

EXEGESIS AND ECCLESIOLOGY IN AUGUSTINE'S CITY OF GOD

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Book 14 of Augustine's *City of God* ends with a famous recapitulation of the character of the two cities that Augustine has been discussing ever since the theme of the two cities was introduced in the prologue to book 1. Reviewing what he has accomplished to this point, Augustine writes, "We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self."¹ Yes, we readers nod our heads, read the few sentences left in book 14 quickly, and then skip to book 19, where our interest resumes as Augustine himself resumes talking about something worthy of a contemporary sophisticated reader like oneself, myself at any rate, namely, his political theology, as we might call it. It could be that, to alleviate our scholarly consciences, we might dip into the beginning of book 15, where we read, as we have been expecting (not to say dreading), that Augustine, having spoken of the origin of the two cities in the angels and in the first human couple, will "undertake to describe their development from the time when that first pair began to produce offspring up to the time when mankind will cease to reproduce itself," for "the development of these two societies [*societates*] that form my subject lasts throughout this whole stretch of time, or era, in which the dying yield place to the newly-born who succeed them."²

As feared, Augustine immediately then turns to the story of Cain and Abel, and the sophisticated reader immediately realizes he or she can skip, or (for the more scrupulous) skim, what promises to be an uncritical, or rather precritical, exercise in biblical fundamentalism that simply rehearses the biblical narrative of salvation history as though it really were history straight up, and as though this were biblical exegesis that had even the faintest chance of revealing what the biblical texts actually *mean*, as opposed to what Augustine reads into them. Perhaps we can read these later books of the *City of God* to discover *Augustine's* thinking, and of course, that is almost a tautology, but certainly not as an exercise in serious biblical interpretation. Wait—since the result will seemingly be that Augustine thought it *was* serious biblical

¹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.28, in *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina* (hereafter, CCSL) (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 1953–), 48:451, lns. 1–3. All English translations from the Latin in CCSL are my own.

² Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.1 (CCSL, 48:453, lns. 23–27).

interpretation, we might just skip reading these books even for the purpose of discovering Augustine's thinking, since, much to our chagrin, we might find its claims eminently dismissible.

Of course, you are all good readers of Augustine, and the only person I have embarrassed is myself, since for years I really did think this way, perhaps without realizing it fully. In any event I happily and without qualms had dismissed these books for years. By now, I have hopefully at least embarrassed myself into looking more closely.

If we go back to the last chapter of book 14 and read more carefully, Augustine has given anyone who wants to take his exegesis more seriously a lot of hints about how to do it. Commenting as he goes, he quotes Romans 1:21–25 at length, a signature passage in the *City of God* and used extensively in his critique of what was, in his view, the best of pagan philosophical culture. He cites it here to recapitulate that critique. The best of pagan philosophical culture was indeed “able to know God,” but: “[They] *did not honor him as God, nor did they give thanks to him, but they dwindled into futility in their thoughts, and their senseless heart was darkened: in asserting their wisdom—that is, exalting themselves in their wisdom, under the domination of pride—they became foolish, and changed the glory of the imperishable God into an image representing a perishable man, or birds or beasts or reptiles, for in the adoration of idols of this kind, they were either leaders or followers of the people, and they worshipped and served created things instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever.*” By contrast, Augustine goes on to say, “in the Heavenly City . . . man's only wisdom is the devotion that rightly worships the true God, and looks for its reward in the fellowship of the saints, not only holy men but also holy angels, *so that God may be all in all* (1 Cor 15:28).”³

Augustine is using these passages from St. Paul to recapitulate his work in the *City of God* so far, and thereby to recapitulate interpretive claims on the meaning of the Bible that he has been making. One is that Scripture (read correctly, according to the Rule of Faith),⁴ including the whole of the Law, condemns idolatry as the fundamental sin, and enjoins instead the true worship of the one true God as true wisdom. True worship, and therefore true wisdom, is not something that has been discovered by any philosophical sect seeking wisdom, not even those whose philosophical discoveries have led them to truths and concepts that are useful for those who do worship truly. In order to discover what constitutes true worship, one must turn to Scripture, for even the wise men of the world, it turns out, are constitutively implicated in idolatry. One will not see or understand what idolatry is from a point of view within any of their systems of teaching because they themselves

³ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 14.28 (CCSL 48:451–52, lns. 12–27).

⁴ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 5.7 (CCSL 48:459, lns. 15–19).

are committed to idolatry. One can say that idolatry, precisely as idolatry, is an invisible sin, simply the way of the world, until it is revealed for what it is by the prophetic perspective of the Bible, and for Augustine this includes the Law and the Psalms, for Moses and David were prophets. Prophecy is not simply telling the future. The prophetic points to the future, it is true, but precisely by affording a perspective on the present that enables you to distinguish a dead end (idolatry) for what it is and to see the true dynamism at work in the world, one that does not, in the first instance, arise from the world, but rather is, strictly speaking, heavenly. The heavenly perspective, when present in this world, is prophetic.

Does it see the world truly? It sees all too well the way in which any given political community in this world, any "city," "loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders" and how such cities, in their "lust for domination," seek "glory from human beings."⁵ But is this not just human community? Is there any other kind? The claim of prophecy is that there is another kind of human community: one that does not "glory in itself," but "in the Lord"; one that does not look for glory from human beings, "but finds its highest glory in God, the witness of a good conscience"; one that does not love its own strength, its own power or virtue (all three terms can translate the one Latin word *virtus*), but rather says, with the prophetic psalmist, "I will love you, my Lord, my strength" (Ps 18:1). From this heavenly or prophetic perspective, all of the various kingdoms and political communities have a common trait: their self-absorption, their fascination with their own power, their belief that this power is what life is all about and, with its attendant glory, what is ultimately worth seeking above anything else. Domination is the ultimate good. This is the dead end in history, and it is given a name by Augustine, "the earthly city." Only from a perspective outside of itself can it be seen as a "city," a perspective outside of any of the political communities that it comprises. The "earthly city" is the name of a dead end because it is a name that is no name, it is a name in which the word "city" is used ironically, against itself: there is no "city," no community, no communion, but rather simply the lust for domination that is intrinsically fragmenting of human community. Augustine comments early in book 15: "The earthly city will not be everlasting; for when it is condemned to the final punishment it will no longer be a city." In a way, what is revealed *then* is simply what was *always* true from the prophetic perspective: it is no city and is called such only ironically:

It has its good in this world, and rejoices to participate in it with such gladness as can be derived from things of such a kind. And since this is not the kind of good that causes

⁵ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 14.28 (CCSL 48:451, lns. 4–9).

no frustrations to those enamoured of it, the earthly city is generally divided against itself by litigation, by wars, by battles, by the pursuit of victories that bring death with them or at best are doomed to death. For if any section of that city has risen up in war against another part, it seeks to be victorious over other nations, though it is itself the slave of base passions; and if, when victorious, it is exalted in its arrogance, that victory brings death in its train. . . . Its victory is only doomed to death. For it will not be able to lord it permanently over those whom it has been able to subdue victoriously.⁶

Ironically, Augustine is saying, this—pathetically—is what we think human community amounts to unless we see it all from another perspective, one that cannot come from within the dead end called “the earthly city” but rather a heavenly perspective that, insofar as it is present in this world, would be the dynamism in the world, would have a future. It would not be simply a deconstructive perspective, for that would be simply “philosophical,” broadly speaking, and a commonplace at that, and Augustine has already cited stories from Cicero and others that tend to deconstruct the braggadocio of empires.

But pure deconstruction cannot remove itself from the dead end it deconstructs; it cannot “see” the “earthly city” *as such*, in itself a *construct*, a claim that, though *this kind* of human community has no future, it is not the sum total of human community and of possibility for human solidarity. Pure deconstruction is just another ideology of the earthly city. A truly heavenly perspective must also be constructive, must be constructing, must be a *presence* of true human community, community clearly not reducible to the idolatrous quest for domination and prestige but actually existing as something that does have a future. Is there such a thing? And by that is meant, can such a thing be a *real* community, a presence, not just a disembodied perspective from above? Can there be a true human community that is not constitutively idolatrous, even if it includes idolators? Can there be a human community constitutively formed by true worship?

For Augustine, the biblical answer, the prophetic answer—and this seems correct—is Yes! And that the biblical history is also and at the same time a prophetic history. Prophecy is not simply telling the future (one of the only things you are *sure* to learn in a contemporary course on the prophets). Or perhaps it is better to say that telling the future involves reading the past. But this means reading the past “mystically” and not simply empirically. The two cities are not empirical communities *tout court*, if by “empirical” we mean

⁶ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.4 (CCSL 48:456, lns. 3–16).

exhaustively defined by their corporate, visible reality. Augustine says, in beginning book 15: "I classify the human race into two branches: the one consists of those who live by human standards [*secundum hominem*], the other of those who live according to God's will. I also call these two classes the two cities, speaking *mystice*."⁷ I would translate *mystice*, often translated "allegorically," as "analytically from a biblical-prophetic point of view."

A "city," Augustine tells us later in book 15, is "nothing but a number of people bound together by some tie of fellowship," and that is the sense in which, as Scripture tells us, "Cain established a city" (Gen 4:17).⁸ Cain did not establish *the* earthly city, just an empirical city. The "earthly city" is a "city" only if one is speaking "mystically," that is, biblically-prophetically. As the community that is no community, it cannot be an empirical unity. The heavenly city, for its part, is not an empirical city if by that is meant simply another one of those examples of dead-end community that is no community that we know all too well—and so it too is also called a city speaking *mystice*, that is, biblically-prophetically. The Bible allows us to see history from this "mystical" point of view.

Cain founded a city but is not, simply because of that, a member of the earthly city. He is a member of the earthly city because the Bible indicates that God was displeased with him, and because he founded a city, he appropriately serves as a figure of the earthly city, which can be represented *only as such*, figuratively. Abel, by contrast, whose sacrifice was pleasing to God and who, as a true worshipper, is a member of the heavenly city, also serves as a figure for it: "Scripture tells us that Cain founded a city, whereas Abel, as a pilgrim, did not found one. For the City of the saints is up above, although it produces citizens here below, and in their persons the City is on pilgrimage until the time of its kingdom comes."⁹

Augustine reads the story of Cain and Abel within the framework of a Pauline recapitulation of salvation history:

It is our own experience that, in the individual man, to use the words of the Apostle, "it is not the spiritual element which comes first, but the animal; and afterwards comes the spiritual" (1 Cor 15.46). . . . The same holds true for the whole human race. When those two cities started on their course through the succession of birth and death, the first to be born was a citizen of this world, and later appeared one who was a pilgrim and stranger in the world, belonging

⁷ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.1 (CCSL 48:453, lns. 14–17).

⁸ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.8 (CCSL 48:464, lns. 44–70).

⁹ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.1 (CCSL 48:454, lns. 55–58).

as he did to the City of God. He was predestined by grace, and chosen by grace, by grace a pilgrim below, and by grace a citizen above. As far as he himself is concerned he has his origin from the same lump which was condemned, as a whole lump, at the beginning. But God like a potter (the analogy introduced by the Apostle is not impertinent but very pertinent) made “out of the same lump one vessel destined for honor, and another for dishonor” (Rom 9:21).¹⁰

Reading from the perspective of Paul explains why the City of God is a city that does not—indeed cannot—glory in itself, cannot love its own strength, its virtue, as constitutive of itself as a community, but must say to its God, “I will love you, my Lord, my strength.” It is God’s work that constitutes this community. But, *because* the Lord is its strength, because it is formed by the work of grace, it is not a dead end: insofar as it is present in this world, it has a dynamism, and hence its pilgrim status. Its status as a pilgrim means that it cannot be reduced to simply another community motivated by the desire for domination and praise, and that it therefore has a future. The prophetic view of history is a *view of human communities now*, and it is *that* view that orients it to the future.

Augustine continues to invoke a Pauline hermeneutic to further characterize his biblical, mystical view of history before he sets out on his exposition, this time the allegory of Sarah and Hagar from Galatians. Augustine quotes the whole of 4:21–5:1 and then comments on it extensively. The two women stand for the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem. The earthly Jerusalem is properly called “the holy city” not because it is not itself part of the earthly city, but because this particular part of the earthly city—the earthly city Jerusalem—“was established not for its own sake but in order to signify another City.” Augustine further comments that we “thus find in the earthly city [Jerusalem] a double significance: in one respect it displays its own presence, and in the other it serves by its presence to signify the Heavenly City.”¹¹ Jerusalem is an earthly city, meaning that its politics are not to be construed as a sacralized form of earthly power to be imitated as though it were. The point is that the significance of the earthly Jerusalem transcends its particular form of government and politics. God’s election of Israel—his promise to Abraham, as Augustine clarifies—has made it so that this earthly city, without being sacralized, but remaining an earthly city, *nevertheless* recapitulates God’s purposes in the world and is ordered toward the fulfillment of God’s purposes in the world, the Heavenly City. Note that the *presence* of the

¹⁰ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.1 (CCSL 48:453–54, lns. 31–46).

¹¹ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.2 (CCSL 48:454–55, lns. 4–41).

earthly Jerusalem is part of its significance. Its *presence* is prophetic, pointing to the ultimate *res* of Scripture (as we know also from the *De doctrina*): “[It is a community] where there is no love of a will that is personal and, as we may say, private, but a love that rejoices in a good that is at once shared by all and unchanging—a love that makes ‘one heart’ out of ‘many’ (Acts 4:32), a love that is the wholehearted and harmonious obedience of mutual affection.”¹² It is God’s work, specifically God’s promise, that provides this earthly city with a significance that it cannot give itself and that does not arise from a particular political organization, and yet, because it is in fact a real, physical city, it is an image of God’s work in history, recapitulating it, and *thus* pointing to the eschatological consummation of that work in the completion of a communion that already has a heavenly portion.

Augustine spends the rest of book 15 commenting on various questions and does not finish dealing with the lines of Cain and Seth, Abel’s replacement, and their participation in signifying God’s purposes in history until he arrives at the story of the Flood, and here he pauses to reflect not only on the significance of the ark and associated stories but also on the character of scriptural narrative. Right off the bat Augustine comments, with regard to the ark, that “without doubt, this is a figure of the City of God on pilgrimage in this world, that is, the Church, which is saved through the wood on which was suspended ‘the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim 2:5).”¹³ Even a sanctimonious and pious modern reader like myself might be taken aback by the complete confidence Augustine has that the story of Noah’s ark presents a figure of the Church, herself the presence of the Heavenly Jerusalem in the midst of this world. The ark is an image of a community constituted by God and saved not through its own power or *virtus* but through the wood of the Cross, through the grace that flows from that wood. The pious reader may be further taken aback by Augustine’s confident assertion that, since the measurements of the ark symbolize the human body, and in particular the reality of the human body in which Christ was truly incarnate, the door in its side “surely represents the wound made when the side of the crucified was pierced with the spear.” Surely?! Further, “This [wound], as we know, is the way of entrance for those who come to [Christ], because from that wound *flowed the sacraments with which believers are initiated*.”¹⁴ Augustine refers his reader to the *Contra Faustum* for those who would like more detail. But the main point is that the ark represents the whole Christ, Head and Body, in the Person of the Head from whose wounds—from whose love—flow the

¹² Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.3 (CCSL 48:456, lns. 22–25).

¹³ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15:26 (CCSL 48:493, lns. 8–11).

¹⁴ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.26 (CCSL 48:494, lns. 24–26).

sacraments that constitute or *build up* the one Body. Thus this is a *constructive* project before it is deconstructive.

Augustine is prepared to admit other interpretations, but none can be at variance with the Rule of Faith, and all must be checked against "the harmonious unity of the Catholic faith," which is what the Rule of Faith expresses.¹⁵ But one thing to be ruled out altogether is the objection of Faustus the Manichaean, "who denied that anything was prophesied about Christ in the books of the Hebrews," or his Marcionite forbears, who denied there was a Christian Old Testament.¹⁶ The modern reader, however pious and well intentioned, should take care that we do not land on the Manichaean side of the equation, which refuses the character of prophecy to the "books of the Hebrews" and so refuses to see the Bible *as such*, Old Testament and New. Augustine concedes that "there is certainly a possibility that someone may explain these points more adequately than I can, or one man than another. That does not matter," he assures us, "provided," he continues, "that all that is said has reference to the City of God, which is our subject, the City which is on pilgrimage in this wicked world as though in a flood." Reinforcing his point he says, "This reference must be observed, if the commentator does not wish to stray widely from the sense intended by the writer of this narrative."¹⁷

That certainly ups the ante considerably for the modern reader, pious or not, I suppose, but Augustine's point is one about the very character of the Bible itself. If the reference to the Church, the City of God on pilgrimage in this world is not intended by the writer of the narrative, then the Christian Bible is simply an imposition on the texts and the Manichees and Marcionites before them are right. As we have seen, the claim Augustine is making is a claim made in retrospect based on claims made in the New Testament, and in our case specifically Paul, which are themselves precisely claims to reveal most fully, I would say to recapitulate, the intentions of the biblical narratives. It need not be the case that the authors of the histories are aware of the full significance of the narratives, since they did not have the benefit of the fulfillment of their references (unless it were given by special dispensation, as Augustine seems to believe). Yet it is true, surely, that the narratives were intended to be narratives about God's work in history and therefore the events described *must* be pregnant with meaning that cannot be fully stated before it is realized, if indeed they are to be true historical events themselves.

It is interesting to observe that the Manichaean denial of prophecy is a denial *of a way of looking at history*, not just a denial of future-telling of a purely linear sort that could equally well be pagan soothsaying. It is instead

¹⁵ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.26 (CCSL 48:494, lns. 45–59).

¹⁶ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.26 (CCSL 48:494, lns. 31–34).

¹⁷ Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 15.26 (CCSL 48:494, lns. 34–39).

a *denial of history itself*. It is, from Augustine's point of view, to accept the lie that the earthly city and its vicissitudes of endless (cyclical) successions of dominations, is the sole account of history, *is* history. Is there any landmark, any benchmark, any point of reference in this "wicked world?" Not if you are looking for something stable in it, something constituted and defined within its terms, for that stability will turn out like all the others, to be a projection of imperial pride. What you must find, if you are to find anything, will be something "on pilgrimage," something floating on the tide, as it were, revealing it *as* a flood of evil. Noah's ark is recapitulatory of that landmark, but precisely as not-a-landmark, as floating, as something constructed whose constitution comes not from any excellence human nature begotten of the sexes brings it. Even the interpretation of the three stories of the ark as three levels of Christian life—married, widowed and virginal, seemingly so unlikely to the modern reader—simply describes the Church, which floats because of God's grace, variously distributed, because God constructs it that way. This is not pure deconstruction of imperial claims. It is rather supremely constructive: God's grace through the sacraments of Christ's love builds the Church in history. Her presence as an actual historical community, but one *not* reducible to any power or virtue we can brag about (and someone else can deconstruct in their own attempt to brag), makes it so that there is such a thing as history and not just annals of *res gestae*, of things that happened.

Augustine goes on to explain this in the next chapter:

No one ought to imagine, however, that this account was written for no purpose, or that we are to look here solely for a reliable historical record without any allegorical meaning [*allegoricis significationibus*], or, conversely, that those events are entirely unhistorical, and the language purely symbolic, or that, whatever may be the nature of the story, it has no connection with prophecy about the Church.¹⁸

Augustine both comments about the purpose for which the narrative was written and notes that the preservation of the story is itself an indication of an awareness of its purpose:

Surely it is only a twisted mind that would maintain that books that have been so scrupulously preserved¹⁹ for thousands of years, that have been safeguarded by such a concern for so well-ordered a transmission, were written

¹⁸ *City of God* 15.27 (CCSL 48:495, lns. 1–6).

¹⁹ Preserved, that is, by the Jews; see the related comment about why the Apocrypha are rejected by the Jews earlier, at 15.23 (CCSL 48:491–92, lns. 104–141).

without serious purpose, or that we should consult them
simply for historical facts [*res gestas*].²⁰

We can hear a patristic consensus echoing here, from exegetes as diverse as Origen, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom, that the Old Testament narratives are not simply *res gestae*, even if they are historical. The “allegorical significance” is a meaning that, as Augustine learned from St. Paul, is recapitulatory of God’s work in history once that work is fully revealed. The “allegorical” meaning is thus not a claim merely about another world, a spiritual realm of which the physical is simply the reflection, but rather, the allegory directs us back to history itself. The fullness of the allegorical significance is that it uncovers the *history* more deeply, and in fact reveals that there *is* such a thing as history, a purpose-filled, meaningful story tending toward a consummation, not just *res gestae* that are just as likely to occur in eternal cycles with no significance whatsoever (as Augustine had shown in books 11 and 12).

That, it seems to me, is the fundamental truth of Augustine’s accomplishment, whether or not one believes, on the basis of historical evidence outside of the text, that there was a flood and an ark or not. Augustine himself insists against all comers that the evidence against the story not being “simply a collection of symbols and allegories” is inconclusive, and he even cites Origen in favor of the historicity of the story.²¹

Without wishing to engage in special pleading, I think we can nevertheless make some sense of this for ourselves. What is absolutely clear in Augustine’s claim is that something happened that can be narrated as the biblical text has narrated it, something freighted with mystery as the historical presence of what is truly God’s work and purpose. The ark story presents, Augustine says, a “mystery of the highest solemnity” (*mysterium sacratissimum*),²² meaning that it can be fully understood only when the purposeful work of God that it contains is brought to its completion in Christ, and even then it cannot be discarded as simply a kind of cipher for that work ahead of time. What precisely is the event? In spite of himself, almost, Augustine makes it clear that it is hard to know it fully because it involved something supernatural. For example, Noah, Augustine remarks, did not have to gather the animals, but rather they came at God’s bidding, miraculously. Did that include flies, which are spontaneously generated from decaying matter, and so did not need to be preserved in the ark? Did it include mules (who are male and female but infertile)? It is not actually totally clear what happened. Also,

²⁰ *City of God* 15.27 (CCSL 48:495, lns. 6–9).

²¹ *City of God* 15.27 (CCSL 48:495, lns. 38–43).

²² *City of God* 15.27 (CCSL 48:496, ln. 69).

the ark would have to be navigated miraculously by God. There can therefore be no record of its specific travels. The event itself is wondrous and full of awe because it is God's work for which there finally can be no conclusive empirical evidence. But Augustine is saying even more, it seems, and that is that history itself, *as history*, is miraculous, is invested with wonder and awe, because there is no history *as history* without direction and purpose and the freedom of God's work. Thus there is no access to what actually happened apart from the figuration of God's purpose, and to see the figure would mean to be converted to the littleness of spirit that steps out of the obsessive and directionless narratives that comprise the histories, so called, of the earthly city. It requires littleness of spirit, a *sacrifice of praise*, to relinquish a sense of history in which only human power and the will to power are recognized as historical agents,²³ and in which we would truly *see* historical events. To believe that history is not simply *res gestae* is to have humility before the figures that proclaim it to be so and that cannot be replaced with a discursive, conceptual, non-figured account, since God's actions in history remain irreducibly mystery.

Augustine is so insistent and emphatic on the narrative as intended to convey both a historical narrative and a prophetic figure of the Church because the pilgrim part of the City of God, which is the visible Church, is the ultimate *mysterium* or *sacramentum* in this world, recapitulating and effecting God's purposes in creating the world in the first place. The Church is a visible community or society of human beings that did not arise from, and is not constituted by, any human strength, virtue, power, or achievement. It is formed by the self-giving love of Christ on the Cross, mediated to it by the sacraments of that love, baptism and Eucharist. The presence of the Church in the world as Christ's Body and Bride makes the world a different kind of place than it would be without the Church, not just "world," but "creation," with a dynamism and a true history that God intended for it. To see in the historical narratives figures of Christ and the Church is a *sine qua non* for seeing history as pregnant with God's work and purpose:

These hidden meanings of inspired Scripture we track down as best we can, with varying degrees of success; and yet we all hold confidently to the firm belief that these historical events and the narrative of them have always some foreshadowing of things to come, and are always to be interpreted with reference to Christ and his Church, which is the City of God. It has never failed to be foretold

²³ See my article "Spousal Vision: A Study of Text and History in the Theology of Saint Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 43, no. 1/2 (2012): 127–48.

in prophecy from the beginning of the human race, and we now see the prophecy being fulfilled in all that happens.²⁴

This passage follows upon Augustine's treatment of the nakedness of Noah at the beginning of book 16, and perhaps we can close with a meditation on his reflections, since, in a way, the nakedness of Noah seems such a supremely unlikely candidate for a figure. But Augustine takes the story of the nakedness of the sleeping Noah as "laden with prophetic meanings and covered with prophetic veils."²⁵ The nakedness of Noah itself, he says, is a figure for the nakedness of Christ in his Passion. In a way, nothing seems more unlikely to the modern reader. Can the text really *mean* this? Noah got drunk and passed out naked in his tent and his foolishness was exposed to his sons. What could be more embarrassing and less likely to be a figure of anything serious? In this act, Noah certainly had no intention of figuring anything! And yet it is included in a narrative that has been so carefully preserved and passed down. It must have been perceived to have significance.

Augustine once again finds the solution from reading Paul. Christ's nakedness was no different from Noah's. The same nakedness that Adam and Eve discovered as embarrassing is the nakedness that Christ assumed on our behalf and that was exposed, "his weakness laid bare," on the Cross. "As the Apostle says, *He was crucified through his weakness*. And that is why he also says, *The weakness of God is stronger than men and the foolishness of God is wiser than men*."²⁶ If it was embarrassing for Noah to pass out drunk and naked, it was embarrassing for God the Almighty to be exposed in that same naked powerlessness, just as foolish, if not more so. We can recognize the nakedness as ours, as well as his "foolishness" or "stupidity" in taking it up. The figures cannot, on their own, compel assent or leverage that which is figured. Instead, they make it so that biblical exegesis cannot be a science reducible to any of the liberal arts or their results, even though the arts themselves are certainly to be mastered and deployed in the exposition of Scripture. The liberal arts aim at wisdom. But Scripture itself does not come from erudition or philosophy or worldly wisdom, and it resists reduction to them. Scripture cannot be mastered in the same way. It resists mastery. It would be like mastering the ridiculous foolishness of Noah and getting a PhD in it. Does anyone actually want a PhD in foolishness? If so, then a PhD in biblical studies is for you, for someone whose littleness of heart can receive the foolishness of Christ, and with it the biblical figures that extend, enrich, and enhance our understanding,

²⁴ *City of God* 16.2 (CCSL 48:500, lns. 73–79).

²⁵ *City of God* 16.1 (CCSL 48:498, ln. 23).

²⁶ *City of God* 16.2 (CCSL 48:500, ln. 61); citing 2 Cor 13:4 and 1 Cor 1:25, respectively.

appreciation, and love of this foolishness, of the work of God in history that is the ultimate historicity, or historical sense, of the biblical texts.

There may be no more cited line in *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation, than this: "The study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology."²⁷ Not only is the study of the sacred page the soul of theology, but it is also equally important for the training of preachers. Accordingly, we also read that "Catholic exegetes and other students of sacred theology . . . should devote their energies . . . to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings . . . so that as many ministers of the divine word as possible will be able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the People of God . . . in order to set [their] hearts on fire with the love of God."²⁸ These passages from *Dei Verbum* clearly regard the study of Scripture, insofar as it is the "soul" of sacred theology and "nourishment" for the People of God, as irreducibly theological—for *Dei Verbum* talks of "Catholic exegetes and other students of sacred theology."

What would a constitutively theological exegesis look like? First of all, it would be the study of the "sacred page," that is, Scripture as Scripture. *Dei Verbum* comments that this means the books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments (so named), are, "in their entirety, with all their parts, sacred and canonical because, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author."²⁹ Further, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we learn, does not replace human authorship, but in fact precisely inspires and one might even say liberates it, "so that with God acting in them and through them," the human authors of Scripture "as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted."³⁰

Treating Scripture as the "sacred page" means paying equal attention to both of these authorships, to God as author, and to the human authors. Treating the latter as "true authors" means paying attention to "literary forms," to the situation of the writer's own "time and culture," to "customary and characteristic" styles of narration and communication. It seems fair to say that this half of the exegete's job is amply represented in Scripture courses in seminaries and universities. *Dei Verbum* goes on to comment, however, that, "since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked

²⁷ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (hereafter, DV) (November 18, 1965), §24.

²⁸ DV, §23.

²⁹ DV, §11.

³⁰ DV, §11.

out," the meaning, that is, that "God wanted to manifest by means of [the human authors'] words."³¹ Can we really say that we have lived up to this half of the exegete's job? That our courses generally give no less serious attention to the "content and unity of the whole of Scripture?" Especially where this is taken to mean that "[t]he living Tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the Faith"? I think it is fair to say that we have not, as a whole, lived up to the challenge of *Dei Verbum* to develop a Scriptural exegesis and pedagogy that respects and receives both "authorships" equally and therefore discovers anew the truly incarnational character of the sacred text, the uniquely self-emptying Divine Word, emptied, as it is, precisely into "human language."³² In fact, more often than not, we teach Scripture as though the only relevant considerations for exegesis as opposed to "eisegesis" are the considerations relevant to the human authorship, and considerations of the living Tradition of the Church and of the unity of the whole of Scripture are seen almost as elements guaranteeing a misleading and anachronistic interpretation, a misinterpretation.

Perhaps that is why Augustine's exegesis can seem so implausible to those of us trained in only one side, the human side, of the authorship of Scripture, as though, in effect, it were not Scripture. Augustine's practice follows the recommendations of *Dei Verbum* almost to a tee. He interprets the Bible from the perspective of the whole, treating the Bible *as* the whole that Tradition says it is and including in his clues to interpreting the text the purposeful decisions to preserve and hand down the texts. His recapitulatory hermeneutic is inherited from St. Paul through Irenaeus, and thereby finds a family resemblance with others of the Fathers in the Irenaean legacy, including Origen and Tertullian. He is second to none in his liberal learning and his application of it to the interpretation of the Bible, and yet, having mastered these skills and methodologies, he offers them, as it were, in submission to the living Word speaking in the text and to the same Spirit of littleness and self-emptying that inspired the text. The same Bridegroom whose love constitutes the City of God, including the part on pilgrimage, the visible Church, is incarnate in the flesh of the text, its prophetic draperies and coverings for his speech. If Augustine is right, what we most risk losing when we lose his recapitulatory style of exegesis is the theology of the Church to which it is intrinsically tied.

If you lose a sense of reading "mystically," a sense of distinguishing the two cities "mystically," as a key to reading history prophetically, then history flattens out into a secular enterprise, an enterprise of the city of this world and its learning. Both Israel and the Church become flattened as empirical

³¹ DV, §12.

³² See DV, §13.

historical groups, one following, and therefore “superseding,” the other. The Church begins to lose her identity as mystery. The typologies begin to appear as subjective additions by the faith of Catholics, suitable for treatment in a spirituality course. The Bible, having lost its principal “mystery” or “sacrament,” is reduced in homilies to moralism. We begin to buy into an ecclesiology that looks both evangelical and neo-Donatist in the Protestant sense. And this ironically makes it also look secular, for in both cases, it is not a “sacrament” of anyone’s sacrificial love, but reducible, in a constitutive sense, to the will and virtue of those assembled, just like the Roman Empire and the United States of America. Perhaps books 15–18 of *The City of God* are worth a second look.

