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The greatest literary influence on The Confessions of St. Augustine is the Bible. That's perfectly clear. The Confessions is not only a sort of montage of Biblical quotes, from beginning to end, but it is the story of Augustine's discovery of the Scriptures as the "firmament," as he calls it, the definitive authority stretched over him as the sky become an unfurled scroll, under which he comes to make his exodus from darkness and restless dispersion to peace, understanding and the happy life. He writes The Confessions, furthermore, to influence others also to come under that authority and so to make it their chief guide for the building of the City of God amidst the ruins of the dying empire of Rome.

The Confessions is, then, all about the reception of the Word of God and of the Scriptures. But as Augustine makes clear from the opening chapter of his book, reception of the Word is contingent on the Word's having been addressed to the one who is to receive it. "My faith prays to you, Lord, this faith which you gave me…through the Incarnation of your Son and through the ministry of the Preacher." (i)

Augustine was all his life preeminently a man of words. His birth is for him less a biological event than a verbal one, a sort of bursting out into speech, "breaking in" his mouth, as he puts it, to the pronunciation of his first words, and from there "launching out into the stormy intercourse of human life." (ii) But *logos* for Augustine was never to be merely a sort of tool…as it can be for the philosopher, that artisan of thought who imitates the structure of being through the logical construction of words. Augustine was by profession a rhetorician. For him words in their most proper function are the medium of communication among human beings, not merely of some

objective information they might have found, or of some theoretical construct they might have built, but first and foremost words are for the communication of a subjective reality, the inner life of those who would speak, the life of one's very identity expressed in its desires, questions, convictions, its urge to understand and its drive to persuade, all concerning what is good, just and true. Such an inner life is not an objective natural phenomenon to be observed but is of its very nature hidden unless the word be expressed, spoken freely outward to whom one chooses freely to reveal it. It is this free self-revelatory word that makes possible the distinctively human life we live together. The "happy life" Augustine sought is such an inner, revealed and mutual life—of family, friendship, community and the city.

The word or *logos* of such life is no sort of monadic emanation, if I can put it that way. Rather it is, as part of its essence, a thing received from others in one's relationship with them.

I learned it in the caressing language of my nurses and in the laughter and play and kindnesses of those about me. In this learning I was under no pressure of punishment, and people did have to not urge me on; my own heart urged me on to give birth to the thoughts which it had conceived, and I could not do this unless I had learned some words; these I learned not from instructors but from people who talked to me and in whose hearing I too was able to give birth to what I was feeling. (iii)

Now, Augustine received the Word of Scripture in a most important way through St. Paul. Paul is "the Preacher" he refers to in the opening chapter of the book. Saul, the Jew, on his conversion become Paul the Apostle, has as his work to carry the Word of God out from Israel and into the nations, the *goyim*, the pagans; Augustine, a citizen of that still largely pagan world, undergoes his conversion when he receives the Word from Paul and becomes a Christian. This I take to be the fundamental fact.

We should notice, then, that from the beginning, Augustine does not receive the Scriptures in precisely the same manner as do Moses and the People of Israel. The Jews across the ages see themselves as present with those gathered at Mount Sinai. With them Saul, too, received the Word from God who speaks to them directly, from the mountain within their midst. Saul received the Word as the Law which unites the people gathered together there on the holy ground of Sinai and thus creates Israel a nation even as it separates Israel out from all the other nations of the earth, just as God created light and separated it from the darkness. They become a people at once "set apart" from all others and the people set into a unique presence with God.

But then—and this is the mystery—it is precisely as a people set apart from all the nations that Israel is to be ”holy,” “peculiarly God’s own” and “priestly,” mediating the light of God’s blessing to all the nations.

This is what God promised Abraham, in a line Augustine quotes in
The City of God
when he asks the question “Who is the God…whom the Romans should have obeyed?” He answers the question: “He is the same God…from whom Abraham received the promise, ‘Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.’” (iv) Augustine, then, stands as one among the nations, receiving the word of blessing from those who have been set apart from those very nations to give that blessing.

As another thinker influenced by Augustine would put it some eight centuries later, “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.” Augustine was to receive the word of Scripture not as the Law establishing the nation of Israel, but as the word addressed to the rest of us, us sorry pagans in deep need of a word to save us, even as we continue to live, for the most part, under the laws we make for ourselves and remain among the nations apart from Israel.

Augustine was to receive that word as one of us, or more to the point, as one who would sum up in himself, in his own vast heart, mind and memory, what it means for the pagan world to receive the word addressed to it from out of the soul of Israel. When Augustine “confesses” his reception of the saving word of God, that confession is paradigmatic for us all.

What Augustine learns to be his need, and the need of the dying Empire, the need that opens itself up to the Word, is what I’ll try to get at in the next section of this paper. And for the final section, I’ll try in the broadest possible stokes to sketch out how the “instruction that came forth from Zion and the Word of the Lord that came from Jerusalem" (v) was exactly the saving word to meet the pagan need.

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Augustine had two great desires—he desired personal relationships and he desired wisdom. Over the course of his life, he gained clarity concerning those desires, and his other needs took shape relative to them. Or it might be better to say that Augustine came to live by one single

desire, which we might call the desire for wise relationship, or for wisdom and truth in relationship…something like this.

From early on we see him aroused by Cicero's *Hortensius* to a burning desire for wisdom, a desire setting him on a lifelong course of intense inquiry and reflection. And at every step along the course of his life, others are there with him, necessary for him, as he pursues wisdom and the happy life. His Confessions is a sort of autobiography composed of many biographies: that of his mother, his many friends, his students and his teachers, and others whose lives were models for him to consider, to emulate, or to reject.

Given his fiercely intense experience of relationships and communion as the very substance of life, mastery of the right practice of relationship would be a matter for him of great importance and of great difficulty as well. Augustine's sexual passions, therefore, were not an anomaly in his personality but were a necessary and vital component of it. It would take considerable doing to get them into proper order, but what was required for him, for his very salvation, was getting them into proper order, not ignoring or destroying them. They represented a real need in him, were an expression of his deepest desire, even if undirected they prevented its satisfaction.

Something similar can be said of the hungry energy of his intelligence. The restless journey of his mind, his insistence on coming to the truth of things, was not to be put to a halt by the docile acceptance of dogmatic conclusions reached by others. His mother would perhaps have had an easier time of it if Augustine had simply followed her wishes and been a good, believing boy from the beginning. But had he done so, his reception of the Word that was to be spoken to him from the deepest reservoirs and sources of Scripture into the deepest recesses of his heart and mind could not have taken place… We certainly wouldn't be talking about him sixteen centuries later, and those sixteen centuries themselves would have had a very different story to tell… because, given the vast scope of his intelligence, his perception of the relationships that might constitute a happy life was also made vast. Though he focused intensely on his particular circle of friends, he had a powerful gaze directed out toward the whole sweep of history—he had the mind of the Empire in which he lived.

The Empire mattered to him, first as the place for the realization of his ambitions, later as the cause of a deep dissatisfaction pressing him to separate himself from it, and finally as locus for the divine drama in which he and Rome would contend.

Augustine's desire for wisdom and relationship, then, would require of him the proper ordering of his sexual appetites, of his relationships with others, his public persona in the Empire, and most certainly the life of his mind. We see Augustine as a young man, however, struggling, sometimes desperately, with defects in each of these dimensions of his life. He gets too dependent on some of his friends. He doesn't know what to do with his mother. As he approaches success in his career as a rhetorician he suffers from powerful doubts about the worth of such a career and feels increasing disgust for the Empire into whose service he is about to sell himself. He would like to get away from it all, leading a leisurely intellectual life off with his friends, but his need for a sexual relationship binds him to family responsibilities which in turn bind him to a career and to the corruption of the Empire he would escape if he could. He feels stuck.

The intellectual effort he manages to make in the midst of these duties and distractions was, no doubt, of a prodigious sort relative to what most of us might think to take on. But still, for him, whatever his intellectual activity at the time, it was not satisfying. Augustine wanted a happy life with others in truth. He had to live his life with others well and rightly in truth. His desire for wisdom demanded nothing less. But this truth he could not seem to find.

One might say that as the political decline of Rome exposed the defects and flaws inherent in the Roman foundation from the beginning, making his public ambitions ultimately repugnant to him, so developments in the religious and philosophic institutions of Rome seemed to offer Augustine no hope of reaching the life-saving truth he sought. Rather, Augustine lived in a time like our own when it's only the experience of a generalized corruption that provides for many their first taste of wisdom.

Augustine, of course, knew early on the beauty of truth, but he knew as well some very ugly truths, and these made all the more difficult his journey to the truth that brings the happy life. But it was not only the corruption of Roman politics and culture that got him down, and not even his own disordered sexual passion as such that bothered him most. It was the terrible awareness that in himself, at the very core of his being, there was something seriously wrong. His discussion of his boyhood theft of the neighbor's pears is often enough taken as a sign that Augustine was too sensitive to feelings of guilt, but this misses the point. Augustine uses this objectively very minor event to reveal the otherwise hidden but enormous subjective event unfolding within him, making manifest a capacity in him for something entirely inexplicable in terms of a merely natural or philosophic understanding.

For the classical thinkers, people do bad things because their rational nature is deficient in education. Bad action is really only error. Knowledge is sufficient to make men good, whole

and self-sufficient, or failing that, a Stoic detachment of will would suffice to deal with the bad things that come our way.

But Augustine knows from early on that something there is about him that does the bad thing knowingly, and that it is his will itself which, rather than detaching him from what is bad, chooses the bad and shows itself as therefore not merely bad, but evil. Augustine experiences evil as an interior and personal orientation of his willing self, for which philosophy can give no satisfying account or response. It is for this reason that he is attracted for a time to the Manicheans; they attempt to address the experience of evil. But as Augustine learns, the explanations they give are entirely unfounded, so that Augustine drifts for a long time in a most disquieting moral and intellectual twilight zone, stuck there, too.

His later encounter with the Platonists helps Augustine with a serious intellectual problem that had him stymied for a long time. The Platonists enable him to grasp the idea of immutability and immateriality so that he can better think both about his desire for abiding happiness and about the life of the soul that so desires. But the Platonists cannot deal with the problem of evil, nor do they point toward a happiness that can actually be achieved in the life human beings share with each other. The philosopher isn't defined by sharing his life but by self-sufficiency; he retires into abstraction and solitude or a small circle of friends. As Augustine puts it, while the philosopher points toward the happy life, he cannot attain it. Augustine makes this grotesquely clear in Book 19 of The City of God where he displays for the reader the plight of the aging philosopher who, having spent the time of his life in pursuit of wisdom as the knowledge of the whole and unchanging order of nature, is by that same natural order reduced to broken and crippled senility. While the philosopher seeks the immutable truth, time mutilates his flesh and unhinges his mind.

Philosophy cannot bring him the wisdom he desires. Augustine is still stuck.

What's left for him? Something his mother had managed to impress on him from his youth, and to which he responded in an enduring way, was her teaching him what he calls, "the name of Christ." Her attention to the person of Christ, to a *person* as the highest reality of all, resonated with Augustine, even despite his long refusal to take seriously the Scriptural tradition which taught that name. *(vi)* That the highest wisdom should, so to speak, bear a human face was a thought that harmonized with Augustine's own desire for truth in relationship and that desire decisively limited his interest in the Platonists. (vii)

But serious inquiry into the Scriptural tradition was for a very long time not possible to Augustine. His classically formed intellectual powers, rhetorical skills and literary tastes made the definitely unclassical forms of the Hebrew texts seems inferior to him. Classic thought, classic politics and classic literature all took the flourishing of nature as their standard. Philosophic greatness, the achievement of poetic perfection, shining moral excellence, political glory—these are high standards, and according to them the Biblical texts simply do not measure up. To a man of the stature of the classical Augustine, the Scriptures seemed as primitive, barbaric and unserious as, say, a Jewish tradesman or tent maker, hawking his wares in the Jewish Quarter of Rome.

But then again, Augustine had seen through the supposed grandeur of the classical world, that it was a fraud.

And then Augustine met Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Ambrose like Augustine was a man of the word. He too was a fine rhetorician. Augustine, with the interest of a somewhat jaded professional, took to listening to the rhetoric of Ambrose as he preached, and at times spoke with him privately. Ambrose helped Augustine to see that the classical literary standards to which he was accustomed did not apply to the Scriptures, and this not because the Scriptures were defective but because they represented a different sort of discourse altogether. The Scriptures' standard of truth is not their imitation of the timeless perfection of nature. The Scriptures' authors do not aim at the glory due those who display their own perfection by the perfection of their works. Rather, the Scriptures address themselves to those who are humble, stuck in their own corruption and that of the world. The voice sounding through all the named and unnamed writers of Scripture speaks as one coming down, humbling himself, to be with the lowly and the fallen.

Hearing Ambrose, Augustine begins to open up to the possibility of the Scriptural Word that is from the Beginning, that is with God, that is God himself, who becomes flesh and dwells among us. Augustine looks to the People formed under the Scriptures and sees something altogether unlike Rome, a People who come to be precisely because in their patriarch Abraham, they left the empire of Babylon, and under their teacher Moses they left the empire of Egypt. He sees a nation that stands outside the sorry pattern of all the nations as he had experienced that pattern in Rome. He began to see before his mind's eye the People of God who are unlike Babylon, Egypt and Rome not because they are inferior but because they stand in relation to the God who speaks with them and in whose company they too receive their word and learn to speak. What he discovers in that great unfurling of historical narrative found in the Scriptures is an account of the truth that does not flee life in time, as do the Manicheans, or that ignores it somehow in metaphysical abstraction, but that speaks *through* time, just as he himself might recite a poem or sing a song over time. Here is the truth that transcends time, but is revealed in time.

Most of all, the truth that is revealed in this way addresses itself to his own People. The truth of the happy life is not at an impossible remove, but comes and addresses itself to his People in time, now, past, present and future, as is the case in any personal self-revelation. The truth which Augustine had before sought through his own intellectual power, as Moses had sought to understand for himself the cause at work in the burning bush, Augustine began to realize is the truth that first knew him, just as it first knew Moses and called him by name and then revealed his own name to Moses.

And from far away you cried out to me: "I am that I am." And *I heard as one hears things in the heart, and there was no longer any reason at all for me to doubt. I would sooner doubt my own existence than the existence of the truth '"which is clearly seen, being understood by those things which are made." (viii)*

Hearing this word sounding across the centuries enables Augustine to intuit for the first time something of the ultimate depth and substance that first stirred in him at his mother's mention of the name of Christ. Augustine decides to become a Christian at last. He wishes to receive the Word that is Christ addressed to himself.

This provokes the crisis. Though he is happy enough to leave behind his career and his old relationship to the Empire, what still binds his will is its attachment to the brokenness of his flesh. His longing for communion had for so long consoled itself with its sexual expression, something within his own power, that he could not let that consolation go. He had begun to see and to be convinced that his true consolation, the consolation of the Truth, was with the Word from the Beginning. But it was not enough to know that God had spoken, or even that he had spoken to all the nations through Israel in Christ. God had to address himself to him, in his own heart, and Augustine had to open himself to receive that address. He had to see and feel the sheer impossibility of saving himself—he had to give up that evil will, the will that was evil precisely because it was turned away from such a personal address; he had to know and to feel that his salvation, the communion and wisdom he desired, rested utterly in the will of another, of God and in God's free choice to address himself to Augustine. He had to abandon forever the claim of the sons of Adam to self-sufficiency.

It was in the garden under the fig tree that Augustine threw himself to the arms of God's grace.

He hears a child's voice, singing a little song, repeating the words "*tolle et lege,"* "take and read." He picks up a nearby text of St. Paul: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and wantonness, not in strife and envy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh." (ix) He took it and read, and for the first time, he heard it as it was addressed and spoken to him: the Word from the Beginning, the Law at Sinai, the Word come to dwell among his People Israel, the Word made flesh in Christ, the Word addressed to the Jew Saul, the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, in the voice of child addressing the heart of a broken man, a Roman, weeping under the tree.

At once, the great desire of Augustine and its former needs are satisfied.

And this is what you did: I was able totally to set my face against what I willed and to will what you willed…How glad I was to give up the things I had been so afraid to lose. For you cast them out and you entered into me to take their place, sweeter than all pleasure, but not to flesh and blood; brighter than all light, but more inward than all hidden depths; higher than all honor, but not to those who are high in themselves. Now my mind was free of those gnawing cares that came from ambition and the desire for gain and wallowing in filth and scratching the itchy scab of lust. ***And now I was talking to you easily and simply, my brightness and my riches and my health, my Lord God. (x)***

Augustine's desire for truth and relationship is perfectly met by the living Truth, even the Word from the Beginning, Creator of all things, that has entered into relationship with him, as person, not as object but as the other who reveals himself to Augustine and to whom Augustine himself can speak. The personhood of God, God's relationship in otherness, known only in God's free self-revelation to us, is the truth and wisdom Augustine sought. "Let me know you," he says, "even as I am known." (xi) The desire for philosophic self-sufficiency in the claim to, or goal of, timeless knowledge, as an objective intellectual *seeing* of the supposed whole of things, is entirely reconfigured before the Truth that reveals itself to him, concretely, as a kind of speech that is heard, addressing itself to him. God's speech sounding in time and in the world and expressed most especially in the Scriptures, stretches like the skins of a scroll across the firmament of heaven,
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replacing the supposed cosmic whole. For Augustine the cosmos is clearly not eternal and cannot be known as a whole, but rather it is fully immersed in time, entirely a process of one thing after another, just as is the sounding of speech itself. It is rendered fully intelligible only by the eternal truth and fidelity of the One who speaks, creates, and reveals himself to us through it. Playing off the image of Scriptural "skins," Scripture is the "lattice of flesh" he speaks of, alluding to the Song of Songs, when he says, "He looks through the lattice of our flesh, and he caressed us and set us on fire, and we run after his fragrance." (xii) Scripture and the story of Israel teach the rhetoric of God as it breaks into speech in creation and across history and

enters our hearts.

Likewise Augustine's understanding of the position of Rome in the world is transformed. Rome had claimed a political self-sufficiency which Augustine had come to see was fraudulent, but now he could see Rome as one of the nations, the many nations of the earth, not as universal world empire but as a neighborhood, so to speak, of the City of Man, known and judged by another, the New Jerusalem and the City of God. God's otherness, his unique personhood in relation to us, is revealed to us in the unique otherness of Israel, alone, set apart from all the nations, but created to be the one source of blessing to all the nations, as is manifested in Christ. A Christianized Rome then possesses knowledge of the one true God, not as a principle for claims to its own universal sovereignty, and
not
as a sort of intrinsic principle of political motion and rest, but as an
extrinsic
principle, received from another, delegitimizing all claims to absolute or universal sovereignty.

Augustine's vast historical knowledge is thus reconfigured according to the pattern revealed in the Scriptures, and his own relationship to Rome is changed as well. Rather than selling his speech in praise of the emperor, he becomes bishop in the Church, establishing himself as othe
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than the political order simply, and labors the rest of his life to open the people of his civilization to the knowledge of the living truth that transcends all politics and that, one way or another, transforms all politics as well. The concrete otherness of the People of Israel among the nations in history becomes the sacramental sign of the subordination of all political orders to the rule and judgment of the one, eternal and transcendent God. Augustine's praise then rises to God, not the emperor.

The People set apart from all others, in Christ becomes the center of a new and lasting order of all things. The tranquil ordering of all things to the one God who reveals himself to us in history, this is the "peace" Augustine praises in the The City of God, true peace, the peace which he identifies with eternal life, replacing the supposed Pax Romana , and posing the definitive challenge to the succeeding political order we call Christendom.

In all these things Augustine becomes a sort of guide to his friends, and he becomes a perfect friend at last to his mother, as we see them shortly before her death, leaning by a window looking out onto a garden like the garden where he first received the word from St. Paul, speaking together in a moment of near perfect communion with each other and with God.

ENDNOTES

[i] The Confessions, Book I, chapter 1.

[ii] I, 14.

[iii] XIX, 22; Genesis 12:3.

[iv] Isaiah 2:3.

[v] VI, 4.

[vi] V, 14.

[vii] VII, 10.

[viii] VII, 12. Romans 13:13-14.

[ix] IX, 9.

[x] X, 1.

[xi] XIII, 15.

[xii] XIII, 15; Song of Songs, 2:9.