

6

The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis

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Introduction: Tracking Augustine the Exegete

Augustine's experience of conversion in the year 386 was momentous but not unique; he was a man of several large conversions and a number of small ones. Reading Cicero's *Hortensius* ignited him with the love of wisdom; the books of the *Platonici* uncovered for him the panoply of the spiritual world; the necessity of authority for understanding truth devolved on him all at once; and within his catholic experience he suddenly moved to a radical understanding of operative grace. But Augustine's development is a story, not of vacillation, but of change through the accumulation of insights.¹ This paper will track one thread of change in the ten years between *On Genesis Against the Manichaeans* (388) and *Against Faustus* (398), which reveals development in his approach to the figurative exegesis of the Old Testament. Eventually his approach represented a creative synthesis of the two major strands of early Christian exegesis, traditionally called the allegorical and the typological.²

Because of the symbiotic relationship in his thought between human language and the Word of God,³ correlations exist between Augustine's christology, theory of signs and practice of figurative exegesis, and suggest a field of coherence within his theology. How to describe such fields and their changes is a challenge, but recent interest in adapting Thomas Kuhn's language of "paradigms" to the concerns of historical theology suggests one option. Since Kuhn's definition of paradigm

stresses not only a constellation of meaning but the exemplary form and the revisionary power of a "concrete puzzle solution" such as Augustine labored to find, "paradigm" will be the term used here for describing the bishop's shifting interpretive structures.⁴ This paper will argue that in the period after his conversion Augustine's understanding of signs, figurative exegesis and christology are identifiable as elements of a "spiritualist" paradigm, and that in the early 390's they gradually and coordinately shift to an "incarnational" paradigm which, as the name implies, was generated by an advance in his christology.⁵

In the mid-380's Augustine broke free from what might be called a "materialist" paradigm and achieved a conception of immaterial and immutable spirit (*Conf.* 7.17.23). Though releasing him from the Manichaean strain of dualism, the new spiritualist paradigm carried its own pronounced disjunction between the world of spirit and the world of sense. In its wake, Augustine formed a disjunctive theory of signs which radically distinguished the signifying realm of sense from the signified world of true being. After he became a catholic Christian, this theory privileged a practice of figurative exegesis in which Old Testament events, characters, rites and texts served as signs pointing either to eternal realities or to the future advent of Christ. Meanwhile Augustine's christology, while orthodox from the time of conversion, emphasized the distinction between the Word in heaven and the assumed man Jesus on earth. He understood the divinity of the Word to have used the man Jesus didactically as an exemplar of humility who opened the way to the spiritual realm. But in time Augustine's restless desire to understand what he believed forced a revision of that disjunctive perspective, because it only partly explained the function of the Word's assumed mutability and weakness. The incarnational paradigm interrelated the eternal and temporal by embracing Christ not only as exemplar but also as mediator whose ensouled flesh was the nexus of a saving exchange between immutable divinity and mutable humanity. The conceptual conjunction of the temporal and eternal comparatively produced a conjunctive theory of signs which acknowledged the ductility of God's power for the world of history and language. In turn, the Old Testament appeared not only to anticipate but also to dispense the grace of the New, though made to wear a "veil" because of its different place in salvation history. Becoming less distinguishable from the New, the Old began to function pastorally and polemically in Augustine's figurative exegesis as the first book of the New Testament.

1. Exegesis, Signs and Christology in the Spiritualist Paradigm

A. Exegesis: History and Prophecy

Augustine wrote the two books of *On Genesis Against the Manichaeans* about 388, shortly after his return to Africa following his baptism by Ambrose at Easter Vigil the previous year.⁶ This work defended the Old Testament against Manichaean objections to its anthropomorphisms and immoralities by showing the possibility of interpretation along the allegorical lines he learned from the bishop of Milan. In the main it followed a "rule of contradiction" which authorized figurative interpretation where the literal sense clashed with the spiritual understanding of God.⁷ Augustine intended to give both a literal and spiritual interpretation for the first three chapters of Genesis, but the end product heavily weighted the spiritual. The treatise proposed a two-fold schema for interpretation according to the contrasting perspectives of history and prophecy: "According to history past events are narrated, according to prophecy future events are foretold."⁸ *Historia* envisioned the visible, time-bound, corporeal world of matter, sense, and serial events, as contrasted or linked with the invisible, timeless, incorporeal world of spirit, understanding and truth (*On Genesis Against the Manichaeans* 1.1.1-1.22.33; 1.25.43; 2.1.1-2.23.35). *Prophetia* related the events, characters, rites and texts of salvation history to the schema of promise and fulfillment of God's self-revelation on the temporal plane (1.23.35-24.42; 2.2.3; 2. 24.37ff.). History and prophecy each contained a literal and figurative sense.

A text may be read as a straightforward chronicle, "according to history," a text's referent being understood to reside within ordinary parameters of verbal meaning. But for Augustine *historia* was patient of both a literal and a figurative sense, much the way lexically the same word may carry a proper and a transferred sense. In contrast to modern definitions, this history deals not only with events and people in the flow of space and time, but by virtue of its verbal medium includes figurative meanings which extend from the literal descriptions. Figurative expressions can point either to an indescribable literal event or to spiritual truth, e.g., as the authority over animals granted to Adam may represent an actual command or the stages of the soul's ascent (1.20.31). In the former case the reality referred to by the verbal signs of the text resides in the visible world, in the latter the invisible. Augustine's usual word for the figurative sense was allegory (*allegoria*), which despite some inconsistent language functioned at this time within Augustine's sense of *historia*.

But the same text may also be read "according to prophecy." After many pages of literal and spiritual interpretation of the days of creation, Augustine declared the need for God's rest on the seventh day to be considered "more carefully" (*diligentius*; 1.23.35). The seven days are reconsidered first as a literal prophecy foretelling the six ages of salvation history followed by a seventh age of eternal rest (1.23.35-41); then as figurative prophecy focusing on "the sixth age" of Christ and the Church which extends from the incarnation to the current moment of the Church's temporal journey (1.23.40; 2.24.37-26.40). Augustine's figurative approach attempted to "explain all those figures of things according to the catholic faith, either those which belong to *historia* or those which belong to *prophetia*" (2.2.4). As the figures belonging to history were characteristically discovered by reason and observation, figures belonging to prophecy were laid down through "the apostolic authority by which so many enigmas in the books of the Old Testament are resolved" (2.24.37).

Augustine's immediate reference was to the Pauline declaration of Eph. 5.32 that Genesis 2.24 ("the two shall become one flesh") refers to Christ and the Church; but he took this as a "clear sign" (*signum manifestum*) to interpret the remainder of Genesis 1-3 within a christo-ecclesiological frame. This frame sharply differentiated the figures of history and prophecy. Augustine said that Genesis narrative considered as *historia* signified Adam, but as *prophetia* portrayed Christ and the Church (2.24.37ff.). As *historia* the creation of woman from the side of sleeping Adam figuratively described either an actual event or the spiritual reality of the human carnal appetite; but as *prophetia* it foresaw the emergence of the Church from the sleep of Christ's death. As *historia* the serpent signified evil, but as *prophetia* it anticipated heresy's attempt to draw the Church from pure devotion to Christ. As *historia* the coats of skin signified the mortality merited by sin, but as *prophetia* they foretold the enslavement to carnal images of spiritual things.

B. Signs: Anagogic and Dramatic

In *On the Teacher* (389) Augustine imagined language "running parallel to the stream of experience and alongside it, so to speak, rather than within it."⁹ The mind's images arise from within human captivity to the senses, alerting and fitting the mind for a movement of understanding which occurs entirely in the intelligible realm. A sign (*signum*) indicates a certain intelligible or spiritual reality (*res*), and prompts the mind to seek the immediate contact which creates understanding. Spiritual interpreta-

tion is possible because a likeness (*similitudo* |) exists between the sensory images conveyed by verbal signs in Scripture, and the truth of either the intelligible world or salvation history. But likeness only juxtaposes sign and reality; understanding remains incommensurate with expression, coming not from the sign *per se* but from enlightenment by God, who reads the soul by co-opting its capacity to be moved by likenesses. This disjunctive theory of signs is operative in the figurative exegesis of both history and prophecy in *On Genesis Against the Manichaeans*. On the one hand the visible *signum* of history invites either an inward look to an immanent *res* of the spatio-temporal world (literal history), or an upward look to a transcendent *res* of the eternal spiritual world (figurative history); on the other hand the visible *signum* of prophecy invites a forward look to a *res* of the future, either to the events of salvation history (literal prophecy) or its culmination in Christ and the Church (figurative prophecy). The figurative signs of history and prophecy possess no revelatory value of their own, but are as it were windows, "diaphanous" to the realities of which they speak.¹⁰

The spiritualist paradigm's correlation of signs, exegesis and christology comes to expression in parts of Augustine's energetic, rambling synthesis of neoplatonism and catholic Christianity, *De vera religione* (390). In this construction of the faith, the main concern is with "the history and prophecy of the temporal dispensation" which providence made for salvation (7.13). Pride had turned the human soul outward to the things of sense, perverted its love and numbed its capacity for spiritual understanding. This diseased condition blocked the soul's immediacy to truth and necessitated both serial existence and communication by signs. But God accommodated to the fragmented human condition by sending his Wisdom into the world, who assumed and lived a perfect human life in order to remind humanity demonstrably of its original perfection (16.30), not by force but by persuasion and admonition (16.31). His life, death and resurrection were lessons in right conduct and hope (16.32). He taught both clearly and obscurely in order to incite the search for truth, a strategy which encapsulated the divine method in all the Scriptures; this showed that the obscurities of the Old Testament remained valid for faith through figurative interpretation (17.33). The unity of Old and New Testaments is rooted in their common subject, the one God who revealed through them the stages of movement from the imperfect to the perfect (17.34). The play of human language in their parables and similitudes used events, characters, rites and texts to create a stairway to heaven.

These "visible words" configure spiritual reality as words in a sentence configure semantic meaning (50.98). The incommensurability of the eternal and temporal realms, as well as the differing capacities of human understanding, is reflected in the contrasting modes of human response to these likenesses, spiritual faith and historical faith (50.99). The modes are hierarchically ordered; the historical is the lowest step in the climb to the spiritual, and *allegoria* provides the thrust of ascent in Scripture's "embodying and uplifting game" (51.100).

Rather than a finished product of neoplatonic Christianity, *De vera religione* is the report of that work in progress. In particular the mood of the eloquent culminating passage of 50.98 – 51.100 can only be described as interrogative. He wonders about the ends of allegorical exposition, whether the realities underlying the words of Scripture reside in visible events or in the intelligible world of the soul—referring to either movements of the affections, decisions of the will, or images of the mind—or whether the texts may refer to all of these. He asks about the kinds of allegorical exposition which differ depending on whether the text is a history-like narrative, the report of a real event, speeches or dialogues of characters, or the description of a rite.¹¹ He seeks to understand the function of the relativities and cultural idiosyncrasies of figurative representation in finding the truth which transcends the particularities of space and time.

Augustine's fluid categories suggest the need to import some terminology for the sake of clear analysis. He attempted during this time to assimilate the Church's traditional language about the four senses of Scripture, but it never was a comfortable fit.¹² His early language about figurative interpretation continued to contrast history and prophecy in a way roughly approximating the modern distinction often made between allegory and typology. But Augustine eventually grew restless with distinguishing these categories too sharply and gradually amalgamated them under the comprehensive term "figure" (*figura*).¹³ The opposition between these traditional terms seems to undermine their usefulness for describing the synthesis of Augustine, who yoked them in a comprehensive figurative approach which operated often in the same passage and sometimes in the same sentence. Therefore I propose to consider his approach as a unified practice with two aspects which I will call the *anagogic* and *dramatic* perspectives of figurative exegesis. The anagogic perspective focuses on a synchronic, upward movement of understanding which is driven by a likeness, usually discerned by rational observation, between a visible figure in the temporal, corporeal world of sense and an invisible

referent in the supratemporal, incorporeal world of understanding. The figurative sign incites the soul to engage the world of spirit and truth, but is essentially *ad hoc*, incidental to its reality and obsolescent because of its incommensurability with the intelligible world. By contrast the dramatic perspective focuses on a diachronic, back-and-forth movement of understanding which is driven by a likeness, usually posited by authority, between a figure and a referent which both belong to the visible world of history and language.¹⁴ The anagogic and dramatic perspectives share the pattern of the sign pointing beyond itself to a complete manifestation of its reality; their major difference is that the dramatic perspective indicates a *res* which belongs to space and time. But there is also the difference that within the dramatic perspective the relation between a prophetic sign and its reality occurs in either of two ways. The first is analogous to anagogic signs of history and characteristic of the spiritualist paradigm: both literal and figurative prophetic signs are interpreted disjunctively, pointing forward to a fulfillment in future space and time. The sign is obsolescent, after its fulfillment the sign serves only as a support for faith by proving the prophecy's credibility. But the second relation breaks new ground that is characteristic of the incarnational paradigm: figurative prophetic signs are also interpreted conjunctively; not only indicating but also somehow mediating the power of the signified reality, the *res* itself as it were present within the *signum* and anticipating its own full disclosure. For this sign the medium is the message, and intrinsic to the reality it signifies. It is therefore also permanent, because after fulfillment in Christ and the Church it serves not only as a proof for faith but also as an interpreter for understanding. Because of the close relation of signs, exegesis and christology for Augustine, I argue that his expansion of the theory of signs to include the conjunctive, and with it the practical interrelation of the anagogic and dramatic perspectives of figurative exegesis, derives from a paradigmatic reconfiguration of his exemplar christology to include the idea of mediator.

C. Christ as Exemplar

In the christology of the treatises Augustine wrote within the spiritualist paradigm, God approaches lost humanity especially through the mind, sending the Word into flesh and history in order to reveal the way to the spiritual realm. God circumvented diseased human patterns of perception by using Christ, a human being on the plane of history, to prompt and fit the dormant higher part of the soul to choose to seek the

spiritual realm. Christ's humility formed a prototype or *exemplum* of humility from which humble faith retrieves enough health for the eye of the soul that spiritual beauty breaks in, stirs love, and initiates the rise into the spiritual world. The historical images of the Savior provide a framework, but the locus of salvation is the free response of the one who believes. The words which describe Christ's function at this time are predominantly didactic; he "teaches" (*On the Teacher* 11.36), "admonishes" (*On Free Choice* 3.10.30), "persuades" (*De uera religione* 16.31), "demonstrates" (*On Faith and the Creed* 4.6).¹⁵

On Faith and the Creed, originally an address to the Council of Carthage in October 393, contains the longest sustained reflection on christology to date among the early writings. In 2.3 Augustine explains that in his divine nature Christ is called the Word because he makes the Father known as a person uses words to make thoughts known. In 4.6 he says that the Word assumed the garb of humanity in order to demonstrate a certain way of humility by offering the soul a dynamic "example of living" (*uiuenti exemplum*). But in 4.7 he juxtaposes images of black and white, hot and cold, fast and slow, to rhetorically generate wonder at the incarnation's mysterious intersection of time and eternity, change and changelessness, being and non-being. For the time being in 4.8 he explains the unity of opposites in Christ as the result of a *temporalis dispensatio*.

But through what I have called a temporal dispensation—because by a work of God's goodness our mutable nature was assumed by that immutable wisdom of God for our salvation and restoration—we adjoin (*adiungimus*) faith in temporal things done with a view to our salvation when we believe in him, "the Son of God who was born through the Holy Spirit from the virgin Mary."

Augustine's underlying restlessness to understand better what he believed concerning the functional association of the divine and human in Christ made for an uneasy alliance of conceptual paradigms. The disjunctive christology of the spiritualist paradigm was under stress, perhaps from the countervailing conjunctive language of Scripture, the inner logic of creedal claims, and his own sacramental ministry. His difficulty interrelating the two realms continued to contrast spiritual and historical faith as in *De uera religione*; their "adjoining" points to the juxtaposition rather than interrelation of the temporal and eternal. This spiritualist understanding of christology and faith corresponded to his separation of the sign and the reality, with divinity running alongside the stream of humanity rather than within it. While the reality remained above, the sign remained

below, displaying humility by its appearance in the world, and pointing the way to heaven. The organizing principle was synchronic and anagogic, subordinating the diachronic and dramatic as the first step on the way of spiritual ascent.

Through the early 390's Augustine's project of synthesis affirmed antinomies which inspired faith but vexed reason, and put his thought on parallel tracks related by juxtaposition rather than coordination. Faith held the two perspectives in tension, but his longing for synthetic understanding made this tension increasingly difficult to sustain. Constitutionally dissatisfied with contradiction and paradox, Augustine continued to search for the way conceptually to bring the two planes together. Like his trial use of spiritualist language about Christ as "the Lord's man" (*homo dominicus*; see *Revisions* 1.19.8), Augustine's experiment with the phrase "temporal dispensation" to explain the incarnation fell into virtual disuse after 396.

II. *Christology, Signs and Exegesis in the Incarnational Paradigm*

A. Christ the Mediator

Imaginative projections of a newer understanding begin to appear in 392 among Augustine's first homilies and notes on the Psalms, in which he continued an already ancient Church tradition of reading the Psalter as the transcript of Christ's inner life. It opened the design of the Incarnation by graphically displaying the movements of his human soul, which "so inherited and somehow coalesced with the surpassing excellence of the Word when it took up a human being that it was not laid aside even by a humiliation as great as the passion."¹⁶ The texts injected images of seething human passions into the neat christology of the spiritualist paradigm, and pressed Augustine beyond mere affirmation to a more exact understanding of the function of Christ's full humanity. The sixteenth psalm pictured for him the soul of Christ as the instrument of God's power:

"My soul is your weapon" which your "hand"—that is, your eternal power—assumed in order that through it your power might conquer the kingdoms of iniquity and divide the just from the ungodly. (*Commentaries on the Psalms* 16.3)

These notes on the Psalms mark the first appearance, without elaboration, of the image of Christ as mediator (e.g., *Commentaries on the Psalms* 25.1). In

the meantime study of Christ the teacher proceeded in 393 with an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (*De sermone Domini in monte*).

But the year 394 marked a turning point in Augustine's integration of christological faith and understanding. In studying Paul's letter to the Galatians he explored the complex of ideas associated with Christ as mediator in order to answer the essentially dramatic question of how the old covenant saints were justified through faith before his advent.¹⁷ Paul declared in Gal. 3.19 that, because God's promises were based on faith, the law had been given pedagogically for the sake of transgressors until the promised seed of Abraham should come, who is Christ; to this he appended the rabbinic idea that, unlike the promise given directly to Abraham, the law had been "ordered" through angels by the hand of a mediator, i.e. Moses. In Augustine's *Expositio epistulae ad Galatas* (394), the interpretation of this text combined certain elements of the bishop's preunderstanding and a mistake in translation to crystallize decisive ideas relating to christology and the exegesis of the Old Testament.

First, Augustine out-christologized even Paul with his understanding of Scripture as a unified verbal mosaic, according to which the word "mediator" referred not to Moses but to Christ, in light of 1 Tim. 2.5, the first quotation of this critical text in Augustine's works. Well understanding Paul's dramatic transposition of the story of Israel into Christian salvation history, Augustine saw Christ mediating the interrelation of the old and new covenants. This image of interrelation, fertilized by his neoplatonic fascination with the number one, gave him conceptual ground for joining rather than merely juxtaposing the eternal and temporal realms.¹⁸ Because the Word is eternally one with God he is excluded from functioning as a mediator, who by definition belongs to two parties and so "is not of one, whereas God is one" (Gal. 3.19). But the mediator was nevertheless also "one," according to the text in which the apostle speaks "more clearly" (*plinius*), 1 Tim. 2.5: "God is one, one also is the mediator between God and humans, the human Christ Jesus." For Augustine this text legitimated the unity of God with a trinity of persons as a pattern for conceiving the unity of the mediator with a duality of natures. However, it was applied to speculation, not about the unity of the two natures in Christ's person, but about their reciprocity in his work. Conflating the image of the mediator with the self-emptying christology of Phil. 2.6ff., Augustine articulated a saving "exchange" between human weakness and divine strength.¹⁹ Instead of the Word assuming flesh only in order to exemplify and incite the human will to humility, the mediator

was a double agent who also cured human weakness and injected divine strength. Christ's power not only enlightened the mind but remade the will; therefore his humanity was not only the theater but also the protagonist of the drama of redemption.

So the only Son of God was made a mediator of God and the human, when the Word of God, God with God, both laid aside his majesty in descent to the human, and bore aloft human humility in ascent to the divine, so that he might be the mediator between God and humans, through God a human beyond the human. (*Expos. pp. ad Galatas* 24)

After 394 the power of the exchange based on the unity of God and humanity in the mediator was soon reflected in the appearance of a word group built around the image of "transfiguration."²⁰ Lexically the verb *transfiguro* denoted the act of changing the appearance or form of a thing, a sense Augustine often used in quoting New Testament references to Satan's self-transformation into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:4). Jesus' transfiguration before the disciples (Matt. 17:2ff. and parallels), and bodily change at the resurrection after the pattern of the glorified Christ (Phil. 3:21). His first use of the concept occurred about this time in reference to the Word's immutability in the incarnation, which occurred not by transforming his deity (*non transfiguratione*) but by wearing humanity as a garment (83 *Diverse Questions*, qu. 73.2). However, the word also carried a metaphorical sense which rhetorically subsumed a constellation of people or things "under the figure of" some other person or thing. Thus Paul's references in Rom. 7:14ff. to being "under the law" were not literally autobiographical, but typical of every person enslaved to the letter of the law (*On Diverse Questions to Simplicianus* 2.3.2). The transition from the reality to the figure was emphasized by appending the phrase "into oneself" (*in me, in se*): understanding was conveyed by "carrying over" the subject into the type. So Paul wrote (1 Cor. 4:6), "I have carried over the figure of these things into myself and Apollus for your sake" (*haec transfiguravi in me et Apollo propter nos*), in order to project the Corinthians' attitudes onto a larger screen (*Against the Letters of Petilianus* 3.2.3). The critical use of the word in Augustine appears in reference to Christ's passion in which he "transfigured us in himself," or more sharply, "transfigured our weakness in himself."²¹ Christ assumed in his suffering not only the condition of humanity's finitude, but also its sinful self-absorption. The classic text in this regard is Matt. 26:39 where Christ confesses, "my soul is sorrowful even unto death," and prays "may this cup pass from me." According to Augustine, Jesus spoke not from himself but from the

weakness and fear which he "carried over" into his humanity from every person's mortal desperation.

This representational use of "transfiguration" recurs throughout his writings and especially fits the exemplary emphasis which dominated the spiritualist paradigm. However the powerful double agency of the one mediator is also reflected in Augustine's contention that Christ not only *demonstrated* change for the human will, as in the second sense of *transfiguro*, but also *effected* change within it, as in the first sense. Both senses are carefully delineated in a comment on the agony in the garden from a homily of 403:

Wherefore Christ, carrying the human and laying down a rule for us, teaching us to live and granting us to live (*docens nos vivere et praestans nobis vivere*), displays as it were a private human will ... But because he willed the human to be upright in heart, so that whatever in the human that was somewhat crooked he should bend (*dirigere*) toward the One who is always upright, he says, "nevertheless not what I will, but what you will, Father" ... In the person of the human he assumed, transfiguring his own in himself, he displayed as it were humanity's own will. He showed you, and he rectified you (*ostendit te et corripit te*). Look, he says, see yourself in me. (*Commentaries on the Psalms* 2.32, sermon 1.2)

Augustine understands the incarnation to have collected chaotic human striving into a single entity and remarkably united it to the will of Jesus, who displayed its characteristic self-concern in the agonized words, "let this cup pass from me." But his passion not only revealed the human will, but "bent" it flush with God's straightedge; Christ taught *and* gave, showed *and* rectified. Humanity so embraced the divinity of the mediator that the sign of his deed cured the infirmity of all, and divinity so inhabited the humanity of the mediator that the same sign bestowed God's strength upon all. It was in order to convey the full impact of this exchange that Augustine conflated the literal and transferred senses of *transfiguro*.

The second insight of 394 generated by Augustine's study of Galatians concerned the exegesis of the Old Testament. Latin translators had garbled Augustine's text by rendering the Greek masculine participle *diatygis* ("ordered") by the neuter *dispositum*, thus referring the action not to the law but to the corporate seed who is Christ.²² This moved him toward a nuance of the Latin which construed the angels as having "prepared" Christ and the Church in the time of the Old Testament. This trajectory of interpretation pushed him toward taking the preposition "in" with a locative rather than with Paul's instrumental sense, so that the hand or power of the mediator became the superintendent rather than

