Platonism's Influence on the Hermeneutic of Augustine: Exploring the Philosophical Roots of Augustine's Interpretive Approach

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Abstract

This paper contends that Augustine was a significant contributor to the "Spiritual Vision Model" of the Christian conception of heaven described by Craig Blaising. This model is premised on the Platonic understanding of perfection in which the soul unites with the Good, and heaven is primarily a cognitive state in which the individual possesses perfect spiritual knowledge. This model also provides a rational basis for favoring a figurative or spiritualized interpretation of Scripture over its literal meaning. Augustine's early life and conversion reflects a commitment to the SVM's Platonic ideals, as demonstrated in his deference to Cicero, his journey into and out of Manichaeanism, and his infatuation with the teaching of Ambrose. His hermeneutic articulated in *De Doctrina Christiana* reflects the SVM's prioritization of a spiritualized interpretation of Scripture over a literal. While Augustine's life and teaching reflect a commitment to a high view of Scripture, they nevertheless reflect a prominent example in church history where the ideals of the Spiritual Vision Model were prevalent.

Keywords

Bibliology, Eschatology, Platonism, Augustine

Cover Page Footnote

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Platonism's Influence on the Hermeneutic of Augustine:
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Craig Blaising takes a peculiar yet significant strategy in making a case for premillennialism in his essay in the Counterpoints monograph on millennial views.[1] A seasoned student of eschatology would expect strategies such as tracing Scripture-wide themes,[2] plotting redemptive-historical timelines,[3] and evaluating pregnant Biblical passages such as Daniel 9:24–27, Revelation 20, etc.[4] Blaising, however, shifts the discussion to the philosophical and hermeneutical presuppositions of eschatological views, devoting roughly 40 percent of his argument to the influence of what he calls the "Spiritual Vision Model" (SVM) on the Christian conception of heaven. This model envisions heaven as a state of pure spiritual existence with "an unbroken, unchanging contemplation of the

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[1] Craig A. Blaising, "Chapter Three: Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond,* ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 155–227.

[2] Discussion popularly centers on the Kingdom of God. See, e.g., Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Lampion House Publishing, LLC, 2017). Some have targeted their discussion on the theme of Messianic promise and fulfillment between the testaments. See, e.g., Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010); Seth D. Postell, *Adam as Israel: Genesis 1 - 3 as the Introduction to the Torah and Tanakh* (Cambridge: Clarke, 2012); Kevin S. Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2019).

[3] Discussion in which the timing of eschatological events is prominent concerns the rapture and millennial fulfillment. For examples of discussion concerning the rapture and its timing, see, e.g., James F. Stitzinger, "The Rapture in Twenty Centuries of Biblical Interpertation," *MSJ* 13, no. 2 (2002): 149–71; Alan Hultberg and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, 2nd ed., Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010). For millennial fulfillment, cf. Robert B. Strimple, "Chapter Two: Amillennialism," 84–100; Michael A. Grisanti, "Premillennialism and the Old Testaement," *MSJ* 29, no. 2 (2018): 157–76; ; Eckhard J. Schnabel, "The Viability of Premillennialism and the Text of Revelation," *JETS* 64, no. 4 (December 2021): 785–795.

[4] For discussion concerning Daniel 9:24–27, cf. Christopher A. Hughes, "The Terminus Ad Quem of Daniel's 69th Week: A Novel Solution," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 17, no. 51 (2013): 119–41; George Athas, "In Search of the Seventy 'Weeks' of Daniel 9," *JHebS* 9 (May 7, 2009), 2–20. For Revelation 20, cf. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 180–90; Matthew W Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two-Age Model* (Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2016), 175–304. Recent treatments of other significant passages focus on those found in the book of Isaiah, including, e.g., G. K. Beale, "An Amillennial Response to a Premillennial View of Isaiah 65:20," *JETS* 61, no. 3 (September 2018): 461–492; Andrew H. Bartelt, "The Centrality of Isaiah 6 (-8) within Isaiah 2-12," *Concordia Journal* 47, no. 1 (October 1, 2021): 29–47.

infinite reality of God," known historically as the "beatific vision."[5] This, he alleges, stems from the Platonic understanding of perfection, in which the soul unites with the Good, the ultimate principle of reality and truth, in a changeless state of existence.[6] Heaven is primarily a cognitive state in which the individual possesses perfect spiritual knowledge, which consists of a "direct, full, and unbroken vision of true being, absolute good, and unsurpassed beauty."[7] The significance of this conception for the study of Scripture is twofold: on the one hand, it relies on Platonic philosophical assumptions concerning metaphysics, human anthropology, and perfection that are not clearly derived from the Biblical text[8]; on the other hand, it provides a rational basis for the sort of hermeneutic that favors a figurative or spiritualized interpretation of eschatological passages.[9] The latter of these constitutes the traditionally fertile ground of eschatology, as the debate between millennial views tends to center on the veracity of their respective interpretations of figurative expressions. Blaising's innovation was with the former, by questioning the veracity of certain philosophical ideals as a necessary first step in evaluating millennial views.

Apart from the "response" essays in the same volume, little attempt has been made to engage Blaising's essay, or at least his discussion concerning the SVM and its influence on Christian thought.[10] All the while, studies concerning

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[5] Blaising, "Premillennialism," 162.

[6] Ed Miller and Jon Jensen, *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 6th edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 55–72, esp. 69. For additional discussion on Platonism, see Gerald L. Gutek, *Philosophical, Ideological, and Theoretical Perspectives on Education*, 2nd edition. (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 20–25. For additional discussion on the Platonic roots of the Beatific Vision, see Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 45–75. Cf. also his respective studies of Gregory of Nysa ("Becoming Human in the Face of God: Gregory of Nyssa's Unending Search for the Beatific Vision: Becoming Human in the Face of God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 2 [April 2015]: 131–151]) and Jonathan Edwards ("The 'Grand Medium': An Edwardsean Modification of Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: The 'Grand Medium,'" *Modern Theology* 33, no. 2 [April 2017]: 187–212).

[7] Blaising, "Premillennialism," 162. Cf. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang (*Heaven: A History* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988]), who suggest "beatific knowledge" is a more apt descriptor; hell is a place of ignorance, but heaven is a place of divine knowledge and, thereby, eternal bliss (88).

[8] Blaising lists three assumptions: contrast between spirit and matter, identification of spirit with mind, and belief that eternal perfection entails the absence of change (Ibid., 161).

[9] Ibid., 162.

[10] Kenneth L. Gentry appears to concede Blaising's point while also noting that the popular alternatives to premillennialism are not so wedded to the SVM's conception of heaven ("Postmillennial Response," 231). Similarly, Robert B. Strimple limits his response to the extent of amillennialism's historical acceptance of certain features of premillennialism (e.g., physical resurrection, renewed earth) without adequately addressing the philosophical commitments Blaising perceives ("Amillennial Response," 257–63).

the influence of Platonic philosophy on prominent Christian thinkers are plentiful.[11] One such thinker is Augustine, the venerated Bishop of North Africa from the early fifth century, whose pedigree as a Christian philosopher is well known, seeing as his conversion was, by his own admission, largely credited to the influence of Platonism on his thinking.[12] Blaising provides some discussion in his essay concerning the influence of Augustine's Platonism on the development of the SVM, but it falls within a broader survey of thinkers throughout church history, making Augustine's unique contribution difficult to discern. Consequently, this study will attempt to expand on Blaising's assertion. To what extent could Augustine have influenced the formulation of the SVM relative to other Christian thinkers? To what extent did his ideas contribute to the development of the SVM's hermeneutical assumptions? The first of these questions will be answered with a biographical sketch of Augustine's early life and conversion with a view to appreciating the educational and philosophical influences that shaped his thinking. The second will be answered with an evaluation of Augustine's hermeneutic presented in his seminal work, *De Doctrina Christiana*.[13] With a more extensive evaluation of the influences on

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[11] Recent studies on Patristic thinkers include Justin Martyr (T. J. Lang, "Intellect Ordered: An Allusion to Plato in Dialogue with Trypho and Its Significance for Justin's Christian Epistemology," *JTS* 67, no. 1 [2016]: 77–96), Origen (Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen and the Platonic Tradition," *Religions* 8, no. 2 [February 10, 2017]: 21), and Marius Victorinus (Stephen Cooper, "The Platonist Christianity of Marius Victorinus," *Religions* 7, no. 10 [October 1, 2016]: 122). For the medieval period, see Willemien Otten, "Christianity's Content: (Neo)Platonism in the Middle Ages, Its Theoretical and Theological Appeal," *Numen* 63, no. 2/3 (March 9, 2016): 245–270; Johann Beukes, "Neoplatonism in the Cologne Tradition of the Later Middle Ages: Berthold of Moosburg (ca. 1300–1361) as Case Study," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021), a6281. https://doi. org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6281. From the twentieth century, Grace Tiffany has surveyed the Platonism of C.S. Lewis in Grace Tiffany, "C. S. Lewis: The Anti-Platonic Platonist," *ChrLit* 63, no. 3 [2014]: 357–371).

[12] Cf. William Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 39–77; Roland J. Teske, *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 3–25; John Kenney, "'None Come Closer to Us than These:' Augustine and the Platonists," *Religions* 7, no. 9 (September 1, 2016): 114. In recent discussion, Laela Zwollo (*St. Augustine and Plotinus: The Human Mind as Image of the Divine, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae* [Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2019]) has demonstrated the relative influence of the neoplatonist, Plotinus, on Augustine's conception of the image of God. Sarah Byers, ("Augustine and the Philosophers," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey and Shelley Reid [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012], 175–87), has demonstrated the influence of Aristotelianism on Augustine's thought by virtue of Aristotelianism's influence on Plotinus. A full monograph is also available demonstrating Augustine's impact on philosophers in the twentieth century, Calvin L. Troup, ed., *Augustine for the Philosophers: The Rhetor of Hippo, the Confessions, and the Continentals* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014).

[13] Unless otherwise noted, all of Augustine's source material is derived from the New City Press translations.

Augustine's thought and the effect such influences had on shaping his hermeneutic, this study will demonstrate Augustine's significant, if not outsized, influence on the development of SVM's guiding assumptions.

Augustine's Early Life and Conversion: Educational and Philosophical Influences

A survey of Augustine's life reveals a life that was significantly influenced by the SVM's core philosophical ideas, namely, those of Platonism. Such ideas took root early in his educational career and eventually became the stimulus for his personal quest for enlightenment that led to his Christian conversion. He was the son of a midlevel Roman official and, as such, received a relatively prestigious education. The education, known as "classical education," was meant to preserve the privilege of Rome's elite through inculturation, literacy, and etiquette, culminating eventually in a position of privilege in Roman society.[14] For Augustine, this was as a teacher of rhetoric, a position he assumed at Carthage in the years preceding his conversion. The education followed a two-stage trajectory, the first of which he received at Madauros in North Africa as a boy. This stage comprised the study of grammar, which included both the study of the parts of speech in Greek and Latin, and exemplary literary works from their respective traditions. Grammar was not for the purpose of speaking the languages as much as it was for reading and writing in the sophisticated form of the educated class.[15] Augustine famously describes the difficulty he had with this phase of his learning,[16] perhaps because of his own youthful angst[17] but also because of the difficulty it posed for young boys to learn.[18] The second phase was

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[14] Anthony Corbeill, "Education in the Roman Republic: Creating Traditions," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too (Boston: Brill, 2001), 282–84.

[15] See Catherine M. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 11–38. James Clackson, "Language," in *Augustine in Context*, ed. Tarmo Toom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 63 suggests that, in this sense, learning Latin was for Augustine like learning a foreign language.

[16] In addition to his professed difficulty with the Greek language (*Conf.* I, 12.19), he also questions the value of having to study such classic works as Aeneid (*Conf.* I, 13.20) and Homer (*Conf.* I, 16.25). Ultimately, he admits the value in learning how to read and write, even if such learning should come through such superfluous means (*Conf.* I, 13.22).

[17] Augustine mentions the beatings he received at this early point in his education (*Conf.* I, 9.14–15), suggesting a more compulsive form of learning that may have created a distaste for the subject matter.

[18] W. Martin Bloomer, "Classical Literary Culture in North Africa," 68–78 suggests that Augustine's skepticism of the value of Classical literature may not have been in isolation, but reflective of the skepticism that characterized other prominent thinkers in his time.

the study of rhetoric, which he received at Carthage, a major Roman port city northeast of Madauros. This encompassed the study of the rules of oratory for the purpose of creating a skilled communicator. It was the logical end of the study of grammar, the point at which the student, having learned the rules of language, considered how to use language to teach, persuade, or move an audience to action. For Augustine, it was the necessary training for assuming his subsequent vocation as a teacher and later as a municipal orator in the city of Milan before his conversion.

Having been raised under the tutelage of a devout mother, Augustine was exposed to Scripture as a boy, but he remained unconverted throughout his youth.[19] A turning point, however, came during his studies at Carthage when he encountered the writings of Cicero for the first time.[20] Cicero's teaching echoed a Platonic ontology, emphasizing the divinity of the soul and the primacy of the mind over the body.[21] He also stressed the necessity of mental discipline for the pursuit of knowledge in this life and the attainment of ultimate truth when the soul reaches the realm of the transcendent in the afterlife.[22] In the face of such teaching, Augustine's carnal desires appeared worthless, and he became impassioned to pursue wisdom wherever that would take him (*Conf.* III, 4.7). Harkening to his mother's influence, this initially took him back to the pages of Scripture, but he was disappointed with their lack of sophistication in comparison

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[19] Carol Harrison ("Augustine," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume I: From the Beginnings to 600*, ed. James Carleton Padget and Joachim Schaper [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 678) makes a point to suggest that Augustine's initial exposure to Scripture would have come through his mother, and that such exposure would have stimulated his subsequent turn to Scripture after exposure to Cicero. Jason David BeDuhn (*Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, Volume 1: Conversion and Apostasy, 373-388 C. E.* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009], 25) cautions, however, that he was largely unfamiliar with Scripture while in Carthage.

[20] Scholars generally believe the work Augustine was exposed to was Hortensius (e.g., Teske, *Know God*, 4–5; Zwollo, *Augustine*, 30; Harrison, "Augustine," 678), a philosophical dialogue that exists only in fragments. Phillip Cary, "Study as Love: Augustinian Vision and Catholic Education," *Augustine and Liberal Education*, ed. Kim Paffenroth and Kevin L Hughes, (Routledge: New York, 2017), 66–67 suggests that the text functioned as a sort of paraphrase of Aristotelian philosophy that urged the study of philosophy for its own sake rather than for its carnal usefulness. For further discussion, see Danuta Shanzer, "Augustine and the Latin Classics," 165–68.

[21] BeDuhn, *Manichaean Dilemma*, 124–25.

[22] The emphasis of mental discipline was more characteristic of Neoplatonism. See Giovanni Catapano, "Philosophical Trends in Augustine's Time," 119–26; Everett Ferguson, "Neoplatonism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Elwell, Walter A., 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017) http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/bpget/neoplatonism/0?institutionId=5072.

to Cicero (*Conf.* III, 5.9).[23] Instead, he found solace in the Manichaean community, an ascetic community that shared his passion for the pursuit of wisdom and provided an alternative to his mother's Christianity that seemingly avoided its fatal flaws.[24]

What did Augustine find appealing about the Manichaeans? They apparently posed quandaries in Scriptural teaching that appealed to his sense of skepticism. Three mentioned in his recollection (*Conf.* III, 7.12) include the question of the origin of evil, the veracity of anthropomorphic descriptions of God, and the offensive behavior of the "righteous" patriarchs in the OT (e.g., polygamy, animal sacrifice). On a deeper level, "Augustine could see that the Manichaeans shared his wider interests in learning and the sciences, beyond the simple parables of Christian preaching."[25] He was enticed by their call to pursue a faith that was premised on rational thought rather than the blind faith he perceived to be more prevalent among Christians that was motivated by fear and superstition (*Util. cred.* 1.2). As an aspiring intellectual, he was desirous for truth (*Conf.* III, 6.10), and he was intrigued by a form of Christianity that was compatible with his desire to pursue truth.[26] Moreover, in their pursuit of truth, the Manichaeans had developed a rich literary tradition, which also appealed to him as an aspiring author.[27] Finally, beyond their unique philosophical emphasis, they offered a sense of community that he found attractive.[28] To Augustine, it seemed he was on the cutting edge of reimagining the Christian faith, and he found a group who, presumably, shared his desire to reimagine it. Their collective willingness to engage in both mental and physical discipline was reflective of a community that took the pursuit of truth more seriously than most. He found people who were equally willing to heed Cicero's instruction, and they were apparently able to do so while innovating on the Christian faith.

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[23] This could reflect the cumbersome nature of the *Vetus Latina*, the presumed Biblical text to which Augustine had access, rather than necessarily a problem intrinsic to the Biblical writers. See discussion below on Biblical texts available in Augustine's time.

[24] For discussion concerning Manichaeism's influence in Augustine's time, see Nicholas Baker-Brian, "Manicheism," 137–44; for an expanded look at its origins and beliefs, see his monograph, Nicholas Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism: An Ancient Faith Rediscovered* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011).

[25] BeDuhn, *Manichaean*, 29.

[26] In his recollection, he describes how he came to attribute every talent he developed (e.g., debate) and every new piece of knowledge he read to Manichaeism (*Duab.* 9.11).

[27] Nicholas Baker-Brian, "Manicheanism," 139. J. van Oort, *Mani and Augustine: Collected Essays on Mani, Manichaeism and Augustine*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean studies volume 97 (Boston: Brill, 2020), 200–1 notes that this included not only a vast quantity of books, but also the pristine quality of the binding of such books.

[28] See Baker-Brian, "Manicheanism," 142–43 for a description of the charity that had come to characterize the Manichean community.

As a member of the community,[29] Augustine was exposed to Scripture, albeit the prescribed canon of the Manichaeans,[30] on a greater scale than what he had experienced up to that point in his life. He also attended meetings, reading groups, and lectures from itinerant holy men, where he engaged in the community's interpretation of Scripture. He even engaged in the public defense of their interpretation, which he saw as affirming the veracity of what they espoused whenever he "won" the debate (*Duab.* 9.11). Nevertheless, he eventually discovered he was not as fully committed to Manichaean doctrine as he initially thought. He recounts, for example, his sorrow over the death of a close friend in the Manichaean community, which caused him to realize that he couldn't accept the Manichaean conception of the afterlife, which amounted to a form of annihilationism (*Conf.* IV, 4.9).[31] He also had a difficult time accepting the Manichaean explanations of the Cosmos, instead being drawn to the study of astrology for explanations that were more intellectually sophisticated (*Ep.* 55.4.6).[32] While he may have converted on the belief that their doctrine and way of life was the appropriate means for attaining truth, he admitted that he ultimately could not accept the doctrine as truth itself.[33]

Augustine hoped he could establish more confidence in Manichaean teaching through consultation with Faustus, a Manichaean bishop in North Africa. His eventual encounter, however, only proved that the Manicheans were not as devoted to the pursuit of truth as he initially thought them to be. To begin with, Faustus did not appear to be as well-read in the holy texts of the Manichaeans as Augustine expected him to be.[34] Faustus was apparently ignorant of the academic

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[29] His technical role was that of an "auditor," a lower rank within the Manichaean hierarchy reserved for those interested in observing, listening, and learning about Manichaean thought and their way of life. See J. van Oort, *Mani and Augustine*, 8–15.

[30] See *ABD*, 4:504–6 for a survey of the archaeological record of Manichaean texts; Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism*, 61–95 for an extended description of the sources in the Manichaean canon.

[31] BeDuhn, *Manichaean Dilemma*, 96 explains that the Manichaean conception of the afterlife envisioned the soul as "transfused into disparate states and embodiments, there to continue its odyssey through the cosmos." Augustine admits that this should render meaningless the act of mourning for the deceased since the person was literally gone. This only made him more depressed, however, knowing that he could never see his friend again, not even in the afterlife. MacDannell and Lang (*Heaven*, 60) suggest that Augustine's hope for seeing deceased loved ones again in the afterlife was influenced by Cicero.

[32] BeDuhn, *Manichaean Dilemma*, 96. Apparently he thought the myths were allegories intended to mask philosophical principles that would later be revealed after he was promoted to a member of the Manichaean elect.

[33] Augustine often speaks about his failure to internalize what the Manichaeans espoused (e.g., *Duab.*, 9.11; *Conf.* VII, 14.20).

[34] Commenting on his general ignorance, Augustine notes that Faustus read only some of the volumes that were fairly well written in Latin. J. van Oort, (*Mani and Augustine*, 200) suggests

disciplines for which Augustine was passionate and reluctant to engage in such disciplines, lest he communicate something as a religious authority he would have to retract (*Conf.* V, 7.12). Instead, he premised the veracity of the religion squarely on the virtuous character of Mani, their founder. As BeDuhn notes, "What mattered for him was the overall ethos of the religion, its compelling character as a value system, and its plausibility as a means of salvation."[35] Augustine admitted that this emptied him of all confidence in the Manichaean sect (*Conf.* V, 7.13) and plunged him into a time of great despair. Motivated by Cicero, he yearned to attain the truth he was seeking, but he realized that he could not attain it with the Manicheans no matter how high he advanced in their ranks (*Util. cred.* 8.20).

Augustine resolved to remain with the Manicheans, but only for as long as it took him to find an alternative belief system that encouraged his pursuit of truth and offered a seemingly more viable path for attaining it (*Conf.* V, 7.12). Glimpses of such a belief system came through his encounter with Ambrose, a Nicene bishop in Milan, after receiving a prestigious appointment as the city's municipal orator. Initially, he was not impressed with Ambrose's skill as a rhetor, being not as cultured as Faustus and too prone to appeal to authority or tradition when making a case (*Conf.* V, 13.23). Regardless, he was a vocal opponent of Manichaeism,[36] and some of his critiques resonated with Augustine's growing skepticism.[37] More intriguing was the sort of Christianity he was espousing, which was different from what Augustine remembered from his mother and seemingly more complementary to his academic interests. Similar to how Cicero would use individuals from Roman history as models for instruction in moral virtue, Ambrose's sermons used the OT patriarchs as models for the Christian faith.[38] He emphasized a promise-fulfillment relationship between the testaments that envisioned the era of the Mosaic Law—the "shadow"—fulfilled in the era of

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this may indicate that there were a variety of sophistication levels in Manichaean literature and that Augustine was disparaging his ignorance of the higher order texts.

[35] BeDuhn, *Manichaean Dilemma*, 127. See also an extended description in BeDuhn's "'Not to Depart from Christ': Augustine between 'Manichaean' and 'Catholic' Christianity," in *Augustine and Manichaean Christianity: Selected Papers from the First South African Conference on Augustine of Hippo, University of Pretoria, 24-26 April 2012*, ed. Johannes van Oort (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2013), 3–9.

[36] BeDuhn, *Manichaean Dilemma*, 168 extracts multiple points of critique from Ambrose's sermons, including their rejection of the incarnation of Christ and the idea that humans were created by forces of evil.

[37] The most crucial point for Augustine was the Manichaean conception of God as a corporeal being who functions merely as a reactive force against evil. He acknowledged that the non corporeal God Ambrose espoused was a fatal flaw for Manichaean dogma (*Conf.* 14.25).

[38] J. Warren Smith, *Ambrose, Augustine, and the Pursuit of Greatness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 107–31.

the Gospel—the "image."[39] This outlook was reflected in shadow-image typology, which he established as prevalent throughout Scripture using allegorical interpretation.[40] His interpretive technique was derived from 2 Corinthians 3:6, premised on a sharp dichotomy between the "letter" and the "spirit" of the Law. On the one hand, the "letter" referred to the carnal meaning of the Law, which was plainly obvious to all people, especially those over whom it was instituted. The "spirit" referred to the spiritual meaning that Christ, having fulfilled the letter, made available through faith. Those who were bound to the "letter" were slaves, but those who grasped the "spirit"—the Law's spiritual meaning—were those who, through Christ, had been set free. Augustine acknowledges that this was one of Ambrose's most intriguing features because it offered a means of handling those enigmatic passages in Scripture he could not fully grasp (*Conf.* V, 14.24; VI, 4.6). Through allegory, Augustine discerned that "[S]cripture was not a crude, badly written, contradictory or offensive work which had to be read literally but a work of profound spiritual depths and meaning, which only needed to be interpreted in a manner appropriate to its divine inspiration for its truth to be discovered."[41]

　　Complementing Ambrose's influence was Augustine's discovery of "the books of the Platonists," which he describes in the middle section of his *Confessions*. It is not clear to the modern reader what books he may have read, but his description of what he learned from the experience corresponds with beliefs of Neoplatonism, a school of thought concerning Platonic ideas derived from the teachings of Plotinus, an Alexandrian philosopher from the third century, and his pupil, Porphyry.[42] He describes his enlightenment to a conception of God as the transcendent, incorporeal, and omnipresent Truth through whom he was made (VII, 10.16).[43] As such, God sits atop a hierarchy of being under whom are humans and all inanimate objects below them (VII, 11.17).[44] He is the ultimate

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[39] Smith, *Ambrose, Augustine, and the Pursuit of Greatness*, 129–30. Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism*, 64–5 notes that such continuity would have constituted theological error for Manichaeism.

[40] Ibid., 113–26 for a variety of examples of his allegorical interpretation.

[41] Harrison, "Augustine," 680.

[42] For further analysis of the development of Neoplatonism, see Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–34, including 10–19 on possible source materials Augustine may have read. Cf., discussion in Zwollo, *Augustine and Plotinus*, 442–56 qualifying the extent of Augustine's embrace of Platonism.

[43] Correspondent with "The One," a transcendent first principle from which everything is derived, and from which multiple levels of reality emanate Cf., Remes, *Neoplatonism* , 7; Ferguson, "Neoplatonism."

[44] Neoplatonism's hierarchy of being consists of "the mind" (nous), the highest level consisting of the One's reflection upon itself; "nature" (physis), the lowest level where reality is confined to physical matter; and "the world soul" (psyche), the intermediary level between and the Mind and Nature. Cf. Catapano, "Philosophical," 19–20; Remes, *Neoplatonism* , 7–8.

Good from which all things derive, and all things that derive from him are considered good (VII, 13.19–15.21). Consequently, evil is not a substantive reality since otherwise, evil would emanate from that which is good. Instead, evil is a privation of what is good, a corruption of a being's essence (VII, 12.18; 16.22).[45] With God's help and guidance, man can temporarily behold truth in a state of ecstasy through mental contemplation.[46] His chief end is reunification with God in a "beatific homeland" where he can enjoy such ecstasy unendingly.[47]

Through Platonism, Augustine discovered a new confidence in his conception of God and the world, which he credited to God providentially preparing his mind to receive Scriptural truth (*Conf.* VII, 10.16; 20.26). Scholars, however, question the extent to which this constitutes an enlightenment to Christian dogma.[48] His claim to have "read" the doctrines of the Gospel of John in the books of the Platonists, including a conception of "the Son of God" (VII, 9.13), smacks of projection, at first glance, given that the Platonists he read likely had little interest in Christianity.[49] At the same time, he concludes Book VII of *Confessions* by saying that it was just as well that he should encounter Platonism first, lest he be led astray from the Scripture by learning it later (VII, 20.26). In other words, by his own admission, the Truth is discoverable chiefly through Scripture; Platonism served only to till the soil of his mind so that Scripture would be more easily received. We must also remember that Augustine was already

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[45] Remes, *Neoplatonism* , 93–7 for a discussion of the Neoplatonic conception of evil.

[46] Ibid., 179–81. This would seem to be what constitutes the experience Augustine describes, beholding God and the state of the cosmos (*Conf.* VII, 10.16–12.18), only to be reminded that he was not capable of beholding God fully beyond a temporary moment (VII, 17.23). The permanent transformation of the body to fully behold God, therefore, is a necessary part of the Beatific Vision. On this point, see Boersma, *Seeing God*, 387–429. Zwollo, *Augustine*, 451–52 distinguishes Augustine's practice of contemplation from the Neoplatonist conception, however, in that it was a corporate endeavor, and one in which prayer and the study of Scripture could supplement the unattainability of complete knowledge in this life.

[47] Reunification in Neoplatonism seems to smack more of Pantheism, in which the human soul becomes subsumed into the One. Augustine's qualifier that the homeland is "not merely descried but lived in" suggests the Christian conception of heaven where man resides alongside God.

[48] For a survey of literature, cf., Mark J. Boone, *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire: Augustine's Theology of Desire in the Cassiciacum Dialogues* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2017), 1–16; Mark J. Boone, "The Role of Platonism in Augustine's 386 Conversion to Christianity," *Religion Compass* 9, no. 5 (May 2015): 151–161.

[49] What would be helpful, of course, is knowing which books or teachings Augustine may have read to make such a claim. Curiously, he makes a similar reference to the Gospel of John in *Civ. Dei.* 10.2 in his discussion of the Platonists, mentioning Plotinus by name. Zwollo, *Augustine*, 44n42 suggests Augustine may have had in mind the Plotinus conception of the divine Intellect (i.e., nous) which functioned in the hierarchy of being as intermediary between humans and the One.

somewhat familiar with Scripture up to this point in his life, and it would have been easy for someone of his intellectual stature to hear the echoes of Scripture in other places. It would seem best, then, to treat his encounter with Neoplatonism as genuinely transformative in his thinking by establishing a rational basis for the Christian truth he would later internalize. As Harrison notes, "It very much seems that it was the Platonic […] understanding of reality which Augustine needed, to make sense not only of the Christian faith – of God and the world – but also of scripture."[50] While Platonism was not the substance of his eventual conversion, it was a stimulant in leading him to it.

On balance, then, Augustine's influence on the SVM's philosophical ideas is credited to Platonism's influence on his own conception of Christian truth. Its influence took shape early in his educational career as he was exposed to Cicero's ontology and exhortation to mental discipline. While his deference to Cicero led him to join the Manichaeans, it likewise led to a parting of the ways in search of what could best complement his Ciceronian commitment. Ambrose's innovation in Christian thought, and the doctrines of Platonism espoused by Plotinus laid the groundwork for Augustine's eventual conversion by making a compelling apologetic for the Christian faith. Allegorical interpretation, the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being, and man's ultimate destiny in the "beatific homeland" lead him to relinquish his lingering objections, and his conversion followed shortly thereafter in the garden of Milan. After his conversion, he devoted his life to articulating Christian doctrine in a way that was mostly congruent with these ideas.

Augustine's Hermeneutic in *De Doctrina Christiana*

Again, Blaising contends that the SVM operates within a Platonic framework where the physical is inferior to the spiritual, and Scripture's ultimate "spiritual" significance takes priority over the "literal."[51] An analysis of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine's seminal textbook on Biblical hermeneutics and preaching, reveals a similar framework.[52] The book was one of the first Augustine

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[50] Harrison, "Augustine," 680.

[51] Blaising, "Premillennialism," 161, 165.

[52] The book had a profound impact on the medieval conception of education for clergy and monastic communities. For discussion concerning its significance and influence, see James A. Andrews, *Hermeneutics and the Church: In Dialogue with Augustine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 13–41; Paul L. Allen, *Theological Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 73–87; Tarmo Toom, "Augustine's Hermeneutics: The Science of the Divinely Given Signs" in *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers*, ed. Tarmo Toom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 92–107; Philip Porter, "Liberated by Doctrine: Augustine's Approach to Scripture in De Doctrina Christiana," *Pro Ecclesia* 26, no. 2 (2017): 219–231.

began writing following his appointment as Bishop of Hippo in 395, written out of a desire to articulate his understanding of Scripture and Scriptural authority to both his fellow-bishops and Manichaean heretics.[53] Perhaps intended for the educated laypeople or aspiring pastors in his congregation, the book provides a systematic approach to the study and communication of Scripture. Such a study may have also been a formative experience for him personally as an exercise in articulating his own task as a teacher of Scripture.[54] The book's composition spanned many decades of his life, with the first three quarters written early in his pastoral career but the final quarter written after a thirty-year hiatus when he was in the twilight of his life. Such a trajectory renders the book a unique fusion of two Augustines—one at a relatively youthful and inexperienced time in his life and one at a time when he was older, wiser, and more contemplative. Likewise, as a composite of his thoughts from the beginning of his ministry to the end, the book represents the whole of what he believed concerning the study of Scripture without the need to qualify his earlier beliefs with the latter. As will be evident, Augustine constructed a hermeneutic that exhibits many of the lingering influences of his educational and philosophical experiences leading up to his conversion. For the youthful Augustine, the prevalence of such influences reflects a zeal to incorporate what he was passionate about as a young believer; for the seasoned Augustine, however, it indicates that such influences had a lingering hold on his understanding of Scripture, even as he grew firmer in the cardinal doctrines of his faith.

Biblical Texts

As is to be expected in the systematization of a Biblical hermeneutic, Augustine began his discussion with the importance of Biblical languages and the specific texts that comprise the Biblical canon. Augustine was raised in a multilingual society with a working knowledge of multiple languages.[55] He spoke and wrote in Latin, which was probably his native tongue. He also had a working knowledge of Punic, which, though having little obvious effect on his ability to

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[53] Reflecting what Harrison describes as "an essentially pastoral, theological, and apologetic" approach to advance and defend the faith ("Augustine," 684). Andrews, *Hermeneutics*, 18–21 suggests the book was written within the same time span as his composition of *Ad Simplicianum*, *Contra epistulam Manichaei*, and *De agone*.

[54] Andrews, *Hermeneutics*, 21.

[55] For an expanded description of Augustine's linguistic background, see Clackson, "Language," 61–67.

study Scripture, would have aided his ministry in North Africa.[56] He learned Greek as a boy in grammar school, but it is not certain how much his distaste for Greek (*Conf.* I, 12.19) may have affected his ability to master the language or his ability to work with Biblical Greek texts without a reliance on Latin translations. Similarly, it is questionable whether he knew Biblical Hebrew.[57] He did, however, acknowledge the importance of the original languages for the study of Scripture,[58] and it is possible, therefore, that he may have endeavored to learn them eventually. On balance, his familiarity with multiple languages prepared him to engage his parishioners and, more importantly, the language of Scripture, both in its original language(s) and the many translations available to him in the Latin-speaking world.

Augustine provided some indication of the Scriptural texts he expected to be available to the interpreter. While a consensus was beginning to take shape in his day concerning which of the texts in the Christian tradition were considered sacred Scripture,[59] there had yet to be a single volume containing the full canon. Augustine's own identification of canonical texts (*Doctr. Chr.* II, 8.13) includes the traditionally accepted 39 texts of the OT, the 27 texts of the NT, and five additional deuterocanonical books—Tobias, Judith, Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach. If he worked at all with Hebrew texts, it is unclear which textual tradition he may have utilized, given the lack of any authorized transmission before the advent of the Masoretic Text a few centuries later. The Septuagint would have represented the closest to a completed copy of the OT, which he considered to be authoritative, even as a Greek translation of the original Hebrew (*Doctr. Chr.* II, 15.22). Texts were slowly becoming more collated, however, through various attempts to translate into Latin. The Vetus Latina (i.e., "Old Latin") was a Latin translation from the Greek texts of both the OT and NT

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[56] Punic was a Semitic language spoken by the Carthaginians before the Roman conquest. Though it had no written tradition, it still survived in smaller towns and would have been a language spoken among members of Augustine's congregation. (Ibid., 80).

[57] Harrison ("Augustine," 676–77) claims that Augustine could not read Hebrew, and that his knowledge of Greek was "severely limited." Clackson ("Languages," 61), however, suggests that he may have had some familiarity with both languages. His classical education may have afforded him some knowledge of Greek, even if squandering his studies, but how much Greek he knew is not certain.

[58] E.g., Speaking to his fellow-Latin speaking interpreters, he says, that they "need two other languages for the knowledge of Scripture, Hebrew and Greek, that they may have recourse to the original texts if the endless diversity of the Latin translators throw them into doubt" (*Doctr. chr.* II, 11.16).

[59] For a survey of the development of the Old Testament canon in the first few centuries of the church, see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon*, Fourth ed., (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2:60–100. Catalogue lists containing canonical texts were beginning to shape in churches throughout the empire and Constantine's earlier call to unity likely stimulated a collective striving for consensus (99–100).

that originated out of North Africa and was likely a text with which he was familiar.[60] His preferred translation was what he referred to as "Itala," the identity of which is not entirely certain,[61] but one which he praised for its ability to preserve the original words of the inspired text while preserving its meaning (*Doctr. chr.* II, 15.22). Jerome also began his work on the Vulgate shortly before Augustine's conversion. While Augustine's attitude toward the Vulgate was complicated,[62] it was a text he grew increasingly reliant on in his later years. Overall, then, the Scriptural witness to which Augustine had access and to which he expected potential teachers of Scripture to access was a robust one, thanks to the availability of Greek and Latin sources in circulation.

Educational Influences

Taken as a whole, *De Doctrina Christiana* demonstrates that Augustine's educational background proved paradigmatic to his study of Scripture. In the first three books, he explored the significance of the study of grammar for interpreting literature, particularly its emphasis on language and textual analysis, which he then applied to the study of Scripture; in the fourth, he did the same with the study of rhetoric.[63] In the classical model, grammar was intended to produce a competent individual who could read, understand, and converse with sophisticated thought without the aid of another. Just as his own teachers provided him the rules he needed to discern the meaning of pagan literature, Augustine

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[60] Harrison ("Augustine," 677) describes the translation as "extremely literal," "somewhat careless," and "somewhat distasteful." This is due at least in part to changes over the centuries from its original form because of successive revisions and changes in Latin vocabulary (see *ABD*, 799–800).

[61] Scholars tend to believe the text was a copy of the Venus Latina originating out of Italy (e.g., David F. Wright, "Augustine: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, I: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)* [Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996], 720). Stephen Pisano suggests that the copy was the result of a broader need to facilitate the movement of Scripture into Europe as Christianity was expanding ("Translations of the Bible, Ancient," in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste [Routledge, 2004] http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/routct/translat ions*of*the*bible*ancient/0?institutionId=5072).

[62] In his correspondence with Jerome, Augustine started his preference for the LXX as a source text for the OT (*Ep.* 71.4), but then later acknowledged the value of his use of Hebrew (*Ep.* 82.5.34). While he felt the translation could be of value in understanding Scripture, he ultimately determined it could not be used in his church because the congregation would have been familiar with it (*Ep.* 82.5.35).

[63] Ibid., 23–41 for a survey of the ways the book's structure has been variously understood. Here, I share Andrews's contention that the emphases of Books I–III and IV are mutually complementary.

perceived his task as an interpreter was as a teacher providing the rules his students needed to discern the meaning of Scripture (*Doctr. chr.* pref., 9). His rules stipulated that just as a student of Greek or Latin discerns what their respective authors are saying, so the student of Scripture should establish familiarity with what the words of Scripture are saying. Of course, not all Scripture can be easily discerned at first read. Hence, just as the rules of grammar (word division, usages, etc.) serve to eliminate ambiguities in the texts that students read, so the interpreter should use the rules of life—clear commands for living—and the rules of faith—clear descriptions of Christian virtue—to eliminate the ambiguities of Scripture (II, 8.14).

For Augustine, grammar provided a template for correctly ascertaining the literal meaning of Scripture. Rhetoric, on the other hand, was a tool not for determining what Scripture meant but for communicating Scripture's meaning after it had been determined (II, 37.55). The rhetor had one of three aims: to teach, so as to give his speech a purpose; to delight, so as to make his speech more attractive; or to appeal, so as to make his speech more effective (IV, 12.27). Moreover, following Cicero, the rhetor had one of three styles with which to accomplish his intended purpose: a subdued style for teaching, so as to make the speech more readily understood; a moderate style for delight, so as to make the speech more pleasurable; and a grand style for persuasion, so as to make the speech's call to action more readily obeyed (IV, 17.34–29.61). For Augustine, the Christian rhetor (i.e., the preacher of Scripture) teaches the truth of Scripture so that it might be understood and makes an appeal so that truth may be more readily obeyed (IV, 4–5). To make truth more delightful, that is, more pleasurable to the hearer, these two purposes must be kept in focus. Consequently, his primary means of delivery is the subdued style to ensure a proper understanding of truth, and the grand style, so as to encourage listeners to live correctly; the moderate style has no place for the preacher except as a means for making the preacher's call to action more pleasurable (IV, 17.34–29.61).

In sum, Augustine appropriated the entire structure of classical education for the study of Scripture, from the point of ascertaining the meaning of Scripture for oneself to the emanation of Scripture's meaning in the believing community. Like Israel, he "plundered the Egyptians" (II, 40.60), taking the spoils of pagan culture and exploiting them for the benefit of the people of God. Augustine's education helped him appreciate that the study of Scripture and the preaching of Scripture were two sides of the same coin. The aim of the classical curriculum was to produce individuals who were both competent and effective—competent to discover truth and effective in communicating the truth they discovered. Each was necessary to ensure that truth was more easily attainable by the virtuous individual, both for his own sake and the sake of his community. In the same way, the interpretation of Scripture was a process of discovery and communication for

the benefit of all believers, both individually and corporately. As individuals are faithful to apply the rules for interpreting Scripture, they can discover the meaning of Scripture for themselves. But "[w]ithout delivering what one understands to the pilgrim church, one has not fully interpreted Scripture."[64] Both are necessary for the people of God in accomplishing the objective of interpretation.

Philosophical Influences

De Doctrina Christiana also evidences the incorporation of Ambrose's figurative exegesis into Augustine's hermeneutic. Like Ambrose, he appealed to 2 Corinthians 3:6 as the principal basis for distinguishing between the "letter" and the "spirit" when interpreting Scripture. In a rather forceful manner, he cautioned against the "carnal thinking" of taking a text according to its "letter" when its true significance remains with its "spirit" or figurative sense (*Doctr. chr.* III, 5.9). Yet, for Augustine, the literal-figurative dichotomy explains more than just the interpretation of any one passage of Scripture. It also serves as the basis for his broader theory of language (I, 2.2). A word, he says, is merely a sign for signifying the thing to which it refers—whether literal, signifying an actual thing, or figurative, signifying something beyond the thing to which it refers (II, 10.15). The task for the interpreter of Scripture is to rightly distinguish the literal and figurative "signs" in order to discern the "things" to which they refer. This requires an extensive knowledge that will make each of the two more easily discernible. A mastery of "signs" entails the study of language (II, 11.16), translation (II, 12.17–18), as well as numbers and music (II, 16.24–18.28). A mastery of "things" entails a broad knowledge of all disciplines, including things concerning the mind, such as logic (II, 31.48) and rhetoric (II, 36.54–37.55), and things concerning the physical senses, such as history (II, 28.42), zoology (II, 29.45), and economics (II, 30.47). As the interpreter becomes increasingly familiar with the "things" of this world, and with the variety of "signs" which are used to point to them, both literal and figurative, the message of the Biblical writer can be more clearly discerned.

This conception of language is ultimately built on the Platonic hierarchy of being.[65] Augustine's conception of God as a "highest Good" led him to think

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[64] Andrews, *Hermeneutics*, 59.

[65] Augustine's theory of language appears to have been inspired by his epiphany with Ambrose's allegorical exegesis. This raises the question of whether or not, and to what extent, Ambrose was influenced by Platonism as well. A synthesis of scholarly studies suggesting a connection to Plotinus in Ambrose's sermons can be found in G. A. McCool, "The Ambrosian Origin of St. Augustine's Theology of the Image of God in Man," *Theological Studies* 20 (January 1, 1959): 63–64. Although dated at this point, Zwollo affirms the research as the basis for a

that, beyond the various carnal "things" to which the "signs" (i.e., words) of Scripture point, there is an ultimate spiritual "thing" to which all Scripture leads, which he defines as the love of God and the love of neighbor (I, 35.39). Moreover, since within the Platonic hierarchy, "the metaphysically prior is always more powerful, better and more simple or unified than the metaphysically lower,"[66] the actual human words of Scripture are necessarily inferior to the divine word and its intended goal. "God's revelation in scripture, God's pulling back the veil, necessitates a new covering: [His] perfect Word takes on the veil of our imperfect language."[67] Scripture is nothing more than an accommodation of his divine word to the limitations of human language. "[It] could only be properly understood as part of this equation: divinely inspired, but descending to a level which would reach fallen human beings and enable them gradually to apprehend their truth and be transformed by it."[68] Necessarily, then, the love of a material "Scripture" should not supersede the love of God's abstract "Word" since the former is only a means of ascertaining the latter (I, 35.39).[69]

This dichotomy carries additional implications concerning the authorial intent of Scripture. Augustine acknowledges that the goal of the interpreter is to discover "the thoughts and will" of the Biblical writer; however, only as a means of discovering the will of God (II, 5.6). The ultimate truth of God's Word is the desirable pursuit, which holds true for all human beings, including the interpreter and the Biblical writer. Nevertheless, it is possible for the interpreter to catch a glimpse of such truth despite not accurately discerning what the writer intended since the same God who inspired the writer abides with the interpreter. The writer's intent is, therefore, not the ultimate end of interpretation. Instead, there is a sense in which multiple interpretations of a given passage are possible, even those which are ancillary to the writer's intent if they equally tap into God's ultimate will (III, 36.40; *Conf.* XII, 18.27). At best, the writer's intent is desirable, but to the extent that the interpreter has made a good faith effort to discern what the writer communicated and taps into God's ultimate will, he has attained what

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modern consensus accepting Plotinus's influence on Ambrose (*Augustine and Plotinus*, 42n37). Elsewhere, however, he cautions that the influence was likely not widespread in the church at Milan (446n6).

[66] Remes, *Neoplatonism*, 7.

[67] Karlfried Froehlich, "'Take Up and Read': Basics of Augustine's Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 58, no. 1 (January 2004): 11.

[68] Harrison, "Augustine," 682.

[69] This also means that the material Scripture is ultimately expendable. Summarizing Augustine's argument concerning Scripture in the *Confessions*, Book XIII, Froehlic says, "There will be a time when the world below will be gone. There will be a time when Scripture will be no more…God's Word is eternal, but Scripture is not" ("Take Up and Read," 11).

he was striving to reach, even if he did not discern the writer's meaning precisely.[70]

The dichotomy also explains the way Scripture interprets itself, particularly the way the NT interprets the OT on a macro level. If the ultimate truth to which Scripture points is the love of God and neighbor, and if this truth was itself a revelation of Christ and the apostles (cf. Matt. 22:37–39; Rom. 13:8–10), then the NT is necessarily superior, and the OT is Christotelic.[71] Regardless of what the Biblical writer of the OT may have intended to communicate, the word of God was veiled until Christ came to lift it. As Augustine would say in *City of God*, "What else is that which is called the Old Testament but the hidden form of the New? And what else is that which is called the New Testament but the revealed form of the Old?" (XVI, 26). The interpreter may rightly discern what the OT writer intended, but, in the end, the ultimate Word is what matters most. The study of Scripture, then, is the pursuit of an ultimate spiritual truth, the Word of God, which transcends the literal sense of the Biblical writer. The literal sense of Scripture is not insignificant, but it is ancillary to the interpreter's ultimate task, which is to discern this Word of God. This Word is synonymous with Christ's double-love command, which is the ultimate end of the various "signs" (i.e., words) that appear in Scripture. The interpreter's success in handling Scripture is determined by how accurately he discerns the Word of God, regardless of how well he discerns the literal sense of the Biblical writer.

To be sure, an accurate description of Augustine's hermeneutic must account for his entire life and ministry since some of what he espoused at one point in his life may have been tempered, nuanced, or even discarded at a later time. While this analysis suggests that Platonism's influence was prominent in Augustine's conversion and his intellectual contribution to Christianity, it should not be construed to suggest that he was committed to Platonist dogma to the detriment of his faith or that he was incapable of adjusting his thinking in light of such faith. His interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis, for example, suggests a coming to terms with what Scripture revealed in a literal sense over a more spiritualized interpretation that better comported with the Platonist

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[70] Augustine does qualify that the interpreter's pursuit of truth necessarily entails striving for a correct interpretation of the author's original message (*Doctr. chr.* I, 36.41), and that an untenable interpretation will become plain as it proves disharmonious with the rest of Scripture (I, 37).

[71] "Christotelic" is precisely chosen in place of the more popular "Christocentric." Augustine saw the double-love command as the chief end of truth, and that to which all of Scripture points. This does not suggest, however, that he saw Christ depicted figuratively in every passage of Scripture. For more on this distinction, cf., Vern S. Poythress, "Christocentric Preaching," *SBJT* 22, no. 3 (2018): 47–66; Daniel I. Block, "Christotelic Preaching: A Plea for Hermeneutical Integrity and Missional Passion," *SBJT* 22, no. 3 (2018): 7–34.

conception of the cosmos.[72] Nevertheless, the trajectory of *De Doctrina Christiana*'s composition over the course of his life suggests that Platonism retained some influence in what he perceived to be the task of interpreting Scripture.[73] On balance, Augustine's life reflects a commitment to a high view of Scripture and a working out of what such a commitment should entail in light of his own persistent intellectual inquiry. Because he wrestled often with philosophical ideas, there were times when such ideas posed a significant influence on his thinking, and such influence persisted throughout his life. At other times, he was able to acknowledge when such ideas forced him into untenable positions.

Conclusion

In response to Blaising's essay, Robert B. Strimble contends that little evidence exists to demonstrate that the philosophical commitments outlined in the SVM were as prominent throughout church history as Blaising suggests.[74] This study was an attempt to counter such a charge by demonstrating Platonism's influence on the life, conversion, and hermeneutic of Augustine. The SVM is premised on the Platonic understanding of perfection in which the soul unites with the Good, and heaven is primarily a cognitive state in which the individual possesses perfect spiritual knowledge. Such ideas, evident in Ambrose's teaching concerning the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being and man's ultimate destiny in the "beatific homeland," had a formative impact on Augustine's thinking in the lead-up to his conversion. Likewise, the SVM's Platonist outlook on heaven provides a rational basis for interpreting Scripture in a way that favors a figurative or spiritualized interpretation of eschatological passages over the literal. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* articulates a similar hermeneutic premised on the Platonic hierarchy of being where the literal "Scripture" of the Biblical writers is subservient to the spiritual "Word" of God. To the extent that the SVM reflects a composite of historic Christian thought concerning a Platonist conception of

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[72] When evaluating his handling of the opening chapters of Genesis earlier in his life, he admitted that his tendency to allegorize was insufficient for discerning their truth (*Retract.* I, 17). Moreover, when commenting on Genesis 2:8f, he ascribes the genre of the passage to "the books of Kings and other writings of this kind" (*Gen. litt.* VIII, 1.2), which suggests a hesitancy to allegorize.

[73] In Augustine's *Retractiones*, he says that he preferred to complete *De Doctrina Christiania* rather than move on to the things that needed revising (*Retract.* II, 31.1). This suggests that, in his mind, the hermeneutic he espoused, including its aforementioned philosophical influences, were still useful for studying Scripture 30 years after he began writing the book. The only additional mention pertaining to Platonism was a correction that Ambrose did not espouse that Plato and Jeremiah were contemporaries (II, 31.2).

[74] Strimble, "Amillennial" 258–61.

heaven, and the interpretive principles warranted by such a conception, the life and teaching of Augustine provide a snapshot in church history where such ideas were prevalent.

A complement to this study would be additional research that analyzes Augustine's exegesis to further demonstrate Platonism's influence on his handling of Scripture. His exegesis of the Psalms would be especially relevant because of how prominent they were in his own devotional life, as evidenced in the *Confessions*. Those which are classified by modern interpreters as "Messianic" would be significant, given the questions they raise concerning authorial intent. More broadly, Blaising's survey of Christianity suggests that, within the Patristic and Medieval periods, there were multiple Christian thinkers who contributed to the development of the SVM. Additional studies evaluating the influence of Platonism on the hermeneutic of such thinkers would further strengthen his claim regarding the prevalence of the SVM within Christendom.

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