

Augustine's Evolving Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles

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INTRODUCTION

The late fourth and early fifth centuries' close concern for Paul was appropriately termed by Peter Brown as 'the generation of S. Paul', with which Brown referred 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 'made ... closer to each other than to their predecessors' by their own and common interest in Paul. In the particular 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'. Indeed, after 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 of the mutually exclusive readings by Manichaeans and by Christians. Or rather the conflict of interpretations might serve to give a reason for his continuous commitment to those texts. It seems interesting to note that, several years after his decisive return to Christianity in a Milanese garden where he was convicted by a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, within a relatively narrow range between 394 and 395, Augustine concentrated on writing the mutually different kinds of commentary on Pauline epistles: *Prepositions from Romans*, *Commentary on Galatians*, *Unfinished Commentary on 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, the *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions*, in which some problems are concerned about the passages from Pauline epistles. Towards the end of his priesthood, then, how did he work to show the readers his reading of Pauline texts? In this paper, I confine myself to the framework both for ages of human history and for stages of the individual's spiritual development in some of these expositions. I shall first argue about these descriptions, and then consider his spiritual sensitivity and the yearning for wholeness and fulfilment.

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 have a sabbatical time to concentrate on the scriptural studies, because Augustine was painfully aware of his own shortcoming. This request seemed to have been received. He tells us in his *Revisions* 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' and he turned his attention to 'the same Apostle's Epistle to the Galatians'. Although the third, more ambitious work on Romans was unfinished, three works are available to us.

Among these expositions, *Prepositions from Romans*, *Commentary on Galatians*, and *Unfinished Commentary on Romans*, the first and the second mark out Augustine's position on the framework for both ages of human history and stages of the individual's spiritual development. First, in *Prepositions from Romans* (13-18), quoting a passage from Romans 3:20 ('For no flesh will be justified before him [God] by the Law, for through the Law comes knowledge of sin'), Augustine does 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 provides a fourfold scheme for understanding of both human action and divine grace.

let 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. (*Prepositions from Romans* 13-18.2, 10)

In the first stage, that is, before the law (*ante legem*), people do not know the meaning of sin, and unaware of the fact 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 to 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 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

any 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 the salvational history, the point which shifts humanity from the revelation to Israel into the revelation in Christ. Hence, along with the sequential and spiritual progress of humanity towards perfection, the crucial point to grasp is that, for Augustine, there is a break between the second and the third stage: how do those who, while serving the law of sin, will and do the morally good? What does it make possible for those to liberate themselves from the old disposition of the self? It is clearly admitted that his 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 considers in this exposition (§ 45-46). 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 helps him to forge a hinge into the problems of the 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 allows 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 towards eternal peace.

In the second of these expositions, *Commentary on Galatians*, which is his 'only complete scientific (as opposed to homiletic) commentary on any book of the Bible', when he proceeds with the commentary on Galatians 5 (41-55), once Augustine tells the audience about a misunderstanding (Manichaeans) 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' (§ 46.1). 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', Augustine employs a scheme in order to explain the function of divine grace: the believer's humanity is divided into four stages, which corresponds to the four stages of the scriptural history of salvation: 'prior to the law', 'prior to grace', 'under grace', and 'in... eternal peace' (§ 46.4-8). Similarly as mentioned above in the first of his exposition, he designates the stages of humanity in terms of the soul's struggle against carnal desires. Since these two stages only represent the existential dimension of humanity in their lives, he emphasises the transition from the second to the third stage. Not only does he mention the individual, subjective mode of the believers' experiences, but reveal the objective and historical epoch through human

history, thereby defending the divine dispensation through the history of salvation. These two expositions were written almost about the same time, They share the characteristics of his view of the four stages scheme, common vocabularies, and the scriptural passages from Paul's texts.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONFIRMATION IN *MISCELLANY OF EIGHTY-THREE QUESTIONS*, Q. 66

Next I shall consider this four-stage scheme in the seemingly different kind of his work, *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions*, which was composed during the years between his return to North Africa (388) and his ordination as bishop (396). With regard to the chronological ordering of several groups of questions which Augustine brought together into one volume, it might be difficult to date precisely each of them. But, as Gustave Bardy, an eminent French scholar who edited and translated this work into French in 1952, examined five groups of these questions, the fourth group (qq. 66-75), in which Augustine exhibits the result of his intensive study on the Pauline letters, can be dated during the years 394-395.

In the first of the fourth group questions, that is, the question 66, after declaring his intention of explicating the texts from Romans 7:1 to 8:11, issues of human sin and divine grace come to the fore. Augustine proceeds with an analogical interpretation of these passages, thereby referring to 'a wife, a husband and the law' as the 'soul, sin and the law of sin' 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. (q. 66.3)

At the end of this question, he recapitulates 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; ... (q. 66.7)

With regard to the schematisation of human history and stages of individual's development into four stages, there might be no difference among the views expressed in these three works: *Prepositions from Romans*, *Commentary on Galatians*, and the question 66 of his *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions*. In the question at issue, although Augustine would give a detailed description of the inner struggle with freshly desires in each of the souls, he does not deny the importance of the transition from the second to the third stage, thus quoting the key passages from Romans 7 at the end of the second stage: 'For when he has been liberated and recognizes 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). It is interesting to note that, in his explanation of the next third stage, he thinks 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' (q. 66.6). This is a moral 'example' to follow which would be taken as the outward, not the inward, exemplar of Christ's death on the cross: 'he [sc. Christ] condemned sin in the flesh itself, so that the spirit,... would not be taken captive by yielding to lust' (q. 66.6). In the *Commentary on Galatians* (46.6), he also refers to this example: 'no temporal comfort is preferred to righteousness. This is possible, only through spiritual love, which the Lord taught by his example (*exemplo suo docuit*) and gave by his grace.' In this regard, Augustine might concur in the view that the teaching and example of Christ is defined externally, not as the divine grace poured into our soul and changing human will from the inside.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the early works before his reading of the scriptures and of Paul in particular, Augustine has continually expounded the seven stages of an individual progress towards contemplation, corresponding to the soul-centred spirituality (*De quantitate animae* 33.70-76, written in 387/388), to the seven days of the scriptural week of creation (*De genesi contra Manichaeos* 1.25.43, in 388/389), to two types of spiritual life in the economy of salvation (*De vera religione* 48-49, in 390/391), and to the eight maxims in Matthew 5:3-10 (*De sermone domini in monte*, 1.2.4-4.12, in c. 392/396). These repeatedly-expressed schemes seem to indicate his intention to incorporate the discipline of the *artes liberales* into the discipline of divine providence upon 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, there would continue to exist a gap in his view of the human desire for wholeness, rest, and peace. By his intensive study of 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 whether Augustine uses the traditional septenary scheme or not. He becomes aware of the shift of his belief in the human behaviour, from the teleological perspective, essentially governed by human rationality. Despite of his immaturity of thought of divine grace as the inner gift, found in some of his Pauline interpretation on Romans 7, both his spiritual sensitivity and yearning for wholeness and fulfilment is more immediately combined with divine mercy working in mysterious ways.