Augustine, Paul and the Manichees

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Abstract

Against the background of a bigger argument about the protreptic purpose and Manichaean audience of Augustine’s Confessions, this essay examines the Manichaean subtext in the penultimate section of book 13. The focus is mainly on the subsection 13.25.38–13.27.42 where, I argue, the Genesis verses to be interpreted (Gen 1:29–30) are used merely as a pretext for what is, in fact, an interpretation of Paul’s ideas on almsgiving. The passage has a polemical and emotional tone that only falls into place when it is read as a counterfoil to Manichaean claims that the existence of the orders of the Elect and the Auditors and their respective tasks within Manichaean liturgy are justified by Paul’s views. The contents of the (albeit fragmentary) Tebessa Codex seems to corroborate this interpretation of the passage. On the whole my argument that Augustine envisaged a potential Manichaean audience for the Confessions is validated.

My research on the communicative purpose and audience of the Confessions originated in a belief that a greater focus on literary practices and religious realities of the fourth century AD may bring us closer to reading Augustine’s great work on its own terms. This was eventually narrowed down to a study of, first, the extent to which the communicative purpose of the work is a protreptic purpose, that is: the purpose to convert its readers; and second, the degree to which the text of the Confessions defines the potential Manichaean reader as the one targeted by many of its strategies, including its protreptic strategy. This essay constitutes a small strand in this latter argument: I try to show that the last section of Augustine’s allegorical exposition of Genesis in book 13 of the Confessions is—contrary to general scholarly opinion—heavily underpinned by a concern with the potential Manichaean reader. The interpretation of the Genesis verses up for discussion in this passage (Conf. 13.25.38–13.27.42) constitutes, in fact, an interpretation of Paul’s views on the provision of material support to ministers of the church, expressed in various letters.
The background to the arguments presented here is, put very concisely, that I see the autobiographical section of the *Confessions* (books 1–9) as a conversion story included in a bigger work for the purposes of converting its reader. I contend that precedents for this combination of autobiographical writing with exegetical and polemical writing (which we find in *Conf. 10–13*) exist in both pagan and Christian literature of the preceding period. Furthermore I show that throughout the work the potential Manichaean reader is a significant element of the intended audience of the *Confessions*. This challenges traditional scholarship that acknowledges vestiges of Augustine’s Manichaean past in the *Confessions* but that assumes the main intended audience of the work to be Augustine’s inner circle, his fellow Christians.

The assumption that fellow Christians are constantly the audience foremost in Augustine’s mind would of course be at odds with my contention that the conversion story is meant to have the purpose to convert, i.e. a protreptic purpose. However, it is important to remember that protreptic from its inception went hand in hand with paraenetic. That is, what was meant as a call to conversion (protreptic) was usually at the same time intended to strengthen the resolve of those who had already made the choice to continue on the chosen path (paraenetic). Thus, if protreptic and paraenetic communicative purposes can co-exist naturally in the same work, it follows that fellow Christians and the not yet converted could equally naturally form two complementary segments of the audience targeted by this text. So, I concede that Augustine’s fellow Christians constitute an important part of the intended audience of the *Confessions* (more so

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1 Prominent examples are Plotinus’ *Enneads* prefaced by the *Vita Porphyrii* and Iamblichus’ *De vita Pythagorica* that starts with the vita of Pythagoras (followed by the protreptic and then by the philosophical discussion proper). Use of the exemplary force of the personal example for protreptic purposes was already present in Plato’s early Socratic dialogues. Malherbe’s discussion (1986, 34–37) of the moral philosophers’ convention to use autobiographical narratives as a preface to their own works, names Julian’s *Oration* and Epictetus’ *Discourse 3* as cases in point. This also indicates another possible function of the autobiographical section in Augustine’s *Confessions*: the autobiographical preface (although in the case of the *Confessions* the autobiographical section is clearly much more than a preface) often had the function of justifying the “activity as moral reformers” and illustrating “the rigorous self-examination required before daring to correct others” (Malherbe 1986, 34). The *Dialogus cum Tryphone* by Justin Martyr, saint Cyprian of Carthage’s *Ad Donatum*, and the *De Trinitate* by Hilary of Poitiers offer precedents for the combination of autobiographical elements with argumentation that can be called polemical, philosophical, and/or exegetical. See the discussion in my *Augustine’s Confessions: Communicative Purpose and Audience* (2004, 66–84).

2 See for example Brown’s remarks in this regard (2000, 152–153).