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Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Literary and Theological Introduction (Baker, 2012)

Addendum to Chapter 5 on Augustine and History in the Gospels

The Testimony of Augustine

Is my proposed way forward of Testimony truly the balanced way? Or is it not really just the next phase in the fabled Hegelian process of human ideals – one’s thesis is met by an antithesis, with the next generation forming a synthesis between them, which itself becomes the next thesis to be reacted against, etc., *ad infinitum*. Is my purported “balanced” view really just a temporary synthesis between today’s warring factions, only to be re-balanced again by my own students? Possibly. Certainly there are blind spots and imbalances in my own understanding and presentation. But I do take intellectual comfort from realizing that this debate is not on a pattern of infinite regression, but has been faced before in the Church, and that the view I am proposing here seems to be the same approach as modeled by the wise and thoughtful father of the church, Saint Augustine.

We saw in the previous chapter that of all the many harmonies of the Gospels that were produced, none has been so influential as that of Augustine’s. This is undoubtedly true in part because he was so influential and well-known on other accounts that his harmony continued to be used more than those of lesser-knowns. But I think it is also true because in his harmony, in combination with his other expositions of Scripture, we see a balanced wisdom about how to approach the question of history and theology.

Augustine’s *Harmony* was written for the clear purpose of giving answers to those questioning how the various details of the four Gospels can fit together. Produced around AD 400, it is often described as one of his “most toilsome and exhaustive” works.¹ Its goal is to refute those who would accuse Christianity of being false on the basis of its historical inconsistencies. It appears that his main interlocutors were the Manicheans and those like Porphyry – the Jesus Seminar of the ancient world as it were. The bulk of the *Harmony* is given to carefully examining the Gospel accounts to show that there is in fact a perfect harmonizing that occurs between them, highlighting especially the real (though not always immediately apparent) consistency between the Passion narratives.

Augustine faces head on the nitty-gritty details; he is not just trafficking in generalities. For example, he raises the questions as to why Matthew and Luke’s genealogies differ, why Matthew has 40 generations although they are divided into three successions of 14 each, what were the exact words of the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, why Matthew has a donkey *and* its colt while the others only have the former, and countless other such detailed matters.

Augustine’s solutions are varied and range from sophisticated to common-sensical, and many are strikingly similar to the kind of solutions offered today. Thus, he explains that when speech is reported, what matters is not so much the exact form of speech, but rather the intended sense (e.g., on the heavenly words at Jesus’ baptism). Similarly, when chronological differences occur, what matters more than the details is the fact that the events did actually occur (e.g., on the order of Jesus’ temptations). Occasionally he will appeal to historical information to resolve apparent conflicts, but

¹ S.D.F. Salmon, “Translator’s Introductory Notice,” in NPNF, 71.

this is rather rare.² At other times, flowing from his conviction that Holy Scripture is divinely univocal, he explains discrepancies on the basis of figural understandings from the analogy of Scripture. An elaborate example of this concerns Matthew's genealogy,³ in which Augustine makes multiple arguments for Matthew's 40 generations, providing a tour de force of the significance of 40 in Scripture while also noting that the number 10 (40 being 4 x 10) has important biblical connotations with the purging of sin, and more!⁴

While I do confess sympathy with the medieval saying, "Si Augustinus adest, sufficit ipse tibi" ("If one appeals to Augustine, this is itself sufficient"), I am not suggesting that every one of Augustine's proposed solutions is perfect. With due humility I would offer the comment that at times there is room for improvement in his otherwise commanding work. Particularly, in places it seems that greater sensitivity to the literary aims and goals of each particular Evangelist would be valuable. Augustine is not without such sensibilities, but the practice of harmonization by its nature tends to numb this sense and force uniformity beyond what may be possible or required, often resulting in over-extended historical gymnastics. Thus, for example, Augustine concludes that Jesus must have cleansed the Temple *on two separate occasions*, both at the beginning of his ministry (as in John) and at the end (as in the Synoptics). This is, for him, yet another example of the Evangelists choosing to record only one of two separate events that occurred. I find this solution unnecessary. Augustine himself could have solved it in the same way he did the discrepancies in the order of Jesus' temptations (what matters is the event, not the chronology). Additionally, Augustine's solution fails to perceive the theogeographical pattern that overlays the Synoptic tradition which portrays Jesus' ministry as a descent from the outsider world of Galilee to his rejection by the insiders of Jerusalem.⁵ This is why the Synoptic tradition never presents Jesus in Jerusalem until the end of his ministry, the climax of the Jewish leaders' opposition to him.

Despite these caveats, the most important thing we can learn from Augustine's valuable *Harmony* is the balanced view of the role of historical explanation in addressing the Gospels. I mean this: The kind of questions Augustine raises and answers show that the concern with historical *realia* is *not* just a function of modern historical-critical study; these issues have always been there and have been faced by believing (and unbelieving) readers of Scripture. Thus, Augustine does not offer a purely non-historical "allegorical" or "theological" reading as if history doesn't matter.⁶ Yet, at the same time, he sees such historical ("behind the text") kinds of questions and answers as functioning *almost exclusively in the realm of apologetics* – either giving a defense for Christianity to its skeptics or providing assurance to the believing but questioning soul.

² Carol Harrison, "Not Words but Things: Harmonious Diversity in the Four Gospels," in Frederick van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt, eds., *Augustine: Biblical Exegete* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 159.

³ Augustine, *Harmony* 1.4.8-13.

⁴ While there are places where Augustine uses such figural arguments, this kind of reasoning does not appear as often as it might nor as frequently as we find in Augustine's other writings. This is likely because of his awareness of the critics of Christianity with whom he is dealing. Since the accusations being leveled were of a factual nature he sought to answer them primarily this way. Harrison, "Not Words but Things," 162.

⁵ This significant pattern in Matthew is well observed and explicated in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3-7.

⁶ I put scare quotes around "allegorical" not because I find this an offensive practice, but because of what I call the Modern "allergy to allegory" that is up and running for most today. Because of this I prefer the term "figural."

The proof of the latter comes from three places. First, when one compares Augustine's other expositions of Scripture with his kind of arguments in the *Harmony*, it quickly becomes apparent that his focus on historical questions and reconciling the discrepancies is a function of his apologetic goal in the latter and is not the way he normally approaches explicating Scripture.⁷ Second, in the prologue to Book Two of the *Harmony* we find a very revealing statement about Augustine's goal and the role of such historical questions in his understanding. While he is obviously willing to take up such historical harmonizing questions, he says that these issues must be addressed because of the perversions of men "who exhibit more curiosity than capacity."⁸ This is certainly a backhanded statement at best; the point seems to be that such historical issues are only addressed because they must be in light of Christianity's skeptics. And third, when we go to his widely read and influential hermeneutics book, *De Doctrina Christiana* ("On Teaching Christianity")⁹ we find Augustine assesses as helpful but minimal the role of historical (as well as scientific, botanical, logical, and musical) study for a fruitful reading of Scripture. In short, knowing something about past history may help us work out details such as the dates when the Temple was built, and especially to help refute mistaken arguments that Jewish understanding came from Plato when it was really the other way around.¹⁰ But beyond this, the wise way forward is to focus on the teachings of the Scriptures and the Church.¹¹

Thus, to reiterate, Augustine provides for us a model of the knife-edge truth of the place of historical issues in reading the Gospels as Holy Scripture.¹² Founded in an epistemology that understands the Scriptures as the voice of God, he sees history as essential in the sense that these events really happened, but as only an occasional helper (necessary mostly for apologetic reasons) when it comes to the real business of

⁷ As but one example, we may consult his Sermon 51 (as given in Boniface Ramsey, ed., *Saint Augustine: Essential Sermons* [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007], 63-75). Ostensibly the sermon is about the differences in the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, but even these are addressed for apologetic reasons and moreover, the sermon becomes about the subject of sexual morality in marriage and for procreation as the goal of sexual relations in marriage.

⁸ Augustine, *Harmony*, Book Two, Prologue, 1.

⁹ This is one of Augustine's most famous books and was very influential throughout most of Church history. It has often been translated into English as *On Christian Doctrine*, but this is an unhelpful translation as it miscommunicates the sense of *doctrina* here, which has primarily the sense of the activity of teaching rather than "doctrine." See Mario Naldini's "Introduction" in John E. Rotelle, ed., *Teaching Christianity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 11-12.

¹⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.27.41-44.

¹¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.39.58-42.63.

¹² It appears that the "father of church history," Eusebius, could be interpreted the same way. In reviewing Eusebius' narration of the life of Jesus, Jonathan Armstrong concludes that while at times he used extra-canonical historical evidence to corroborate the historical veracity of the Gospel accounts, "no evidence beyond the apostolic kerygma was necessary to prove the truth of the gospel. The apostolic preaching is in and of itself a convincing demonstration of the authenticity of Jesus' miracles and resurrection." Extra-canonical historical evidence may be helpful at points, but the attempt to rediscover Jesus "apart from the interpreted tradition of the Gospels is an ultimately futile endeavor." As Eusebius said, "One must put complete confidence in the disciples of Jesus, or none at all." Jonathan Armstrong, "Eusebius's Quest for the Historical Jesus: Historicity and Kerygma in the First Book of the Ecclesiastical History," *Themelios* 32.1 (2006), 55-56.

explicating Scripture, which is to speak of God and apply this to us as his creatures.¹³ To say this is to move us forward beyond the scope of this chapter and into the broader hermeneutical discussion of how to read Holy Scripture.

For now we can conclude by reiterating our goal of seeking a balanced way forward with the category of Testimony, acknowledging the helpful but limited role that historical reconstruction must play in our understanding of the Gospels as Holy Scripture. There are many implications of this discussion yet to be explored (see Chapter 8 below), but these must wait until we make one more important foray in the next two chapters into the foundational hermeneutical issues at hand here.¹⁴

¹³ Despite the great helpfulness of Harrisville and Sundberg's essay, "The War of the Worldviews", mentioned above, I find their final evaluation of Augustine as in line on history with von Hoffmann, Machen, Käsemann and even Bultmann (at times), to miss the mark.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Robert Yarbrough and Jeff Dryden for the especially insightful dialogue on the weighty ideas in this chapter, from which I benefitted much, though we are not necessarily in agreement on all the positions stated here.