ON THE CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT OF AUGUSTINE’S EARLY COMMENTARIES ON THE PAULINE LETTERS

Among the great number of letters written in early Christian times, the letters of St. Paul had the most significant role and the greatest influence on the development of the Church, but their evaluation and interpretation differed from time to time throughout these early centuries. We learned about the reception of Pauline letters in the first and second centuries from Professor Manabu Tsuji’s opening lecture at the APECSS Conference in Sendai, 2009.¹ We know that Pauline letters were included into the Canon of the New Testament and read within Church communities; it can also be detected that Marcion, the Gnostics, and the Manicheans used Pauline letters in order to support their dualistic perspective.² In this developing period of the assessment of Paul, Origen of Alexandria had a decisive role in the first half of the third century, exercising a strong influence on Athanasius of Alexandria in the early fourth century and on the establishment of the Canon of the New Testament.³

Here I would like to turn to the Latin West and to consider a remarkable fact, that the commentaries on the Pauline letters were produced one after another in the late fourth and early fifth century: Marius Victorinus, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Tyconius as well as Rufinus’ translation of Origen’s Commentaries on Romans were produced in this period. Peter Brown impressively pointed out that “the last decades of the fourth century in the Latin Church, could be well called the ‘generation of St. Paul’.”⁴ Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was among the authors following the same trend. When Augustine was still a young

¹ See Manabu Tsuji, Beyond the Original Context: Reception of Pauline Letters in the First Century, in this volume.
² Cf. W. S. Babcock, Paul and the Legacies of Paul (Dallas, TX, 1990) xx.
³ This point is clarified by Miyako Demura in her paper: M. Demura, Reception of Pauline Letters and the Formation of the Canonical Principle in Origen of Alexandria, in this volume.
presbyter (391–395) and newly ordained bishop (395/6–) in the 390s, he wrote at least five works intensively dealing with the Pauline letters, and focused especially on the Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Galatians:

1) Questions 66–74, and 82 from On Eighty-three Questions (De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus) in 391–395,
2) Commentary on Romans (Expositio quarundam prepositionum ex epistola ad Romanos) in 393–394,
3) Commentary on Galatians (Expositio epistolae ad Galatas) in 394,
4) Unfinished Commentary on Romans (Epistolae ad Romanos incipit) exposition) in 394–345, and
5) Response to Simplician (Ad Simplicianum de diversis quaestionibus) in 396.

The Commentary on Galatians and the unfinished Commentary on Romans are the commentaries intending to explain the whole text, while the other three commentaries pick out some passages which Augustine considered to be significant and difficult to understand, and tried to clarify their meaning. In the case of the first book of Ad Simplicianum, Augustine especially focused on Rom. 7:7–25 (the first question) and Rom. 9:10–29 (the second question). He says in the preface:

But still I am not satisfied with my previous research and explanation, since I may have negligently overlooked something pertinent, and I have gone through the Apostle’s words and the sense of his statement more carefully and attentively. For, if it were a quick and easy matter to understand them, you would not consider that they should be investigated.5

The method of raising some questions on a particular passage and proposing the answer to that question is something like a discussion or dialogue in going over the text. Augustine used this method in replying to inquiries that he was asked by his fellow clergy and elder bishops like Simplician through the form of letters. He must have intended to involve the addressee(s) into this dialogue with St. Paul and the Scriptures in general. For example, in the first reply in Ad Simplicianum, Augustine commented on Rom. 7:24–25, “Wretched

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