

Origins. As book 11 begins, Augustine has finished deconstructing history as pagans tell it. Now he starts again, telling the story as a Christian. He starts with a review of doctrinal topics – Trinity, Christology, protology (creation, time and eternity, fall). These set the theological frame for what comes next. You may be tired of these doctrines, but Augustine is not. Remember, every one of Augustine’s projects is a different variation on the same grand theme. That these doctrines surface in each project underlines how important they are to each.

It is also important to see *where* they surface. The setting of the first ten books is the sack of Rome; the setting of the next twelve is the Rule of Faith. The result is catechetical: An apologetic tract that meets educated pagans where they are, and so must re-educate them radically before they are even ready to understand the most basic claims of the Christian faith.

What difference would it have made if Augustine’s summary of Christian doctrine led in Book 1, rather than appearing in “part 2”? How would it change the whole rhetorical flow?

In book 12, Augustine narrates the creation and fall of angels: God, who alone “supremely is,” gave “degrees of being” to his creations from nothing (12.2). Good and evil angels do not have two different natures, but share a common nature. They differ only in that the angels who cleave to God are blessed, and those who do not are cursed (12.1). To turn away from God (and to something else, 12.6) is merely (!) to injure one’s good nature (12.1, 12.3). This turning away is not caused by something else (12.7). Here Augustine is arguing against the (dualist) Manichaeism of his youth, as well as the (gnostic) Origenist idea that embodied life is the “imprisonment” of fallen spirits. He is also staking out common ground between the angelic fall and the human fall; there are two cities, not three or four. These things are so settled for us today that it can be hard to remember that all of them were once theological battlegrounds!

Here we encounter a characteristic feature of Augustine’s doctrine of sin: The reduction of sin to pride. “What else is their fault called than pride? For ‘pride is the beginning of sin’” (Ecclesiasticus 10:13). It is true of the angels, and of Adam and Eve too (14.13). This idea is *vastly* influential in the Western tradition. Tragedies are stories of tragic heroes, who are brought low through the sin of *hubris*. Satan becomes the greatest angel, turned by pride into the prince of demons (cf. 14.11). Isaiah 14 is read not as an oracle against the king of Babylon, but the angel Lucifer (“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star? ... You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God.... But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit’”). At the center of Augustine’s project is this claim: The city of God is ordered by humility, while the city of man is disordered by pride.

But is *every* sin a manifestation of pride? Feminist theology takes issue with the reduction of sin to pride. Sin can also be pride’s *opposite*: shame. It is shame, not pride, that afflicts the oppressed and marginalized; and their healing comes by being built up, not brought low. *Does Augustine’s vision need this correction? If so, how would that correction change his project, and change his description of the two cities? Or would there even still be two cities? And is Eve’s sin one of pride, or shame? How about Adam’s?*

The nature, effects, and transmission of sin occupy Augustine's attention over the next few books, as he recounts the two cities' origins. His opponents are two: First, those who would call evil things "good" (the pagans who worship demons and order their city according to cupidity), and second, those who would call good things "evil" (the Gnostics, Platonists, and Manichaeans who malign God's creation by denigrating the body, or human will, or marriage). The former mistake leads to idolatry; the latter fractures rather than redeems God's good world. Only by avoiding both can Augustine follow a radical condemnation of pagan society with a friendly account of ideal social and personal human existence. Everything is a trap for the disordered soul; but to the virtuous, life is filled with love for the goodness of God and neighbor (14.6). Salvation is a radical purification of an entirely corrupted person; but it does not strip away the saint's body, community, or world.

To pagans, this is too pessimistic. To Gnostics, it is too optimistic. Our own society has tended to judge Augustinians these same ways: H.L. Mencken described a Puritan as "someone who is terribly afraid that someone else, somewhere else, is having a good time," while otherworldly evangelicals worry about sacramental, aesthetic "high-church" spirituality ("Daddy, why does this grape juice taste funny?"). Today's culture wars over sex are an especially depressing place to watch pagans battle Gnostics (and both battle increasingly marginalized Augustinians like John Paul II; cf. 14.16). In case you hadn't noticed, the pagans are winning.

Are there options besides these three?

Development. Having explained the origin of the two cities, Augustine pursues their courses in human history. The contrast is between worldly *citizenship* and *pilgrimage*. The first "finds its rest in its own temporal peace and felicity" (15.17), the second "in the hope of eternal felicity" (15.18). The allegorical power in Cain and Abel is rich: Cain founded a city (Gen. 4:17), but not Abel (15.1). The earthly city may point to the heavenly one (as Jerusalem does: 15.1 on Gal. 4:21ff). But more often it oppresses: Founded on a fratricide, Cain's city is mirrored in Romulus' murder of Remus (15.5).

Augustine's exegetical skills produce both beautiful allegories, and amusing excursions on problems introduced by literalistic interpretation (such as Cain's founding a city when the world is practically unpopulated, or Seth's living a hundred years before apparently bearing children, or the wacky Gen. 6:1ff). You have here, in the paragraphs generally omitted from the required reading, many rich examples of premodern biblical interpretation. *What do you think of it?*

How can we – myself included – continue to teach some conclusions of Augustine's biblical interpretation, while rejecting others? Are we careful enough to show why some conclusions are still warranted, and others obsolete or simply wrong? And can we plead patristic authority for our interpretations and doctrines when we are so inconsistent here?

Augustine traces the two cities before and after the flood, through the rivalries of Abraham's and Isaac's sons, and then (surprisingly quickly) in Egyptian slavery, exodus, conquest, monarchy, exile, and return (books 16.1-17.7, 17:21-24).

Then in 17.8-20, Augustine suddenly lingers over the figurative significance of wisdom literature (e.g., 17.16). These scriptures are dialogues between Christ and the Church, the heavenly city's "King and Queen" (cf. 17.20). All the Bible, not just biblical narrative, testifies to the course of the two cities. Why the long messianic exegesis of the Psalms? I think it makes the case that *hope* characterizes God's pilgrim people. The pagan histories have none to offer.

Augustine returns to the classical pagan histories in book 18. And then we see that books 15-18 are a synthesis of epics. Brown has told us that Augustine sees the Bible as a classic, even better than the classics of the Gentiles. Here he treats it as one. The effect is weird: A juxtaposition of Gentile and Jewish histories, a timeline of contemporaneous events that seem not to relate to one another (unless Augustine is simply telling the biblical story according to the timelines familiar to his classically educated audience).

His account of Rome's founding (18.22) introduces another long review of predictions of the Christ, both pagan (Sibyllene Oracles, 18.23) and biblical (prophetic, 18.27-35). Why? "It was fitting that this should occur at the same time as the foundation of that city which was to rule all the Gentiles" (18.27). Hmm. Well, it *does* allow Augustine's pagan readers to compare the confused and controverted "wisdom" of the nations to the prophetic concord of Scripture (18.41). Next comes a discussion of biblical translation, for providence saw that the Scriptures were translated in the tongues of the nations (and Augustine's audience; 18.42-44).

Finally, *finally*, both histories flow together, in the arrival of Jesus (18.46). And here Augustine's "long and arduous work" pays off. We have struggled with the length of everything that has come before. Now we see why. Like a long novel that has been "getting started" for hundreds of pages, suddenly the moment comes when the earlier material finds its place:

When Herod reigned in Judea, and when, the condition of the commonwealth having now changed, Caesar Augustus had become emperor, and had brought peace to the whole world, Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judah, in accordance with the prophecy given long before (18.46).

In a grand amplification of Luke 1-2, the two stories converge. Stunning!

How do you interpret the length of this project? What is its rhetorical purpose?

We do not hear the specifics of Jesus' story; instead, the arrival of the Word made flesh ushers in the age of the Gospel preached to all nations (18.50) – and the age of heresies preached against it (18.51). The cities' long encounter with each other continues. Where it ends, we learn on Friday.