

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

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0 Introduction

0.1 *De Genesi ad litteram Imperfectus Liber*

During about forty years of his writing career Augustine endeavoured to write an explanation on the beginning of Genesis at least five times. He started writing the second of these, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (hereafter abbreviated to *Imperfectus Liber*), around 393. In his *Retractationes* 1.18 Augustine described at length the origin and end of his first task of producing a literal reading of the six days of Creation, a *hexaemeron*. When he undertook the literal exposition of Genesis in *Imperfectus Liber*, Augustine found himself still inexperienced in Scriptural exegesis. It is at this point that he was working his way up to Gen. 1:26 that he gave up his plan.

0.2 Working Hypotheses

Little attention has been focused on the second of Augustine's expositions of Genesis. This work has been eclipsed by his exhaustive commentary, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (401–415). And Augustine himself advised his readers "to read the twelve books that I composed much later"¹ in order to judge what he himself found dissatisfied with the unfinished commentary. Before reviewing his works in *Retractationes* 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 in 427 he finally published his writing.

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 Scriptures²

Although concerning Augustine's early views on Genesis we must consider his first attempts at literal exegesis, is there any other significant feature 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 bilateral commitment to the explanation of a literal reading in his works. Next I explore Augustine's way of exposition in *Imperfectus Liber*. Finally I shall argue some significance and consequences of his first literal interpretation.

1 Augustine's commitment to the literal interpretation

¹ *Retr.* 1.18, trans. M. I. Bogan, FaCh 60, p. 77.

² *Retr.* 1.18, FaCh 60, p. 77.

1.1 Augustine's testimonia

It appears from his *Retractationes*³ that when Augustine began writing *Imperfectus Liber*, he did attend to the difference between the exegetical method of his present commentary and that of his former one, *De genesi contra manichaeos* (abbreviated to *Contra manichaeos*), which was written about four or five years before at the monastic community in Thagaste. The distinction is clearly stated at the same passage. As he related in *Retractationes* 1.18, he intended to explain “the words of Scripture according to their allegorical meaning” in *Contra manichaeos*: that is to say, he had recourse to an allegorical exegesis. Although at that time the literal interpretation could not avoid the serious danger with which the manichaeans had condemned the ordinary believers of the Catholic faith to accept what they considered blasphemy,⁴ he did not admit that the anti-manichaean commentary was collapsed. With regard to the present commentary, Augustine reviewed it as a challenging programme for his unskilled 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 work⁵

At the point where he exerted himself to comment on Gen. 1:26, Augustine did not resort to a figurative way of reading done in his earlier endeavour. Instead the work remained unfinished until 427 when it was partially revised and complemented. It can thus be seen how in his *Imperfectus liber* the literal interpretation came to be more highly demanded and more closely linked to his understanding of Genesis story rather than being in conflict with it. In *Imperfectus liber* Augustine firmly adhered to its exegetical method.

1.2 Aspect of the meanings of “ad litteram”

The title words of the commentary, that is to say, “ad litteram” themselves reveal the high consciousness of his method-centred approach. When he intended to publish the commentary, Augustine “determined that its title should be *One Unfinished Book on the Literal Meaning of Genesis*”.⁶ However, nowhere in the commentary did Augustine mention the words “ad litteram”. And he did never make clear what he defined by such a phrase. Why did he choose the heading?

Apart from such lexical deficiency, what evidence is there for the fact that around 393 Augustine's view of the literal interpretation shared a number of understandably similar characteristics? It must be understood that his evaluation of a literal reading had been consistently negative. For reading text “according to the letter” is defined as “to understand it exactly as the letter sounds”.⁷ And if anyone wanted to take what was said, “there is nothing more pernicious than to take whatever is there literally”.⁸ Augustine explicitly stated his disapproval of its exegetical method.

Another texts which are important to his view of the literal interpretation are found later in *De genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*. Augustine repeatedly expressed the need for discovering the literal meaning of passages.⁹ Although he did not deny that the meaning intended by the author had an allegorical as well as literal sense, he was primarily concerned with the literal interpretation. Augustine's creative relevant to the literal meaning moved away from his early view. And this corresponds to what he finally decided to entitle his small commentary.

³ *Retr.* 1.18.

⁴ R. Teske, *FaCh* 84, p. 5, n. 10: J. J. O'Meara, *The Creation of Man in St. Augustine's De Genesi ad Litteram*, Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1980: p. 14.

⁵ *Retr.* 1.18, *FaCh* 60, p. 76.

⁶ *Retr.* 1.18, *FaCh* 60, p. 77.

⁷ *Contra manichaeos* 2.2.3, *FaCh* 84, p. 95.

⁸ *De utilitate credendi* 3.9, LCL 6, p. 298.

⁹ *De genesi ad litteram* 2.9.22, ACW 41, p. 60: 8.1.2, ACW 42, p. 33: 8.1.4, ACW 42, p. 34: 8.2.5, ACW 42, p. 35: 8.4.8, ACW 42, p. 38: 11.1.2, ACW 42, p. 134: 11.2.4, ACW 42, p. 136.

With his attitude stressing the importance of a literal reading, provided that Augustine himself had already recognised his incomplete attempt as a literal reading, I presume that the very words “ad litteram” would comprise somehow its another aspect of meaning which he felt the need to accept and adopt. Even though his revision in 427 does appear to present a proper picture of his early failure, it also cautions us against reading earlier texts in view of later development. But this small commentary undoubtedly gave a literal reading for 25 verses. Hence, if Augustine from his early stages regarded its method as necessary and useful, what did he consider to be its characteristics and how did he refer to it?

2 Exegetical method in *Imperfectus Liber*

2.1 Four ways of interpretation

In *Imperfectus Liber* Augustine did never mention the words “ad litteram”. 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.¹⁰

In fact we find here the idea that, despite its uniqueness in his corpus except in *De utilitate credendi* 3.5, the way of reading “according to history” intends for the sense of what has happened and is being narrated. And in this commentary Augustine had been mostly applying the exposition “according to history” to the texts of Genesis.

It is also noteworthy that this way of reading aims at “deeds done” (*res gesta*). And it can be seen that it interprets the sentence which describes a narrative account, not a single word which consists of articulated and letter sounds. Whether or not a word is linked to a particular thing and/or to a transferred sign, its meaning would be conferred by a word-giver (user) except mishearing, deception, slips of the tongue, misunderstanding, and the like. However, each individual word can not reveal one’s thinking as a mental activity, even if a language constituting community presuppose its component parts. Their various combination would rather serve as a starting point for one’s thought. This exposition thus should not 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 that the word “events” (*gesta*) occurs; indeed, it is an expression which is often mentioned in *De genesi ad litteram*,¹¹ applied to the account of events and historical facts as the literal interpretation should 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*).¹²

Let them, therefore, examine the matter more closely to see where their presupposition leads, and let them try with us first to take in the proper sense all

¹⁰ *Imperfectus Liber* 2.5, FaCH 84, p. 147. Concerning the interesting questions about its sources, see R. Teske, Fach 84, p. 32, n. 60 and M. Dulaey’s article.

¹¹ *De genesi ad litteram* 1.1.1: 1.17.34: 6.21.32: 8.1.2: 8.1.4: 8.4.8: 8.5.9: 8.7.13: 9.12.20: 9.12.22: 9.14.24: 9.16.30: 11.31.41: 11.34.45: 11.39.52: 11.41.57.

¹² *De genesi ad litteram* 1.1.1, ACW 41, p. 19.

the events (*gesta*) narrated.¹³

This view of the literal interpretation can be seen to correspond to the exposition “ad litteram” referred to above. The idea that the literal interpretation should be designed for the sentence which reports the narrative of events and deeds done if one is to find the proper meaning of texts would help to pave our way towards the identification of the “ad litteram” with the literal exegesis in his full commentary. Hence, at this point I suggest that Augustine’s literal reading in *Imperfectus Liber* is a pioneering effort which can not be paralleled by the “ad litteram” exegesis in his another early works.

2.2 Aspect of Scriptural texts

When Augustine enumerated four ways of interpretation stated above, he first, for example, spoke of the method “according to history” (*secundum historiam*) and then, in turn, gave an explanation of “history” (*historia*). After offering us the historical interpretation, he did not get on to explain the mode of exposition which reads the scriptures 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 did make an easy transition 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 interpreting the scriptures. What effect did this easy move have?

It seems that this transition raises an intriguing question. The move clearly suggests the connection or merger between the content of the scriptures and their expositions.¹⁴ And within the scriptures there are different kinds of texts. Along with providing this connection, some of the scriptures treated as “history” are certainly explained from the viewpoint of the historical exposition. In fact, although in his exposition of Gen. 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 and narrative meaning. Such an effort enables us to assume that Augustine defined Genesis as “history”. The conception of “history” thus served as the ground on which the exposition in *Imperfectus Liber* has rested.

However, despite his notion of “history” Augustine did not think it necessary for scriptural exposition to fix the bond between the texts and their exposition 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.¹⁵

Augustine is still saying that there are different types of texts in the whole scriptural canon. And he clearly admits Genesis story is written “in a style proper to history”. However, notwithstanding the difficulty of finding the literal sense, he stressed the necessity of finding both the literal and figurative sense in Genesis. Thus, his emphasis on the modes of exposition would allow him to loosen the connection between them: these books can be simultaneously explained in terms of both the past-oriented and future-oriented exegesis. This, again, means that Augustine came close to saying that this division of the texts would not function as the basis for the interpretation. More interested in the possibility of reading the scriptures either from the viewpoint of its historical or figurative sense, he will be less interested in distinguishing the different kinds of texts. And he was feeling his way towards another conception of texts: if scriptural texts

¹³ *De genesi ad litteram* 8.1.4, ACW 42, p. 34.

¹⁴ Or rather I would say that the distinction between the kinds of text and their expositions in Augustine’s mind tended to merge: see also *Contra Manichaeos* 2.2.3.

¹⁵ *De genesi ad litteram* 8.1.2, ACW 42, p. 33.

would be less rigidly confined to the past and future events, they come to be mutually merged and be almost synonymous.

3 Conclusion

Augustine's first literal reading of Genesis was not completed. It seems reasonable to suppose that he was encountering some difficulties in providing a literal reading of Genesis: one possibility is that the phrase "male and female he created them" (Gen. 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 indicate even tentatively another reason: it is within his view of the aspect of scriptural texts. Although he has already started attempting a literal reading which would anticipate the historical mode of exposition developed later in *De genesi ad litteram*, Augustine had not yet work out the idea of double aspect or stratum of the scriptures. At the time when he started attempting his first literal reading, Augustine could not open the possibility of expounding the scriptures as either history or prophecy. However, his literal exposition had already realised its essential characteristics in *Imperfectus Liber*. It is the significance and impact of the small commentary.