

The Exegesis of Genesis in the Early Works of Augustine

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INTRODUCTION

Augustine planned and wrote commentaries on Genesis at least five times during about forty years of his writing career. He started writing the first of these, *De Genesi aduersus Manichaeos* (= *Gn. adu. Man.*), around 388/389, after his return to Thagaste towards the establishment of a small (monastic) community in his home town (*Retractationes* (= *Retr.*) 1.10(9).1) and the second of these, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (= *Gn. litt. inp.*), around 393/394, after his ordination to the priesthood (*Retr.* 1.18(17)). In the *Retr.* 1.10(9) and 1.18(17), Augustine explains at length the method, origin, and end of these first exegetical writings: in the former commentary, by employing the method of allegorical interpretation on the Genesis-Creation Story (Gen. 1-3), he intended to refute Manichaean criticism of the Old Testament; and in the latter commentary, unlike the first one, a literal reading of the six days of Creation was designed for the audience. Yet, this approach was unsuccessful. He stopped writing because of his inexperience as an exegete. Although he realised the necessity to interpret the scriptures literally (*Retr.* 1.18(17).1), Augustine's third attempt was made to show the reader the figurative exegesis of the creation narrative in Genesis 1. It is the last three books of the *Confessions* that appeared about seven years after his first commitment to the literal reading. It might seem that the figurative interpretation on the *Hexaemeron* relates to the fulfilment of the confessions of his spiritual pilgrimage. Consequently, after about fifteen years had passed, he could finish writing a literal interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis by his comprehensive commentary, *De genesi ad litteram* which was probably completed in 415.

It is interesting to note that Augustine reverted again and again to the exposition of the beginning of Genesis. He could not lose concentration and focus on the task. We may assume, then, that his effort had been made to continue to treat some difficulties involved in Genesis, even when he did not get to work on his commentary. In fact, already before the publication of his first commentary, some explications of Genesis can be realised in the earliest works of Augustine. Although for Augustine's early views on Genesis we must take to his early commentaries (*Gn. adu. Man.* and *Gn. litt. inp.*), is there any significant tendency towards a comprehensive interpretation? How did he make sense of difficult texts from Genesis? In this paper, the investigation of this topic will principally focus on Augustine's early works around before he gave up his plan of writing the first literal interpretation in 393/394. What I intend to do is, first, to examine some difficulties which Augustine faced in providing a first literal reading of

Genesis 1:26-27 in *Gn. litt. inp.* Then I shall turn to some interpretations in his early works. For the sake of clarity, I have divided these writings along chronological lines into two groups, and within each group, I shall consider the status of the topic. Finally, I shall venture an explanation for the change in the way in which Augustine dealt with the difficult passages, which is surely tied to the significance of his early exegesis of Genesis.

AUGUSTINE'S LITERAL READING IN *GN. LITT. INP.*

When Augustine started writing *Gn. litt. inp.*, as he tells us in *Retr.* 1.18(17), he seemed to appreciate the importance of the exegetical method of his present commentary. He considered it as a challenging programme for his ability:

how what was said there could be understood in keeping with its historical character. In this very arduous and difficult work as well I wanted to get a sense of what I was capable of, ...¹

At the point where he exerts himself to comment on Gen. 1:26, he would not resort to an allegorical way of reading. In the case of his former commentary, *Gn. adu. Man.*, which was written about four or five years before, he would rather have recourse to an allegorical interpretation. Because a literal interpretation could not avoid the serious danger with which the Manichaeans condemn the ordinary believers of the Catholic faith to accept what they consider blasphemy.² Yet, the present commentary, *Gn. litt. inp.*, remains incomplete. It can thus be seen how in *Gn. litt. inp.* the literal interpretation comes to be more highly demanded and more closely linked to his understanding of Genesis story rather than being in conflict with it. Augustine firmly adheres to its exegetical method in this commentary.

In *Gn. litt. inp.* Augustine managed to deal with the first chapter of Genesis up to Gen. 1:26: 'And God said: "Let us make man to our image and likeness."³ At this point (16.55-60), he left it unfinished. When he was revising his writings in *Retr.*, Augustine found this work among them and hesitated over whether to destroy it. But he did not abandon the commentary. Finally in 427 he complemented his explanation of the verse 26 (16.61-62) and published it as 'an indication of [my] early attempts' (*Retr.* 1.18(17)). Why, then, did Augustine stop interpreting the following verses in Genesis? Both in 16.55-60 and the supplementary part (16.61-62), he tried to expound on the phrase 'to

¹ Aug., *Retr.* 1.18(17): 'quemadmodum possent secundum historicam proprietatem quae ibi dicta sunt accipi, volui experiri in hoc quoque negotiosissimo ac difficillimo opere quid valerem; ...' Eng. trans. in R. Teske, WSA I/2 (2010) 78.

² Cf. J. J. O'Meara, *The Creation of Man in St. Augustine's De Genesi ad Litteram* (Villanova 1980) 14.

³ Aug., *Gn. litt. inp.* 16.55: 'Et dixit Deus, Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram.' Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/13 (2002) 146.

our image and likeness' (*ad imaginem et similitudinem dei*), and summarised his view as follows:

in which we read that God said Let us make man to our image and likeness, insofar as the likeness of God to which man was made can be taken to be the very Word of God, that is to say, the only-begotten Son; nor of course that man himself is that same image and likeness, equal to the Father.⁴

It is noteworthy that, without any hesitancy, Augustine considers the human likeness to God in relation to the participation in the Likeness, who is the Word and the Son of the Father. Although, in the additional sections (16.61-62), he quotes a passage from 1 Cor. 11:7⁵ that urges the reader to reconsider the words 'to our image' as 'to his own image, and that is the Trinity itself'⁶, there would be no reason why his first literal exposition was discontinued altogether. Thus it may be seen that the serious difficulty Augustine faced was the literal interpretation of the next verse 27, particularly the phrase: 'male and female he created them'. Since he saw the humanity created by God as an incorporeal soul with a spiritual body, it would be a seemingly impossible to think about the 'male and female' who had not fallen into their mortal body.

AUGUSTINE'S EARLIEST REFERENCES TO GEN. 1.26-27

We have seen that, in his first literal exegesis, the problems encountered when interpreting Genesis were, first, that Gen. 1:26 speaks of human nature as the image and likeness of God and second, that the verse 27b might demand him a literal interpretation of 'male and female'. Then, I shall turn to some citations of these verses found in his earliest works, and in the next section, examine some works written around the same period when Augustine began *Gn. litt. inp.* around 393/394.

Augustine cites the verse 26 of Genesis 1 as early as the Cassiciacum dialogues (386-387). In *Soliloquia* 1.1.4, the citation is found in the prayer to the whole Trinity, the one God, "who made man to your own image and likeness", which he who knows himself recognises.⁷ This fourth part of the prayer that draws explicit attention to God's governing of the universe concludes with the text of Gen. 1:26. Yet, he does not give any

⁴ Aug., *Gn. litt. inp.* 16.61: 'in quibus legimus dixisse Deum: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram, ut similitudo Dei ad quam factus est homo, ipsum Dei Verbum, hoc est unigenitus Filius accipi possit: non utique ut ipse sit eadem imago et similitudo aequalis Patri'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/13 (2002) 150.

⁵ 1 Cor. 11:7: 'A man, certainly, ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God'.

⁶ Aug., *Gn. litt. inp.* 16.61: 'ad imaginem suam, quod est ipsa Trinitas'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/13 (2002) 151.

⁷ Aug., Sol. 1.1.4: 'Qui fecisti hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem tuam (Gn 1, 26), quod qui se ipse novit agnoscit'. Eng. trans. in G. Watson, *Saint Augustine: Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul* (Warminster 1990) 29.

explanation for the verse, apart from a kind of Delphic oracle: 'know thyself'. And in *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* 1.26.49 (388), we find an allusion to Gen. 1:26,⁸ in which he argues for the necessity of divine precept to love one's neighbour as oneself. But here also he leaves the text open to the explanation. In *Gn. adu. Man.* (388/389), when he deals with the first chapter of Genesis, Augustine's primary concern with Manichaean anthropomorphic interpretation directs the audience to read it for spiritual insights. Indeed, he thinks of the image and likeness of God in the 'interior man' in terms of the expression of human superiority to the other animals.⁹ In *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.19.30, he expounds on the verse 27b, 'Male and female he made them', and the subsequent divine blessing in Gen. 1:28, thereby indicating 'a chaste coupling of male and female' and 'a spiritual brood of intellectual and immortal joys'.¹⁰ Again in Book 2 (2.12.16), Augustine offers an allegorical interpretation which describes their union as the superior (rational) and the inferior (appetite) aspects of the soul. Hence, in his first commentary on Genesis, he does not yield a literal interpretation on these verses.

In *De vera religione* (written in c. 390 at Thagaste), which is the last of his works prior to his ordination to the priesthood, there are several citations of Gen. 1:26. It is evident from these that not only does Augustine regard the soul's complete transformation into the eternal life within the septenary ascending stages towards God as its being made according to the image and likeness of God (26.49),¹¹ but also evidently defines the image and likeness as the Son (43.81-44.82).

the Father of Truth is supremely the One, the Father of his own Wisdom, which is called his likeness, in no respect at all unlike him, and his image because it is from him. And so the Son is rightly said to be from him, everything else to be through him.¹²

Thus, among his earliest works, Augustine has viewed God's image and likeness as the Son of God. But he has not yet worked out a literal interpretation of Gen. 1:27b.

⁸ Aug., *De moribus* 1.26.49: 'non enim contentus fuit uno, qui sciret aliud Deum esse aliud hominem; atque interesse tantum, quantum inter eum qui creavit et id quod ad Creatoris similitudinem creatum est'.

⁹ Aug., *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.16.25-26 and 2.7.9. At this point Augustine's dependence on Ambrose's *Hexaemeron* is clearly admitted: see R. Teske, *Augustine of Hippo: Philosopher, Exegete, and Theologian* (Milwaukee 2009) 277.

¹⁰ Aug., *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.19.30: 'casta coniunctio masculi et feminae ... et spiritalis fetus intelligibilium et immortalium gaudiorum'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/13 (2002) 58.

¹¹ Aug., *vera rel.*, 26.49: 'Sextam omnimodae mutationis in aeternam vitam et usque ad totam oblivionem vitae temporalis transeuntem perfecta forma, quae facta est ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/8 (2005) 62.

¹² Aug., *vera rel.*, 43.81: 'summe unus est Pater Veritatis, Pater suae Sapientiae, quae nulla ex parte dissimilis, similitudo eius dicta est et imago, quia de ipso est. Itaque etiam Filius recte dicitur ex ipso, cetera per ipsum'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA I/8 (2005) 85.

AUGUSTINE'S REFERENCES TO GEN. 1.26-27 AROUND 393/394

We come now to consider the second group of his works which, written around the same period *Gn. litt. inp.* was started, contains *Sermon* 1 and 259, *Epistle* 23, *De sermone domini in monte* and *Contra Adimantum*.

The first to be considered is *Sermon* 1, dating from the period 391-393 (394-395 or before 396), against the Manichees, in which Augustine compares the passage of Genesis 1:1¹³ with the opening of the Gospel of John¹⁴ (*Sermo* 1.1), and interprets the 'beginning' as the son of God through whom all things were made. With reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is the three persons in God, it is interesting that, in the last part of this sermon (1.5), Augustine assumes that the Manichaeans have also accepted it, despite their consistent rejection of the God of the Old Testament. For this, a passage of Genesis 1:26-27 is crucial: 'Let us make man to our image and likeness'; and 'God made man to the image of God'.

Though even if it was not plain, and trinity were not being suggested to perceptive readers under the naming of unity, that is no reason why the beginning of the gospel should strike careful readers as contradicting the beginning of Genesis.¹⁵

The approach that the Christian should discern the inner harmony of the scriptures is an essential one for Augustine's theory of biblical exegesis. Hence, not only does he imply that the image of God the Trinity is the only Son, but also speaks of the Son in another texts as Matthew 5:34-35¹⁶ and Romans 11:33-36.¹⁷

Next *Sermon* 259, preached around 393 (394 or c. 400) at the Basilica of Peace in Hippo Regius, contains the exposition of the words from the Gospel of John 20:19-29. In this sermon, after clarifying how the 'eighth day, octave, day represents the new life at

¹³ Gen. 1:1: 'In the beginning God made heaven and earth'.

¹⁴ John 1:1-3: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was made nothing'.

¹⁵ Aug., *Sermo* 1.5: 'Quamquam etiam si non appareret, et sub unitatis appellatione Trinitas intellegendibus insinueretur; non ideo contrarium principio Geneseos, Evangelii principium videri debuit prudentibus'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA III/1 (1990) 171.

¹⁶ Matt. 5:34-35: 'But I tell you not to swear at all, neither by heaven, because it is God's throne, nor by the earth, because it is his footstool'.

¹⁷ Romans 11:33-36: 'Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has come to know the minds of the Lord, or who has ever been his counselor? Or who has first given him anything and will be rewarded for it? Because from him and through him and in him are all things. To him be glory for ever and ever'.

the end of the age',¹⁸ Augustine shows his congregations the seventh day as the future rest the saints will have on earth. He also talks about the sixth day and with the citation of Gen. 1:27a: 'in the image of God', offers a spiritual interpretation of this sixth day:

...in this age, as in the sixth day of the whole course of time, we are made new in baptism in order to receive the image of our maker.¹⁹

Epistle 23, dating from between 391 and 395, addressed to Maximinus, the Donatist bishop on Sinita in Numidia, provides a passage from Genesis 1:26 in its opening, in which Augustine explains the reason why he shows proper respect and consideration for the addressee at the time of his first contact with the Donatist bishop.

I, therefore, willingly call you "honorable" on the basis of that rule by which I know that you are a human being and know that a human being has been made to the image and likeness of God and placed in a position of honor by the very order and law of nature.²⁰

Yet, he does not offer a further explanation for the verse 27. And this is the only example found in his letters written before 393/394.

I shall turn to his citations from his writing, *De sermone domini in monte*, written in c. 392/396. Since Augustine is concerned with the study of scripture after his ordination, in the first part of the book 1 (1.2.4-4.12) we read Augustine's first extended exegesis on the New Testament, in which he interprets the eight maxims (Matt 5:3-10) in terms of the ascent of the soul. With regard to the seventh step, he explains twice as follows:

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.' Where there is no contention, there is perfect peace. And, because nothing can contend against God, the children of God are peacemakers; for, of course, children ought to have a likeness to their father.²¹

¹⁸ Aug., *Sermo* 259.2: 'Octavus ergo iste dies in fine saeculi novam vitam significat'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA III/7 (1993) 175.

¹⁹ Aug., *Sermo* 259.2: 'in isto tempore, quasi sexto die totius saeculi, renovamur in Baptismo, ut recipiamus imaginem Conditoris nostri'. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA III/7 (1993) 176.

²⁰ Aug., *Ep.* 23.1: 'Honorabilem igitur ex ea regula te libenter appello, qua novi te esse hominem, et novi hominem ad imaginem Dei et similitudinem factum, et in honore positum ipso ordine et iure naturae,...'. Eng. trans. in R. Teske, WSA II/1 (2001) 63. Cf. Aug., *En. in Ps.* 49.28 (dated 412; 400-411; 412).

²¹ Aug., *serm. dom. m.* 1.2.9: 'Beati pacifici, quoniam ipsi filii Dei vocabuntur. In pace perfectio est, ubi nihil repugnat; et ideo filii Dei pacifici, quoniam nihil resistit Deo, et utique filii similitudinem patris habere debent'. Eng. trans. in D. J. Kavanagh, FaCh 11 (1951) 23.

Finally, the seventh maxim is wisdom itself; it is the contemplation of truth, making the whole man peaceful, and taking on the likeness to God. It is summed up in this way: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.'²²

There is an interesting element in his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount that should be indicated, such as the point that the human likeness to God is clearly defined as the Son. He previously commented on Gen. 1:26 in *De vera religione* (43.81); there he was also concerned with the soul's ascension towards God. At this point, Augustine consistently regards the likeness as lying in human soul in virtue of which 'this same pre-eminent faculty of man [sc. mind and reason] is itself subject to a still higher power, which is Truth Itself, the only begotten Son of God'.²³

The last work examined in this section is *Contra Adimantum*, written around 392 (or 394) when he was still a priest, treats the Manichaean criticism of the incompatibility of the Old and the New Testament (*Retr.* 1.22(21).1). The procedure of this work is to cite passages from a work of Adimantus, which came into Augustine's hands, and show them to the reader with his comments. Since this work follows the sequence of the Old Testament, in its first part (chapter 1-5), we read the Manichaean oppositions to Genesis and Augustine's responses. In 5.1-2, first, Augustine identified the Manichee's claim that the words in Gen. 1:26, 'Let us make man to our image and likeness', were opposed to the words of Christ, who called the Jews children of the devil (John 8:44) and a brood of vipers (Matt. 3:7, 23:33). Then, he marked a significant difference in these verses as follows:

They do not understand that the former statement, that man was made to the image and likeness to God, was said of man before he sinned, but that the latter statement in the gospel, You are from your father, the devil, is said to sinners and unbelievers.²⁴

Although, later in *Retr.*, he mentioned another use of the term 'sons' in the scriptures (*Retr.* 1.22(21).3), it is clear that he regarded the image and likeness to God as the son of God. It is noteworthy that in the next section of this chapter (5.2) Augustine cited another passage necessary to comprehend the meaning of the text in Genesis.

²² Aug., *serm. dom. m.* 1.3.10: 'Postremo est septima ipsa sapientia, id est contemplatio veritatis, pacificans totum hominem et suscipiens similitudinem Dei, quae ita concluditur: Beati pacifici, quoniam ipsi filii Dei vocabuntur'. Eng. trans. in D. J. Kavanagh, *FaCh* 11 (1951) 26.

²³ Aug., *serm. dom. m.* 1.2.9: '...id est mens et ratio subiciatur potiori, quod est ipsa veritas unigenitus Dei Filius'. Eng. trans. in D. J. Kavanagh, *FaCh* 11 (1951) 24.

²⁴ Aug., *C. Adim.*, 5.1: 'Non intellegunt illud esse dictum de homine antequam peccaret, quod factus est ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei; hoc autem quod in Evangelio est: Vos ex patre diabolo estis, peccatoribus et infidelibus dici'. Eng. trans. in R. Teske, *WSA* I/19 (2006) 181.

A man certainly ought not to veil his head since he is the image and glory of God, but a woman is the glory of her husband. (1 Cor 11:7)²⁵

And Augustine advised the audience as follows:

in order that we might clearly understand that man was made to the image of God, ...according to his spiritual formation, the same apostle admonishes us that, having stripped off the habit of sin, that is, our old self, we should put on the new life of Christ, which he calls our new self.²⁶

With regard to his view of the renewal of the self, it was confirmed by the addition of relevant messages from Colossians 3:9-10²⁷ and John 1:12²⁸. Thus, it may be that, at this point of the work, Augustine had in mind that the words 'made to the image of God' is understood as the Son of God in terms of the spiritual transformation into 'our new self'.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have shown, in this paper, that Augustine's view of Gen. 1:26 evolved rather gradually during about several years between the Cassiciacum dialogue (387) and *Gn. litt. inp.* (393/394). In the third section of this paper I have offered certain signposts which enable us to understand more clearly what he was speaking of a difficult passage of Genesis, how he was shaping the interpretation of Gen. 1:26-27a, and not interpreting the verse 27b ('male and female he created them') at all. In fact, as shown in the first section, he could expound on the words, 'to our image and likeness' in *Gn. litt. inp.* and understand the human likeness to God in terms of the participation in the Likeness, who is the Word and the Son of the Father. Yet, no doubt it was not only able to be achieved through Augustine's effort in this commentary, but also by the continued commitment to the text in another works. In the case of Gen. 1:27b, once after offering an allegorical interpretation in *Gn. adu. Man.*, there were no citations in his writings before 393/394.

Why did Augustine continue the interpretation of Gen. 1:26, while passing over Gen. 1:27b? It is interesting to note that the same passage from 1 Cor. 11:7 is found in both *Contra Adimantum* and the complementary part of *Gn. litt. inp.* (written in 427). From this verse Augustine would proceed with the literal interpretation and show the reason

²⁵ Aug., *C. Adim.*, 5.2: 'Vir quidem non debet velare caput, cum sit imago et gloria Dei, mulier autem gloria viri'. Eng. trans. in R. Teske, WSA I/19 (2006) 182.

²⁶ Aug., *C. Adim.*, 5.2: 'Et ut manifeste intellegatur, ...sed secundum spiritalem conformationem factum esse hominem ad imaginem Dei, idem apostolus monet ut exuti consuetudine peccatorum, id est, vetere homine, induamur nova vita Christi, quem novum hominem appellat'. Eng. trans. in R. Teske, WSA I/19 (2006) 182.

²⁷ Col. 3:9-10: 'Stripping off your old self with its actions, put on your new self that is being renewed in the knowledge of God in accord with the image of him who created it'.

²⁸ John 1:12: 'He gave them the power to become sons of God'.

why Gen. 1:26 (*Let us make man to our image and likeness*) uses the plurals '*faciamus*' and '*nostram*' if God made man to the image of the Son. It would thus seem reasonable to suppose that Augustine did anticipate the complementary reading in showing the reader its passage in *Contra Adimantum*. The subset of relevant material for the interpretation of Gen. 1:26 has been referred to and indeed texts such as the emphasis on the whole Trinity, the expression of human superiority to other animals, and the spiritual transformation of the soul, which were explicitly repeated in his early works. Despite the fact that, in these works, the literal reading has not given by him, these elements really contribute towards the understanding of Gen. 1:26 in both *Contra Adimantum* and *Gn. litt. inp.* An important factor which can be said to have combined these elements together is Augustine's primary concern for the internal unity and harmony of the scriptures. Some biblical texts were persistently charged by Manichaeans with the conflict between the Old and the New Testaments. Hence, particularly after his ordination to the priesthood in 391, together with his spending much more time on the study of the scriptures, this Genesis text would be considered in the context of their relation with one another, pointing as it referred to a correlation between the image and likeness of the Son and its spiritual implications. While almost ignoring Gen. 1:27b, the Manichaeans, at least in the works of Augustine, have been of particular interest to the opposition between the words of Genesis and that of Christ. This is the case, too, with Augustine's special concern.