augustine mostly applied the method "according to history" to the texts of Genesis.

It's notable this way of reading points to "deeds done" (*res gesta*). And it can be seen it interprets the sentence which describes a narrative account, not a word which consists of articulated sounds. Even though the meaning would be conferred by a word-giver except mishearing, misunderstanding and so on, each word itself can't express one's thinking as a mental activity. Their diverse combination would rather serve as a starting point for one's thought. This exposition thus shouldn't be confused with the "ad litteram" method which intended "to understand it exactly as the letter sounds".

It is not only in this small commentary the word "events" (*gesta*) occurs. It is an expression which is often mentioned in *De genesi ad litteram*, applied to the account of events and historical facts as the literal interpretation would intend for.

In all the sacred books, we should consider the eternal truths that are taught, the facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicted, and the precepts or counsels that are given. In the case of a narrative of events, the question arises as to whether everything must be taken according to the figurative sense only, or whether it must be expounded and defended also as a faithful record of what happened (*res gesta*).

This view of the literal interpretation corresponds to the exposition "ad litteram" referred to above. The idea that the literal interpretation should be designed for the sentence which reports the events and deeds done would help to pave our way towards the identification of the "ad litteram" method with the literal interpretation. At this point I suggest Augustine's reading in *Liber Imperfectus* is a pioneering effort and can't be paralleled by the "ad litteram" exegesis in another early works.

ASPECT OF SCRIPTURAL TEXTS

On his list of four ways of interpretation Augustine first speaks of the method "according to history" (*secundum historiam*) and then, in turn, gives an explanation of "history" (*historia*). After showing us the historical interpretation, he doesn't get on to

explain the mode of exposition from the viewpoint of its historical meaning. Augustine changed direction of his description: he would rather make his way towards a definition of history. Indeed he makes an easy move from one idea to the next: the one is to clarify that the scriptures include different kinds of thing, and the other is that there are different modes of exposition. What effect does this easy move have?

It seems this move raises an interesting question. The move suggests the connection between the content of the scriptures and their expositions. And within the scriptures there are different kinds of texts. Along with making the connection, some of the scriptures treated as "history" are explained from the viewpoint of historical exposition. Although in his exposition of Genesis 1:1 Augustine would equally refer to different modes of interpretation, then he turned to treat the following passages only in terms of its historical meaning. Such an effort enables us to assume that he defined Genesis as "history". The conception of "history" thus served as the ground on which the exposition has rested.

However, despite his notion of "history" Augustine didn't think it necessary for scriptural exposition to make the connection later in *De genesi ad litteram*.

The narrative in these books [Genesis] is not written in a literary style proper to allegory, as in the Canticle of Canticles, but from beginning to end in a style proper to history, as in the Books of Kings and the other works of that type. But since those historical books contain matters familiar to us from common human experience, they are easily and readily taken in a literal sense at the first reading, so that the meaning of the historical events in relation to the future may also be subsequently drawn from them. But in Genesis, since there are matters beyond the ken of readers who focus their gaze on the familiar course of nature, they are unwilling to have these matters taken in the literal sense but prefer to understand them in a figurative sense.

Augustine is still saying that there are different types of texts in the whole scriptures. And he clearly admits Genesis story is written "in a style proper to history". However, notwithstanding the difficulty of finding a literal sense, he stressed the necessity of finding both a literal and figurative sense. Thus, his emphasis on the modes of exposition would allow him to loosen the connection between them: these books can be expounded in terms of both the past-oriented and future-oriented exegesis. This means Augustine came close to saying that this division of the texts wouldn't function as the basis for exegesis. More interested in the possibility of reading the scriptures either from the viewpoint of its historical or figurative meaning, he will be less interested in distinguishing the different kinds of texts. He was feeling his way towards another conception of texts: if the texts would be less rigidly confined to the past and future events, they come to be merged and be almost synonymous.

CONCLUSION

Augustine's first literal reading of Genesis was not finished. It seems reasonable to think he faced some difficulties in providing a literal reading: one possibility is that the

phrase "male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27) would reject his view of man as God created him as a soul who fell into this mortal body after sin. At the same time, I suggest another reason: it is in his view of the aspect of scriptural texts. Even though he has already started trying a literal reading as an archetype later developed in *De genesi ad litteram*, Augustine hadn't yet work out the idea of double aspect of the texts. He couldn't open the possibility of expounding the scriptures as either history or prophecy. But Augustine's literal exposition had already shown its essential characteristics in *Liber Imperfectus*. It is the significance and impact of the small commentary.