

Augustine Standing between Ambrose and Jerome

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I. The Bible as lost and found in Augustine

Augustine studied rhetorics as a means of social success from his childhood. At the age of 19 he read Cicero's *Hortensius* as a textbook of rhetorics. Cicero encouraged the young student to search after wisdom, to engage himself in the love of wisdom. Cicero tried to introduce Augustine into 'philosophia', but he didn't show his reader his own philosophy or his own system of philosophical truths; as a result Augustine had to try to search after wisdom and truths in his own way.

Monnica had taught her son that Jesus Christ is the truth of God and that the Holy Bible is the book of wisdom, in which he could find the true way of life. Encouraged by Cicero the 19 years old student took, opened and read the first pages of the Bible, namely the first chapters of Genesis. But he was very much embarrassed by the Biblical text, because the sentences were very poor and the text was filled with odd expressions and absurd assertions. Augustine therefore threw the Bible down and abandoned to search after truth by reading the Bible.

Of course Augustine did not abandon his attempt to search after truth. He tried to know truths by way of reasoning. But at the same time he could not leave from Monnica's teaching of the Christian faith. Augustine tried to find a true and rational teaching of life. In search of a rational teaching of truths Augustine met the Manichaeian teaching of truths. They claimed that their teachings were thoroughly rational and that one could know the truths only by way of reasoning. The so-called thoroughly rational teaching of the Manichaeians was for the young Augustine attractive enough to adhere to it for 9 years. Ironically, the Manichaeian

teachings were full of myths and fabulous doctrines.¹⁾

The Bible was for a long time alien to Augustine, a good grammarian and gifted rhetorician. In Milan Augustine was a good teacher of rhetorics. Then he heard of a rumor that the bishop of Milan named Ambrose was a good speaker and a gifted rhetorician. Augustine visited the Milanese church to hear Ambrose preach. He found in the Milanese bishop a good speaker and rhetorician. At first Augustine was interested only in Ambrose's rhetoric and eloquence, but he came to pay more attention to Ambrose's interpretations of the Bible and his message to the audience. One day Augustine was struck by Ambrose's exegesis of the Bible. He wrote in his *Confessions* as follows :

And I listened with delight to Ambrose, in his sermons to the people, often recommending this text most diligently as a rule : “The letter kills, but the spirit gives life,” while at the same time he drew aside the mystic veil and opened to view spiritual meaning of what seemed to teach perverse doctrine if it were taken according to the letter (VI,4,6).

The phrase “mystic veil drawn away” (*remoto mystico velamento*) is very important, because this mystic veil not only hides the spiritual meaning of the text, but it also draws attention to the spiritual meaning of the text through the enigmatic and mysterious letters of the text.²⁾

At last the lost Bible was found by Augustine himself!³⁾

II. Ambrose as preacher and poet

Ambrose came of a noble Roman family. He became a gifted administrator. As a son of a good Roman family Ambrose had mastered the classic culture so-called *paideia*. He was good at persuading people of different opinions and at bringing conflicting groups into reconciliation and peace. In that sense Ambrose was a good speaker and a good fixer in the good sense of the word.

Ambrose was requested to be a bishop and a preacher of the Christian community in Milan, though he was at that time only a catechumen. In spite of his wonderful career as a gifted administrator and in spite of his promised future success, Ambrose accepted the request of the people to become their bishop. It was of course unusual to require a catechumen to become a bishop. But astonishingly that unusual request was accepted really. And miraculously enough, Ambrose became a very good bishop and preacher. He was famous for his nice speeches. He was indeed good at speaking persuasively and beautifully.⁴⁾

Ambrose was a good poet and that a good psalmist. As a poet Ambrose made use of figures of speech and imagery. Prof. Hiroyuki Ogino wrote a paper on Ambrose's interpretation of *Hexaemeron*. Ambrose made a dramatic story of the six days of creation out of the Genesis text.⁵⁾

As well-known, the hermeneutical method of the allegorical interpretations originated from Greek interpreters, who tried to interpret the Homeric texts moralistically. The Greek method of allegorical interpretation was adopted in Alexandria by Jewish interpreters of the Torah, in order to reconcile the Hebrew teachings with Greek philosophical teachings. Philo of Alexandria tried to tie the Hebrew theory of the Word with the Platonic and Stoic theory of the Logos. This hermeneutical tradition became popular among the Alexandrian church fathers, especially in Origen. Furthermore, this allegorical method of Biblical interpretations was accepted among Cappadocian church fathers, specially by Basil in his *Hexaemeron*.

How and where did Ambrose come into contact with the allegorical interpretation of the Biblical texts? Now I cannot answer the question, but I suppose the academic circle of Platonic thinkers such as Marius Victorinus and Latin translations of the Greek church fathers such as Origen contributed to the Greek and Latin scholarships.⁶⁾

May we evaluate the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, especially of the Old

Testament? Today it is often emphasized that the typological interpretation is biblically right, whereas the allegorical interpretation is not authentic but alien to the Biblical text. It is true that we should not interpret the text arbitrarily, in other words, we should not bring into the text any meaning against the message of the text. But the Bible is composed of many different books of many different genres. The modern theologians searched after the lexically literal sense of each word, after the original meaning of each sentence and after the right intention of the author of each text. But we realized that the Bible ought to be read in many different contexts, for example, the New Testament ought to be interpreted in the light of the Old Testament and vice versa.

We should not read the text arbitrarily by ignoring the original message of the text. But at the same time preachers are to bring the original message of the text into the contemporary context and combine the Biblical text with the present situation.

Ambrose was a preacher and he spoke to his Christian community. He encouraged, admonished and helped the community to lead a good Christian life. For that purpose Ambrose made use of rhetoric and eloquence.⁷⁾

Ambrose emphasized that the letter kills, whereas the spirit gives life. The letter means the commandments of the Law, whereas the spirit signifies the gracious act of the Savior Jesus Christ. Accordingly the letter contains not only the Law and its commandments of the Old Testament, but also the literal meanings of the Old Testament texts. On the other hand, we can find the spiritual meanings of the Old Testament texts and the witnesses of God's act of salvation in the Old Testament.

Ambrose was busy with his works as bishop of Milan, when Augustine visited him at home. Augustine was satisfied with hearing his preaching in the church. Augustine was pleased to know the spiritual meanings of the Old Testament texts, which seemed odd and absurd in their literal senses.⁸⁾

In short Ambrose was well acquainted with the allegorical interpretation of the

Biblical texts, but his own way of reading the Bible is something more than allegorical interpretation; it should be called a spiritual interpretation. Spiritual interpretations however should not be arbitrary. Many explainers bring strange misunderstandings into their talks or works by way of ‘spiritual interpretations.’ Ambrose was authentic in using figures of speech and rhetorical techniques. He was a good rhetorician and a nice psalmist.

III. Augustine met the *ad litteram* interpretation of Genesis

The Manichaeans claimed that the Book of Genesis was wrong in speaking of God’s creation of the material world and of physical bodies. They ridiculed the Bible and its naïve expressions. As mentioned above, the 19 years old Augustine could not read the Old Testament and he threw it down. After a long journey of trials and errors, Augustine could overcome the Manichaean abuses of the Bible and their wrong claims that the Bible is false and wrong, through Ambrose’s spiritual reading of the Bible.

After his conversion in 386 Augustine began to criticize the Manichaean abuses of Genesis: he wrote a commentary on Genesis in order to refute the Manichaean doctrines of dualism and anti-creation theory (388-9). The commentary is somewhat free from the Biblical texts. He was busy with refuting the Manichaeans. So Augustine tried to read the Book of Genesis *ad litteram* (according to the letter, or towards the letter). He tried to follow the advice of his teacher Ambrose that the letter kills, whereas the spirit gives life. He was eager to know the spiritual meanings of the letters of the Biblical texts. He came to the locus of the creation of humans, but he was not ripe enough to interpret the creation of rational and temporal human beings. As a result, Augustine stopped interpreting the creation of humans.

In his most famous work *Confessiones* Augustine interpreted the first three books of Genesis more or less freely apart from the literal senses of the texts. This

commentary on Genesis is great in explaining the importance of the eternal peace, but he was not satisfied with the spiritual readings of the texts. Augustine tried once more to interpret Genesis *ad litteram*, by reading Genesis word for word, sentence by sentence, story by story and by searching after the proper senses of the Biblical texts. This way of reading Genesis is original in Augustine. Each word has different meanings ; each sentence should be interpreted intertextually between the Old and the New Testaments, between the Torah and the Wisdom literature, such as the Proverbs and the Book of Job, between the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles and so on.

Augustine tried to find out the original and lexically literal sense of each word and next to search after the proper meanings of the texts, sometimes literal and sometimes figurative. In this way Augustine came nearer to Jerome.

IV. Jerome as a great scholar and translator of the Hebrew Bible

Jerome is famous for his Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible. In the fourth and fifth centuries Christians were critical to the Jews who did not accept Christianity. The Jews were thought as opponents of truth, although they are the elected people of God and teachers of the Word of God, who handed the teachings of God over to Christians as their elder brothers and sisters. Against the current stream of anti-Semitism, Jerome wanted to learn the Hebrew language and to read the Hebrew Bible in its original language. He went eastward to Palestine and dwelled in Bethlehem among the Jews. He tried to learn their way of life and their faith personally. Jerome was generous and open-minded to the Jews and their faith.⁹⁾ In contrast to Jerome, Augustine learned Greek only a little. He did not know the Hebrew language at all. He could not help relying only on the Latin translations of the both Testaments. Augustine was not good at mastering foreign languages, which makes me, a bad speaker of foreign languages feel friendly and at

home. That may be the greatest reason for the fact that Augustine is the most popular Western medieval thinker in Japan!

Joking apart, Augustine and Jerome were contemporaries and good rivals. Augustine entered into a controversy with Jerome on the interpretations of the Biblical texts. They corresponded with each other. Of course, Jerome tried to search after the historical and literal meanings of the Bible, but that was not all : he was also familiar with the patristic tradition of the Biblical exegesis. But in comparison with Jerome, Augustine tried to read the whole texts of the Bible and he was open enough to admit different translations. He admitted several alternatives : the word means A or B ; yes, C and D are also possible. Augustine examines the alternatives one by one.

V. Augustine as *ad litteram* interpreter of the Biblical texts

Augustine speaks of the creation of angels in his interpretation of Genesis 1 : 3, where we cannot find any mention of angels. He finds some other meanings or implications by way of contextual readings. In Genesis 1 : 3 it is written : God said, ‘There be light!’ and there was light. Augustine explains that this light created at that time is not any physical light, because it is written in Genesis that heavenly bodies were created later on the fourth day. Augustine claims that the creation of the light on the first day was creation of spiritual beings including both angels and humans. The rational beings were called by their Creator to turn around towards God the Creator. When they turn around towards God of light, the spiritual creatures are illumined and formed as good creatures, whereas, when they turn away from their Creator, the spiritual creatures become dark and evil. This decision of good and evil depends on the free choice of the spiritual creatures. Augustine speaks of angelic conversion in his *ad litteram* Genesis commentary. My fellow professor of the Old Testament Studies told me that Augustine’s interpretation of the

Old Testament is odd and ridiculous, because it is alien to the Hebrew text. Academically it is partly true, but Augustine's exposition of the angelic conversion is illustrating for the problem of human liberty and freedom.¹⁰⁾

VI. Conclusion

Augustine is a pupil of allegorical interpreters, such as Philo of Alexandria and Origen. He makes use of allegorical interpretations in his works. Ambrose is a good preacher with a spirit of a poet. His motto of Biblical interpretation is: The letter kills, but the spirit gives life. The spiritual interpretation of the Bible is true and productive.

Ambrose's interpretations are not arbitrary, but they are full of good insights and impressive expressions. Augustine is a follower of the bishop of Milan, though they could not meet and talk personally after Augustine's return to North Africa.¹¹⁾

Jerome is a good reader of the Hebrew Bible. He tries to understand the intimate mind of the Jewish people. For him the historical understanding of the Bible is important. Augustine agrees with Jerome in searching after the literal meanings of the Hebrew texts, but Augustine's understanding of *ad litteram* interpretations is unique.

In short Augustine goes with Ambrose and Jerome. He stands between his teacher and his good rival in searching after his own spiritual interpretation of the Biblical texts.¹²⁾

NOTES

1) *Confessiones*, III, 3, 4-6, 10.

2) *Ibid.*, V, 13, 23- VI, 4, 6.

3) *Ibid.*, VII, 8, 12-9, 14 ; cf. MORI, Yasuo, <Reading>(legere) and <Understanding>(intellegere) in Augustine, in : the Japanese Society of Medieval Philosophy (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Thought*, Vol. XXXIX, (Sobunsha, 1997), pp.112-121.

- 4) McLYNN, Neil B., *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (University of California Press, 1994), especially Chapter I.
- 5) OGINO, Hiroyuki, The question of “In principio” —Patristic tradition of hexaemeron—, in: The Japanese Society for Patristic Studies (ed.), *PATRISTICA*, Vol.2 (Shinseisha, 1995), pp.93-117.
- 6) OGINO, H., Patristic Tradition of the Exegesis of the Genesis, in: the Japanese Society of Medieval Philosophy (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Thought*, Vol.XXXIX, (Sobunsha, 1997), pp.102-111.
- 7) PÉPIN, Jean, *Mythe et Allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations Judéo-Christiennes* (Etudes Augustiniennes, 1976).
- 8) MORI, Y., <Reading>(legere) and <Understanding>(intellegere) in Augustine, pp.115-116.
- 9) FÜRST, Alfons, *Hieronymus: Askese und Wissenschaft in der Spätantike* (Herder, 2003), especially pp.116-137.
- 10) MORI, Y., Zur <conversio> der geistigen Kreaturen bei Augustin in seinem *De Genesi ad Litteram*: ein Versuch, Augustins <conversio> im Vergleich mit Plotins <epistrophe> zu verstehen, in: the Japanese Society for Patristic Studies (ed.), *PATRISTICA*, Vol. 8 (Shinseisha, 2004), pp.5-19; MORI, Y., <esse> und <malum> —Zu Augustins “conversio” im Vergleich mit Plotins “epistrophe”, in: the Philosophical Association of Western Japan (ed.), *Annual Report of the Philosophical Association of Western Japan*, Vol. 13(2005), pp.117-131.
- 11) McLYNN, N.B., article: Ambrose of Milan, in: FITZGERALD, A.D. (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans, 1999), pp.17-19.
- 12) Prof. McLynn (prof. of Keio University) was the chair of my session and he presented my thesis a radical question. He said: “You told us a happy story. Were they so happy and friendly to one another?” It is true that there are differences in their thoughts, but I believe my assertion that Augustine synthesized Ambrosian exegesis and Jerome’s way of understanding the Bible is still true and valid. Cf. AUGUSTINUS-HIERONYMUS, *Epistulae Mutae/Briefwechsel*, 2 Bände (Brepols: Fontes Christiani, 2002).

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