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AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO: ADVOCATE OF SCRIPTURAL METAPHOR

Agustín de Hipona: defensor de la metáfora bíblica

Guido Jacobs[1]

Abstract

This article investigates Augustine's evolving views on metaphor in his commentaries on the creation narrative. He contends that certain metaphysical truths, including God and his creation, are ineffable and can only be understood metaphorically. Therefore, he thinks that metaphors are crucial in the interpretation of the Scriptures, and he spends a great deal of effort explaining this to his readers. In his early work *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, he adheres to the classical view, in which metaphors have a fixed meaning that can easily be rendered using a literal expression. This is a useful method to refute the Manichean claims, but it stands at odds with the idea that the things that these metaphors describe are beyond words. Later, in *De Genesi ad Litteram*, he comes up with a novel approach to metaphor. Here, he leaves a great deal of interpretational freedom to the reader. He points out that certain expressions are metaphors, and that individual expressions are part of a larger metaphorical concept, without restricting their meaning. Augustine's approach shares similarities with the modern metaphor theories laid out by Max Black, as well as by George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, which may not have been as innovative as once thought.

Keywords

Augustine of Hippo; Metaphors; Exegesis; Creation Narrative; Genesis; De Genesi contra Manichaeos; De Genesi ad Litteram.

Resumen

1 Doctor in Biblical Sciences and Church History at the Tilburg University, Netherlands. Independent author. Email: guidojacobs@hotmail.com

Este artículo investiga la evolución de las opiniones de Agustín sobre la metáfora en sus comentarios sobre el relato de la creación. Sostiene que ciertas verdades metafísicas, entre ellas Dios y su creación, son inefables y sólo pueden entenderse de forma metafórica. Por ello, piensa que las metáforas son cruciales en la interpretación de las Escrituras, y dedica un gran esfuerzo a explicar esto a sus lectores. En su primera obra De Genesi contra Manichaeos, se adhiere al punto de vista clásico, en el que las metáforas tienen un significado fijo que puede ser fácilmente interpretado mediante una expresión literal. Este es un método útil para refutar las afirmaciones maniqueas, pero se opone a la idea de que las cosas que describen estas metáforas están más allá de las palabras. Más tarde, en De Genesi ad Litteram, propone un nuevo enfoque de la metáfora. Aquí deja una gran libertad de interpretación al lector. Señala que ciertas expresiones son metáforas, y que las expresiones individuales forman parte de un concepto metafórico más amplio, sin restringir su significado. El planteamiento de Agustín comparte similitudes con las modernas teorías de la metáfora expuestas por Max Black, así como por George Lakoff y Mark Johnson, que quizá no hayan sido tan innovadoras como se pensaba.

Palabras clave

Agustín de Hipona; Metáforas; Exégesis; Relato de la creación; Génesis; De Genesi contra Manichaeos; De Genesi ad Litteram.

1. Introduction

How do we deal with metaphors in the Scriptures, and how do we know that an expression is a metaphor in the first place? I find this a fascinating question, since it is crucial to understanding the Scriptures, and it goes back to the early days of Christianity. To restrict this vast topic, in this article I have chosen to study this question through the eyes of Augustine of Hippo, a 4th-5th century Church Father, who has had a profound and lasting influence on Christian thought. His work is relevant to our question since he had a high linguistic sensitivity, and a deep appreciation of Scriptural metaphor, and at the same time, as a bishop, he was responsible for pastoral care, and he had to argue his points of view in the many theological debates –often with a Scriptural angle–that took place in his lifetime. He was, therefore, concerned with putting his sophisticated views into practice and communicating the results to a wide audience. As a present-day theologian, I am inspired by this, and in my opinion, we academics should look to Augustine as an example.

In this article, I will first explore Augustine's metaphor theory in three selected commentaries on the creation narrative, *De Genesi Contra Manichaoes, De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus* and *De Genesi ad Litteram*, and I will also demonstrate how he explained it to his readers. Second, I will assess how Augustine's view on metaphors changes, and how this impacts his exegetical methods. This is relevant since Augustine is famous for his allegorical interpretation, which is usually regarded as a way to work to a conclusion, and not considered as relevant in the present-day context. Do his new views really lead to a method that is distinct from his earlier methods, and to what extent is his method relevant today? This is a continuation of the research that I did for my dissertation (Jacobs, 2018). My secondary aim is

to highlight the importance of metaphors in biblical interpretation, and to demonstrate that the use of metaphor has ancient roots going back to (at least) Augustine.

2. Methodology

Selection of works

Augustine was always captured by the creation narrative (Genesis 1-2), on which he wrote multiple commentaries. In these commentaries, figurative interpretation plays an important role, since especially the creation narrative is hard to understand in a purely literal way. I have selected three works: *De Genesi Contra Manichaoes* (*DGCM*)*, De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus* (*DGLI*) and *De Genesi ad Litteram* (*DGL*). *DGL* is his largest and most mature commentary, so it is logical to include this one. I have included *DGCM* because, as the earliest commentary, I use it to show his development. *DGLI*, an unfinished work, is relevant as a first attempt at an *ad litteram* interpretation. In at least two other works, *Confessiones* and *De Civiate Dei*, Augustine discusses the creation narrative. I have not included these commentaries, in order to limit the scope of this article and because they are not necessary for understanding the development that leads to *DGL*; in *Confessiones* Augustine follows a different approach altogether, and *De Civitate Dei* was written after *DGL.*

Frame of reference

As a frame of reference, I will use *DC*, which is virtually the only work where Augustine presents his exegetical views on metaphors in a structured way. In addition, I will bring up the main points of the classical metaphor theory. I will also discuss the main points of the modern metaphor as formulated by Black (1962) and Lakoff & Johnson (1980), in order to compare Augustine's later views with them.

Methodological steps

DC is an early work, and Augustine shows a development in his views on metaphors in his later commentaries. In the Genesis commentaries that I have selected for this study, Augustine does not present a structured overview of his exegetical views (on metaphor). I do not wish to fit Augustine's work into an artificial structure that was unknown to himself. For this reason, I will first look at each work separately, distilling his views on metaphors on a case-by-case basis.

The first step in my analysis is to find the expressions in Scripture that Augustine treats as a metaphor. Since his terminology is not consistent across his *oeuvre*, I will not rely on this too much, but give his exegetical practice a greater weight by looking at all passages where Augustine's interpretation deviates

from the literal meaning. I will use terms like *metaphor* and *figure* in a broad sense, neglecting any nuances that are not relevant to the point I would like to make.

The second step is to analyse how Augustine deals with the expressions that he identified as metaphors, and from that, derive his views on metaphors. This includes an investigation of the criteria he employs to determine whether to use metaphorical interpretation, and the reason why he thinks that the Scriptures use a metaphor rather than literal language.

The third step is to assess how Augustine's views on metaphor influence his exegetical methods.

Finally, after having analysed the works individually, I will compare them as a whole, in order to demonstrate the diachronic development of Augustine's views on metaphor, and, in addition, I will compare his views as a function of their purpose and audience. Based on this, I can answer one of the key questions of the present study, i.e., whether his novel views really make a difference for his method.

3. Metaphor theory

3.1 De Doctrina Christiana

In *DC*, Augustine presents his exegetical principles in a structured way.[2] It is an early work, with the largest part written in 397 (Green, 1995, xii-xiii). What does he say about the interpretation of metaphors, and how do his early insights relate to his interpretations of the creation narrative throughout his life?

In the beginning of *DC*, right after his discussion of the Creed, he states that God is ineffable; nothing can be said about him (1.6.6.). Nevertheless, we can praise God. Augustine thus summarises the speaking on God:

> For the sound of those two syllables [*deus*] in itself conveys no true knowledge of His nature; but yet all who know the Latin tongue are led, when that sound reaches their ears, to think of a nature supreme in excellence and eternal in existence. (*DC* 1.6.6.)

This is also a bridge to his sign theory. The word *God* is not God himself, but it is a sign for "a nature supreme in excellence and eternal in existence" that cannot be properly expressed in words. This frames Augustine's exegetical principles in *DC*.

Augustine distinguishes two types of signs, and in each of them, different kinds of obscurities may arise. In the first type, *signa propria* or proper signs, obscurity can be caused because the meaning of a word is unknown, or because there is an ambiguity in the meaning. This type of obscurity is rather technical; it could be fixed with the right language skills. In the second type, *signa translata* or metaphorical signs,

2 A great deal has been written on Augustine's sign theory, for example by Mayer (1964) and Mayer (1974). Pollmann (1996) has summarised and structured Augustine's division of types of signs in an admirable way.

obscurities may arise due to a metaphorical concept that is hard to grasp. This is a more profound source of obscurity. According to Augustine, it was especially this type of obscurity that was beneficial to the reader, since it made one humbler, and over time one could grow and appreciate the deeper meanings of the Scriptures.

Augustine's method to deal with obscurities is to apply the *regula fidei* (*rule of faith*), which says that interpretations should be consistent with the faith. The *caritas* principle plays a crucial role; it is the final goal of the interpretation of the Scriptures, as well as of their actual content (Pollmann, 1996, 125; *DC* 1.37.41.90l).

In addition, Augustine uses *caritas* as an exegetical criterion (Pollmann, 1996, 136; *DC* 1.35.39, 1.36.4). In *DC* this proves to be a useful tool to deal with ambiguous *signa propria*. For example, when a Greek word has a double meaning, which is rendered by two words in Latin, one could easily pick the appropriate Latin word. Yet, for the *signa translata*, which are usually more profound, and the discussion about which spans a large portion of *DC*, Augustine does not provide a method to derive the meaning of metaphors. Also, he does not tie the interpretation of metaphors to the ineffability of God. I will therefore look at the classical metaphor theory, which Augustine was familiar with, as an additional source of exegetical principles.

3.2 The classical view

Augustine stands in the classical rhetorical tradition, and in this tradition, metaphors are seen as important. What is the classical view of metaphors about, and how did it influence Augustine?

Aristotle (384-322 BC) (Kennedy, 2007, 1, 7) was the first, as far as we know, to write about metaphors (μεταφορά, *transfer*). He does so in two of his works: *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. In *Poetics* he defines metaphor as "the transferred use of a term that properly belongs to something else; the transference can be from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or analogical" (*Poetics*, 1457b). He copies this definition in *Rhetoric*, where he says that the analogical variant is the most important (*Rhetoric* 1411a). This is also the one that aligns with our common definition of metaphor, while the others we would rather label as metonymy. So, in Aristotle's view, metaphor is based on analogy, and he groups it with other stylistic devices in which there is a predictable, almost mathematical, relationship between the meaning and the expression. For example, in the case of "from species to genus," one would simply go up in the "tree" to find the meaning.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle says that metaphors should be beautiful, although this should not be to such an extent that it diminishes clarity (*Poetics* 1458a-b). In this work, Aristotle advances another purpose of metaphor: it can be used to fill in a lexical gap (*Poetics* 1457b), although it is more about brevity rather than coming up with a meaning that cannot be conveyed without the metaphor. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle repeats that notion, though he emphasizes that metaphors are part of daily speech, and that they enhance clarity. This is consistent with the predictability of meaning. In any case, the meaning of metaphors is never in question for Aristotle. He values the clarity of metaphors and even assumes it.

Aristotle's view on metaphors was adopted by a number of Latin authors, who each added their own accents and nuances. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* or *Ad Herennium* for short, was written around 86-82 BC by an unknown author (Caplan, 1964, vi-xiv; xxvi.). *Ad Herennium* uses the term *translatio* (transfer; the Latin translation of μεταφορά) and the related *uerbum transferetur* in the sense of metaphor. The definition of *translatio* is in line with Aristotle's, the transfer of a word from one domain to another (based on comparison):

> Metaphor (*translatio*) occurs when a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity seems to justify this transference. (*Rhetorica ad Herennium 4*.46)

Several purposes of metaphor are listed that are rhetorical in nature: (1) creating a vivid mental picture, (2) brevity, (3) avoiding obscenity, (4) magnifying, (5) understating, and (6) embellishment. These purposes are in line with Aristotle's. Cicero also follows the path of the previously discussed authors, praising metaphors that are clear (*De Oratore*, 3.155).

Conclusion

We have looked at the views on metaphor in Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, as well as in *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and in Cicero. All these works were written with the goal of teaching the readers about conveying a message, either with the purpose of persuading or delighting. Consistent with this goal, these works praise the rhetoric or ornamental value of metaphor.

These works are written from the vantage point of the author, and the ideal is that the meaning of metaphors is completely under the control of the author. The meaning of a metaphor is always predictable, based on analogy, in an almost mechanical way. Metaphors can create new words; they bring clarity and brevity (there is virtually no appreciation, either positively or negatively, of obscurity), but do not create new meanings. All of this means that metaphors are a very useful tool, "nice to have," but they are not essential.

3.3 The modern metaphor theory

The classical metaphor theory appears to be useful in dealing with some metaphors. However, when it comes to the ineffability of God, anything that we say about him is inadequate, so it is insufficient to replace one expression with another. For this reason, we need to look at other views on metaphor. The classical view is limited by its focus on rhetoric, and especially on the author. The modern view looks at the author, at the reader, as well as at the wider societal fabric in which the metaphor exists, which leads to a different way of looking at metaphors.

Max Black (1962) was the first to formulate a modern theory of metaphor, in which he looks at it from a different perspective. Black recognises three views of metaphor: the comparison view, the substitution view, and the interaction view. The comparison view and the substitution view match the classical metaphor theory; however, in the interaction view, two unlike concepts interact in a way that is not straightforward, creating a meaning that cannot be expressed in literal terms (p. 285f). For example,

in the metaphor "man is a wolf," the reader can choose which properties are transferred from wolves to men. Black has stated that a great deal of the meaning is lost if the metaphor is spelled out, as the reader will not make all the connections that he might have been able to think of (p. 293). This is an important contrast with the classical view of metaphor as being something that can always be replaced by literal language. Also, interaction metaphors are only partially true.

George Lakoff & Mark Johnson (1980) presented a modern theory of metaphor in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, which builds on Black's insights, and most notably the creativity and the partiality of metaphors. A new insight is that metaphors govern our experience and thinking. Metaphor in language is merely a result of its place in the basis of human experience (p. 3). Lakoff & Johnson have defined metaphor as follows: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). They have pointed out that metaphors are useful for describing metaphysical concepts: "we typically conceptualize the nonphysical *in terms of* the physical" (p. 59).

Most important for our purposes is the *structural metaphor*, in which one concept is structured in terms of another. Lakoff and Johnson have explained this as follows:

> *Structural metaphors* in our conceptual system also induce similarities. Thus, the IDEAS ARE FOOD metaphor establishes similarities between ideas and food. Both can be digested, swallowed, devoured, and warmed over, and both can nourish you. (pp. 147-148)

Thus, the meaning of metaphorical expressions can be clarified by the structural metaphor that they belong to.

4. De Genesi contra Manichaeos

De Genesi contra Manichaeos (*DGCM*) is Augustine's first commentary on the creation narrative and was published in 388/389, shortly after his conversion to Christianity (Mayer, 2004, 132). Before that, he was a follower of Manicheism, a religion that held a dualistic view in which there was a struggle between a good, spiritual world and an evil, material world. The Manicheans acknowledged Jesus Christ as a prophet, but they held that the God in the Old Testament was evil, being responsible for the creation of the material world. The goal of *DGCM* was to counter the Manichean interpretation of the Old Testament (Teske, 2001, 6-7, referring to *Retractationes* 1.10.1). Most importantly, Augustine refuted the Manichean idea that God is the author of evil. *DGCM* was aimed at educated and non-educated readers, since the Manicheans targeted both groups (*DGCM* 1.1.1).

Throughout the work, there is a tension between literal and figurative interpretation. On the one hand, Augustine held literal interpretation in high esteem (2.2.3). On the other hand, he thought that the Scriptures could only be understood within the context of the faith, and with love and desire. When he thought that the literal meaning of the Scriptures conflicted with the faith, he often resorted to a figurative interpretation. He criticised the Manicheans, whom he thought interpreted the Old Testament in an over-literal fashion (e.g., 2.7.8) and read their own meaning into it.

4.1 List of passages that Augustine interprets metaphorically

Augustine treats several expressions in the creation narrative as metaphors. Since he rarely uses the term 'metaphor,' I have included all passages where he provides an alternative, non-literal meaning (I will later refer to these expressions by their number between square brackets):

First creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4)

1. Heaven and earth (Gen 1:1) stand for the whole of creation. (1.5.9-1.7.12)
2. God saw that the light was good (Gen 1:4) means that God observed the light with wonder, which in turn means that we should observe the light with wonder. (1.8.13-14)
3. God calls the light day (Gen 1:5) means that God *caused* the light to be called day. (1.9.15)
4. The evenings that occur after each work denote its completion, and the mornings stand for the beginning of a new work. (1.14.20)
5. God's order to increase and multiply (Gen 1:28) has a spiritual meaning. (1.19.30)
6. God's rest on the seventh day (Gen 2:2) means that we rest in God. (1.22.33)
7. Second creation account (Gen 2:4-25)
8. The single day on which God made heaven and earth (Gen 2:5) stands for the whole of time. (2.3.4)
9. The mud from which man was made (Gen 2:7) was a mixture of earth and water, which stands for body and soul. (2.7.8-9)
10. God's mouth, by which he breathed the breath of life into man (Gen 2:7) means his truth or wisdom. (2.8.10)
11. Paradise (Gen 2:8) signifies the blissful state of men. (2.9.12)

Expulsion from paradise (Gen 3)

12. The serpent was the wisest of all beasts[3] (Gen 3:1) means it was *sly*. (2.14.20)
13. That Adam and Eve's eyes were opened (Gen 3:7) is not literally true, but it means that they saw their nakedness and were displeased at the sight. (2.31.40)

Exclusion of the prophetical section in Book 1 of DGCM

Book 1 of *DGCM* ends with a prophetic interpretation of the creation narrative (from 1.23.35 on), and here, Augustine likens the six ages in history to the six days of creation. Even though this can be considered as being a figurative interpretation, I have excluded this section in my analysis, since he does not provide a metaphorical interpretation of the six days of creation, but he uses them as a structure to shed light on something else: the ages in history. This makes this section something of its own and hard to compare with the (other) metaphors.

3 In Augustine's version, the serpent is called *prudentissimus* (the most prudent or most wise).

4.2 Discussion

Why did Augustine think these expressions are metaphors? How does he deal with them? What is his view on the metaphors lying behind these interpretations?

Criteria to determine whether to use metaphorical interpretation

In a number of cases Augustine motivates why an expression should be interpreted as a metaphor. This is usually based on the absurdity of their literal meaning, or on a conflict with his theological ideas or other passages in Scripture. In expression [4], the evenings and mornings are metaphorical based on the internal consistency of the text. Because during the first three days of creation the sun had not yet been created, corporeal evenings and mornings did not yet exist. Secondly, he treats anthropomorphisms as metaphors because he believes that God is ineffable (1.17.27-28; see also Van Geest, 2011, 50-51). This applies to expressions [2], [3], [6] and [9]. In the other cases, he does not explain why he thinks the expression is a metaphor.

The purpose and interpretation of Scriptural metaphors

In the beginning of *DGCM*, Augustine says that Scripture sets out very complex matters in very simple terms; so simple that even little children (*paruuli*) can grasp them. (1.3.5) *Paruuli* was a term also used by the Manicheans to denote their outer circle, which did not have complete knowledge, as opposed to their inner circle. This focus on clarity for the *paruuli* is important for how Augustine discusses the individual metaphors.

In [1], he says that "heaven and earth" is a simplification that is easier to understand for the *paruuli*. This implies that those who are schooled in philosophy could attain a deeper understanding of the creation process, which started with *chaos* or unformed matter. Augustine contends that "heaven and earth" mean "a kind of seed of 'heaven and earth'", the basic material that heaven and earth were made of. He says that this way of speaking, where something that still has to happen is spoken of as if it already has been done, is common to the Scriptures. I would consider this to be a type of analogy.

The Manicheans derided Gen 1:4, arguing that God was surprised that the light was good, as though he could not predict how his creation would turn out. In [2], Augustine responds to this by drawing an analogy with a carpenter who is satisfied after realising his inward vision. Thus, Augustine thinks it means that God is filled with wonder and astonishment. Since he thinks that God is ineffable, he reflects this upon humans; thus, it means that we should be filled with wonder and astonishment:

> Nothing, after all, can be said about God that is at all worthy of him. But so that we should be suitably brought up and helped to attain to those things that cannot be uttered by any human speech, things are said in scripture which we are able to grasp. (1.8.14)

In contrast to the other metaphors, Augustine acknowledges here that the metaphor is a way to understand things that cannot be understood in a different way; not only for the *paruuli* but for human beings in general.

In [3], he says that God's speaking is not literally true, but "is all said according to our way of understanding." "He called" means "he causes to be called"; he points out that this type of analogy is used throughout the Scriptures. Similarly, in [6], "God rests" means "God lets us rest," which is similar to [2] and [4].

In (4), the meaning of the evenings and the mornings comes from an analogy with work (the completion and commencement of a new work). He says that this is common in the Scriptures: "the transference, you see, of words from human matters to express things divine is common form with the divine scriptures." (Here he has used the verbalised form of *uerbum translatum*, *uerba transferre*, which is the technical term for metaphor).

Augustine points out that *Eden* means "delight" in Hebrew [10]. He supposes that *Eden* is a spiritual state, but that it appears to be the name of a physical place when the word is left untranslated.

For the other metaphors, *DGCM* lacks clear substantiation of why a metaphor is used and how the meaning is derived: [5], [9], [11], [12]. In [7] and [8], Augustine bases himself on his own philosophical ideas.

4.3 Conclusion

In *DGCM*, metaphorical interpretation plays an important role in understanding the meaning of the creation narrative, and in countering its Manichean interpretation, which Augustine accuses of being over-literal in order to serve the Manichean agenda. Augustine needed to convince his readers that certain expressions were metaphors in the first place. He does this by emphasizing that metaphors are common in the Scriptures, in the same way that metaphors are common in everyday language.

Scriptural metaphors are, however, not *everyday* metaphors; I would rather call them *divine* metaphors. Augustine is aware of this, as he says in his discussion of metaphor [5], "The transference, you see, of words from human matters to express things divine is common form with the divine scriptures." In his discussion of metaphor [8], he states that the "veil needs to be taken off" (referring to 2 Cor 3:16), but he is confident that this is a straightforward thing to do. As he stressed in the beginning of *DGCM*, Scripture employs metaphors for the sake of clarity, especially for the *paruuli*. At this point, Augustine's methodology is fully aligned with the classical, Aristotelian view of metaphor. This was also confirmed in the discussion of individual metaphors. The meaning of these metaphors is always clear to Augustine, especially with knowledge of Scriptural idiom and, in the case of the meaning of *Eden*, knowledge of the source language. There is no room for doubt.

Also, even though the ineffability of God is central in *DGCM*, the interpretations deflect this issue. The interpretation of God's speaking in [3] does not say anything about God, but instead it says something about humans, and something similar also happens in [2] and [4].

5. De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus

In *De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus* (*DGLI*), written between 393 and 394 (Mayer, 2004, 126), Augustine proceeds with another attempt at the interpretation of Genesis, but from a different angle. Although he did not complete this attempt, he nevertheless published the work to show the development in his thought (*Retractationes* 1.18.1). In *DGLI*, Augustine's perspective is that the creation narrative should be read with an open mind, without making rash assumptions, as some heretics do, as he states in the very opening of this work:

> The obscure mysteries of the natural order, which we perceive to have been made by God the almighty craftsman, should rather be discussed by asking questions than by making affirmations. This is supremely the case with the books which have been entrusted to us by divine authority, because the rash assertion of one's uncertain and dubious opinions in dealing with them can scarcely avoid the charge of sacrilege. On the other hand the doubts and hesitations implied by asking questions must not exceed the bounds of Catholic faith. Many heretics, after all, have been in the habit of twisting their exposition of the divine scriptures to fit their way of thinking, which is quite at odds with the faith learned by Catholics. (*DGLI* 1,1)

The influence of the Manichean debate is still present, but it is not explicit (the heretics are not named) and more in the background. Augustine permits himself more room for uncertainty than he would when in direct confrontation with his opponents (Pollmann, 2007, 206-207). Also, he acknowledges multiple ways of interpretation, which he lists in the beginning of the work as "the way of history, the way of allegory, the way of analogy, the way of aetiology" (*DGLI* 2.5). The interpretations are nevertheless restricted by the catholic faith. This approach has implications for his view of metaphor, too. In *DGLI* he discusses a large number of the expressions that he identified as metaphors in *DGCM* (although he does not use that term; he occasionally uses *similitudo* [comparison], but mostly he does not label them). I will go through them one by one and discuss his views.

Heaven and earth (Gen 1:1)

In *DGLI* 3.9, Augustine says that "it can also be reasonably supposed that 'heaven and earth' are put here for the whole of creation," which matches his interpretation in *DGCM*, although in that work he leaves no room for doubting this interpretation.

> Up to this point we have been inquiring about the meaning of the text, ln the beginning God made heaven and earth; it would have been impossible, after all, to make any definite assertions about these matters without incurring the charge of rashness. (3.10)

The Spirit of God was being borne over the water (Gen 1:2)

Augustine explains Genesis 1:2: "and the Spirit of God was being borne over the water" as follows:

> [It should be understood] in the way that the intention of a craftsman is "borne over" the wood or whatever it is he is working on, or even over the parts of his body, which he applies to the work. ... But we cannot find any clearer comparison [*similitudinem*], or any that is closer to the matter we are talking about in things that people can grasp in any way at all. (4.16)

Thus, Augustine thinks that this simile (I would rather say metaphor) is not sufficient to express the truth, but it is the closest to what humans can understand.

Light (Gen 1:2)

Augustine points out that the light in Genesis 1:2 could be material light or hidden light (*DGLI* 1.3.6), whereas in *DGCM* he was more certain; there he asserted that it meant spiritual light. In any case, it is not the light which shines in God's own wisdom, because this would contradict the catholic faith, as that light is eternal and not created.

God saw that the light was good (Gen 1:4)

Augustine repeats the interpretation from *DGCM* that God approved of the light, rather than that he was unexpectedly surprised by its goodness. (*DGLI* 5.22) However, in *DGLI* he is aware that even this is not an accurate expression when taken literally (it might still be a metaphor): "The inexpressible, after all, was rightly expressed to human beings through human agency in such a way as to profit them all."

God calls the light day (Gen 1:4)

Augustine rules out the literal meaning of "God said, let Light be made" (Gen 1:4) (implicitly saying it is a metaphor), because God saying something in space and time contradicts his ineffability, an essential part of the catholic faith (*DGLI* 5.19). He then adds a sneer at the Manicheans, though without naming them: "So let no materialist, fleshly image creep into the soul and disturb the godly, spiritual understanding, because for anything to begin or cease in the nature of God, if taken literally, is a rash and headstrong opinion." He does not provide an alternative interpretation, as he did in *DGCM*. He merely says that the meaning "defies expression." Thus, he thinks it is not necessary to fully explain the metaphor in literal terms.

The days of creation

In *DGLI* 7.28, Augustine says that the universe was created at a single point in time, based on his version of Sir 18:11 (based on the LXX) according to which "all things were created simultaneously." He consequently

sees the days of creation as metaphorical (which is in line with his view in *DGCM*, where he describes the evenings and mornings as metaphors), and written like this for the sake of our understanding:

> But in this book of Genesis the story of the things made by God most appropriately sets them out as it were through intervals of time; by this arrangement of the account in an orderly sequence, the divine plan itself, which cannot be directly and timelessly contemplated by our weaker intellects, is presented, so to say, as a spectacle for our very eyes to gaze on.

Conclusion

In *DGLI*, Augustine accepts multiple interpretations of the creation narrative, as long as they are consistent with the catholic faith, of which the ineffability of God is an important element. This has important implications for his view of metaphor. Firstly, he identifies certain expressions as metaphors because their literal meaning is inconsistent with the faith. Overall, his method is to explain the occurrence of metaphors in Scripture by pointing out that they were created by the sacred author, so that humans could understand things that cannot be understood otherwise. Here is a crucial difference with *DGCM*: in *DGCM* he thought that the metaphors could be fully explained in literal terms, while in *DGLI* Augustine is aware that this is not always possible. Even where he explains that "God saw that the light was good" means that God approved the light, he still points out that that is not a literal truth but an approximation.

6. De Genesi ad Litteram

De Genesi ad Litteram (*DGL*), published in 416, (Mayer, 2004, 114) is Augustine's most extensive commentary on the creation narrative. In this work, Augustine pursues the completion of his objective that he already had in his early work *DGCM* to achieve a literal interpretation of the creation narrative, by which *in this work* he means a historical interpretation. He held that the events in the creation narrative are historical, and they are narrated by means of metaphors. (Jacobs, 2018, 95-96). Augustine motivates this by stating that metaphors can be used to understand spiritual matters:

> Hence it is not incongruous to transfer the meaning of the word (*uerbum transfertur*) from the material to the spiritual order and speak of place in this sense, although the reality itself is worlds apart (4.18.34).[4]

This is a neutral statement; he does not present metaphors as useful, e.g., he does not point out the goal of clarification for the "little ones" or people in general, as he did in *DGCM*, nor does he think that metaphors are necessary. This is one of the few statements on metaphors in *DGL*. To gain a more profound understanding, I will investigate the particular interpretations of metaphors by Augustine and then discuss

4 Here, Augustine uses *uerbum transfertur*, the verbalised from of *uerbum translatum* (metaphor): *…ideo non incongruenter a corporalibus ad spiritalia uerbum transfertur, ut dicatur locus, cum res ipsa plurimum distet*.

his view on metaphors that emerges from them, as well as the methods he uses to interpret them. I will also compare his view to the classical and the modern views of metaphor.

I will also look at *DGL*'s methodology in relation to its purpose. *DGL* is an open exploration of the various meanings of the creation narrative. They are bound by Augustine's assumptions, so he does not accept all interpretations, but he also tends not to give a definitive answer (Solignac & Agaësse, 1972, 18).

6.1 Cognitive metaphors

In *DGL* Augustine emphasizes that metaphors can be more than a stylistic device; sometimes a metaphor is the closest we can get. I build on Solignac & Agaësse, who contend that Augustine interprets many elements in Genesis 1 as metaphysical. He does this most notably in Genesis 1:3, where he interprets "God speaks" metaphysically, and connects it with the eternal Word of God, and where he interprets "Let there be light" as spiritual light (1972, 35; 41).

Light and darkness

The abyss

In the beginning of *DGL*, Augustine poses the question what "heaven and earth" (Gen 1:1) mean (1.1.1). As in his previous commentaries, he holds that creation took place in two steps: the creation of unformed matter, and then its formation. Also, he makes a distinction between corporeal and spiritual creation. This leads him to consider a few interpretations of "heaven and earth." This term refers to (1) the corporeal creation, (2) the corporeal and spiritual creation, (3) the unformed basic material creation, both corporeal and spiritual, (4) earth as the imperfect, corporeal creation, and heaven as the perfected, spiritual creation.

He finally proposes a fifth view, for which he settles later on, in which there is both an unformed corporeal state, indicated by "the earth was invisible and shapeless," and an unformed spiritual state, indicated by "there was darkness over the abyss."

> In this interpretation we should understand "dark abyss" as a metaphor, meaning that life which is formless unless it is turned towards its creator. Only in this way can it be formed and cease being an abyss, and be illuminated and cease being dark. (1.1.3)

Thus, he points out that the *abyss* is a metaphor. He explains a few aspects of the metaphor in plain language: "life is formless…"; however, as he continues, the full meaning of the metaphor emerges from connecting it to another metaphor, the (divine) light that takes away the darkness of the abyss. This way, he emphasizes the strength of the metaphor as something that is more than what can be said in literal terms.

Augustine does not motivate *why* this is a metaphor. He gets away with this because, at this point, it is only one of the possible interpretations that he wants his readers to open their minds to; he also considers an interpretation in which the abyss constitutes material darkness. He hints at his preference for

the metaphorical interpretation by putting it last and going into it much more profoundly than the other interpretations. Only later in *DGL* does he confirm his preference for a particular interpretational framework of light and darkness in Genesis, even though he never presents it as the only possible interpretation.

Divine light and God's speaking

At this point it has not yet become clear what kind of light is able to illuminate the abyss. This does become clear when Augustine talks about the way in which God speaks in Genesis 1:3. Augustine contends that God's speaking is metaphysical (1.2.4-1.2.6), because God is unchangeable and timeless:

> God in His eternity says all through His Word, not by the sound of a voice, nor by a thinking process that measures out its speech*, but by the light of Divine Wisdom, coeternal with Himself and born to Himself (1.4.9).

I will split this statement into two parts, separated by the asterisk. In the first part, Augustine sees the speaking of God as a metaphor (although he does not use the word). The reason is that a literal or corporeal interpretation would contradict his beliefs. He does not explain the metaphor in plain language. Instead, he denies some of the properties of physical speaking, rather than pointing out what properties of speaking still apply to God's speaking. This means that his reader receives a great deal of interpretational responsibility.

This approach is consistent with the modern theory of metaphor, in which metaphors are seen as partially true. For example, in "men are wolves," not every aspect of wolves applies to men. Also, it is not always possible to spell out all properties that are transferred. This is because the meaning of a metaphor arises from a creative interaction between *source field* (e.g., wolves) and *target field* (e.g., men), which requires the participation of the reader. This creative process can always bring up new connections between the source and the target field. It is not sure to what extent Augustine was aware of this, but he knew that he couldn't spell out the metaphor.

In the second part, Augustine connects this word to the "the light of Divine Wisdom"; this is the light that can be identified with God himself and which we can deduce is also the light that illuminates the abyss. As in the previous metaphor, the abyss, Augustine uses the *light* metaphor to explain the *God speaks* metaphor. Augustine takes this interpretation from John 1, to which he briefly refers, which connects the light to God's word in the creation process.[5]

Spiritual light

The light created in Genesis 1:3 is a different kind of light; since it is created, it cannot be the light that is identified with God himself. Instead, "This is the light …. About which it could be said: *Wisdom has been created before all things* (Sir 1:4)" (1.17.32). This created light removes the abyss and turns the unformed creature towards its creator, thereby forming it.

5 He refers to John 1 a few sentences further on, when he starts discussing the meaning of the light created in Gen 1:3 *(DGL* 1.17.33).

Meaning of day, evening, and morning

Augustine distances himself from the interpretation of light and darkness as good and evil, which he held in *DGCM*, and he calls this interpretation allegorical (1.17.33). In *DGL* he sees darkness rather as an intermediate step in the creation process.

Augustine believed that the universe was created at a single point in time, based on two passages in Scripture. The first one is Genesis 2:4; his version of this verse reads: "This is the book of the creation of heaven and earth when day was made. God made heaven and earth" (5.3.5), which deviates from the Hebrew text and implies that creation took place on a single day.[6] The second one is Sirach 18:1, which reads in Augustine's version: "He who lives forever created all things together" (4.33.52 and 6.3.4).[7]

For this reason, Augustine held that this day, with its evening and morning, was not an ordinary, time-bound day. Instead, he saw it as a single "divine" day (in its entirety related to the spiritual light created in Genesis 1:3) that was repeated six times. He proposed that with the creation of this day, as well as its evening, two forms of knowledge were created, which are two steps in creation (that took place simultaneously). The day is the highest form of knowledge, which is angelic knowledge of the creation in God's Word, which is eternal. The evening is the angelic knowledge of the creatures themselves. Then, in the morning, the angels rise from the knowledge of the creatures to the praise of the Creator (4.24.41; see also 4.29.46).[8]

Spiritual light is truer than material light

Augustine argues that his interpretation of the light in Genesis 1:3 as spiritual light is not figurative, because spiritual light is truer light than material light.

> I have spoken about spiritual light, about the creation of day in angelic spirits, about their contemplation of the Word of God, about their knowledge of creatures in themselves, and about their referring this to the praise of the immutable Truth, where from the first they beheld the forms of creatures yet to be before they knew these creatures as actually produced. Now it must not be thought that these interpretations are applicable to "day" and "evening" and "morning" not literally but only in some figurative and allegorical way. These interpretations, of course, are different from our ordinary understanding of light in the material

6 In my dissertation I discuss the translation issues in this passage "Augustine's version reads: "Hic est liber creaturae coeli et terrae, cum factus est dies, fecit deus caelum et terram." The Septuagint has ᾗ ἡμέρᾳ (day), a locative dative, meaning "on the day", thus, the day is not made, unlike in Augustine's text. Augustine's version also deviates from the Hebrew text, which NRSV translates as: "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." (Jacobs, 2018, 107)

7 Qui uiuit in aeternum, creauit omnia simul. (CSEL 28, 173; 178)
Taylor has noted that "the word *simul* ('at one time', 'all together') in the Latin version seems to be a mistranslation of the Greek word *κοινῇ* ('commonly', 'without exception')". (Taylor (1982), vol. 1, p. 254, n. 69) It must be noted that the Hebrew text of Sirach was not known in Augustine's time.

8 Bouton-Touboulic (2004, 82-86) has worked out Augustine's interpretation: in sum, the six days of creation denoted a single point in time at which God created the causal order (*causalis ordo*), which contains the possibilities of all creatures. In the second account of creation, these possibilities were realised; in fact, this is an ongoing process.

> sense. But it is not true that material light is literally "light", and light referred to in Genesis is metaphorical "light". For where light is more excellent and unfailing, there day also exists in a truer sense. Why, then, should that day not have a truer evening and a truer morning? (4.28.45)

Here Augustine makes a distinction between *proper* (proprie), on the one hand, and *figurative or allegorical* (figurate atque allegorice), on the other hand. The term *proper* has a special meaning here, because further on in the quoted passage he says that this spiritual light differs from the material sense (*corporalis*), and that this light is *more excellent*. It is therefore my contention that Augustine does not mean that spiritual light is literal in our common understanding of the term *literal*. Instead, he wishes to distinguish this interpretation from an allegorical interpretation, which is usually pointed at future events that take place outside of the text (possibly, *proprie* is meant to be *ad litteram*, so it means that the metaphor refers to an historical reality.) He then uses the *via eminentiae*, in which a physical reality is used to direct the reader to a higher reality that cannot be experienced in physical terms.

The Spirit of God

Augustine's text on the second part of Genesis 1:2 reads: "The Spirit of God was stirring above the water" (1.5.10). He then refers to an interesting variant, based on the Syriac text, which he thinks is close to the Hebrew, and which has "the Spirit of God *brooded…*" Augustine explains this metaphor by mentioning its connotations with motherly love. At the same time, he negates its physical aspects, as he did in the "speaking of God" metaphor:

> This action is ... like that of a bird that broods over its eggs, the mother somehow helping in the development of her young by the warmth of her body, through an affection similar to that of love. Hence we must not think of the matter in a human way, as if the utterances of God were subject to time throughout the various days of God's work. (1.18.36)

6.2 Idiomatic metaphors

In *DGL*, Augustine also discusses a couple of metaphors that are idiomatic, which means that they add no cognitive value; they are rather remnants from a different language that could be made clearer by replacing them with a literal expression.

God's speaking to humans

Whenever God speaks to humans, Augustine assumes that this happens in a physical way, in space and time, as opposed to the metaphysical speaking by which God created the universe. Augustine is faced with the problem that God is timeless, and therefore, he comes up with a solution in which an intermediary creature (an angel) speaks on behalf of God. Thus, Augustine's interpretation, "God speaks" can be replaced by the plain explanation "The angel speaks."

The wise serpent

Augustine calls *wise serpent* (Gen 3:1) a metaphor (*uerbum translatum*) and then a catachresis (*abusio*) (11.2.4). He explains this by making clear that the literal meaning is absurd, and he says that this is a common Scriptural metaphor. He supports his interpretation by referring to another passage in Scripture where *wise* is used in a negative way: "The sons of this world are wiser than the sons of the light" (Luke 16:8). Here, the metaphor can easily be explained in plain language.

Their eyes were opened

Augustine points out that *their (Adam and Eve's) eyes were opened* (Gen 3:7) is a metaphor. He argues that the literal meaning does not make sense; they did not walk around Paradise with their eyes closed. It rather means that they recognised something that they had not recognised before, as in Luke 24:13-31, where the eyes of Cleophas and his companion were opened when they recognised Jesus. As in the *wise serpent* metaphor, this metaphor can easily be explained in plain terms.

6.3 Conclusion

From the individual metaphors that we have discussed, Augustine's view on metaphors emerges. There is a contrast between the idiomatic metaphors and the cognitive metaphors. The idiomatic metaphors are in line with the classical metaphor theory, since they can easily be explained in plain terms without loss of meaning. He identifies these metaphors because their literal meaning contradicts the catholic faith or common sense. They all arise from translation issues; they may not have been an issue in the original language (although Augustine cannot tell for sure). He therefore doesn't attribute any benefits to them, such as the classical benefits of clarity, beauty, and brevity. Instead, he treats these metaphors as obscure expressions that should be clarified, and the explanation improves upon the original.

Regarding the other group of metaphors, the ones that I have labelled as cognitive, Augustine goes beyond the classical metaphor view. Instead of their ornamental benefits, they seem to be necessary, which is reminiscent of the modern theory of metaphor.

Let us unwrap the methods Augustine uses to interpret the cognitive metaphors, by comparing them to the characteristics of the modern metaphor theory.

Augustine adheres to the first distinct feature of the modern metaphor theory, which holds that metaphors go beyond what can be said in plain terms. Even when he provides a plain explanation, he emphasizes that this explanation does not fully cover the meaning. This approach requires that his readers think of the meaning itself, which goes beyond what can be expressed with words.

Secondly**,** the modern metaphor theory emphasizes that metaphors are only partially valid, otherwise, they would be literal expressions. Augustine is fully aware of this in his discussion of the cognitive metaphors. In one case, in God's speaking, this is very explicit, since he actively denies the physical properties of speaking. In the other cases, it is also clear that the metaphor does not fully cover the metaphysical concept.

It is my contention that, in general, where abstract metaphors are concerned, it is especially the physical properties that tend to be invalid, and this is underemphasised, by Black, as well as by Lakoff & Johnson, in the modern metaphor theory. The canonical example "men are wolves" does not mean that men are covered with hair or have sharp teeth; "love is fire" does not mean that love produces physical flames.

Thirdly, Black emphasizes that the meaning of cognitive metaphors arises from forcing the reader to connect the source field and the target field in a creative way. Augustine does not directly state his views on this aspect, and it is hard to assess it based on the examples. We can say, however, that he respects the interpretational freedom of the readers; he points out that certain expressions may be metaphors, and he excludes certain interpretations, but he does not enforce a particular interpretation.

Fourthly, the key finding of Lakoff & Johnson is that metaphors do not exist on their own but are usually part of wider networks, called metaphorical concepts. This aspect is visible in Augustine's treatment of the abyss and the days of creation with their evenings and mornings, which he explains by referring to the overarching metaphor *God is light.*

In sum, in *DGL* Augustine's interpretational method for the cognitive metaphors is consistent with the modern metaphor theory. Hereby, he addresses the shortcomings in *DGCM*, in which he seemed to be aware that metaphors were needed to convey the incomprehensible, but ended up providing an interpretation in which he fully explained the metaphors in literal terms, and thereby made the metaphors redundant. There is nothing left in the metaphor that cannot be said literally.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored Augustine's views on metaphors in the creation narrative in Genesis, as well as the way he explained this to his readers. Secondly, I have looked at the way these views affect his interpretational methods. In his early works, even though Augustine was aware of the importance of metaphors, his views were not yet fully developed. In *DGCM*, his early commentary on the creation narrative, he follows the classical view. He defends his claim that metaphors occur in the Scriptures by pointing out that they are a common linguistic feature. He praises metaphors for their ability to clarify complex matters, especially to the uneducated, but he thinks that their meaning can be fully rendered in plain words. He thereby fulfils his goal of refuting the Manicheans, whom he accuses of reading the Old Testament in their own way, ignoring the *caritas* principle and the context of the catholic faith. Nevertheless, his method of replacing the metaphors by plain language stands at odds with his idea that certain ideas cannot be fully expressed with words.

In *DGLI*, an unfinished work, Augustine puts forward a different view on Scriptural metaphors. Instead of emphasizing their clarity, he points out that they are approximations of higher truths that cannot be accurately expressed by means of language. He remains true to this idea by refraining from explaining metaphors in plain terms, leaving open their exact meaning.

In *DGL*, Augustine builds on the insights in *DGLI*. His goal in *DGL* is not to provide definitive interpretations; instead, he is open to multiple interpretations, if they are consistent with the faith. He defends metaphorical interpretations as one of the possible interpretations. He does not equate them with ordinary metaphors as he did in *DGCM.* Their meaning is not crystalised. Instead, he moves towards a novel method that resembles the modern metaphor theory in his discussion of the abyss, of the light created in Genesis 1:3, as well as of the days of creation, and their evenings and mornings. Rather than providing an exact meaning, as he did in DGCM, he points out that these metaphors can be understood by seeing them in connection with the *God is light* metaphor, leading the readers to the higher truth that they signify, which is beyond language.

Looking at the outcomes of this investigation, I believe that we can use Augustine's methods as a source of inspiration for future theological research. He claims that God, as well as certain spiritual truths and the creation act, are ineffable, but that it does not end there. Metaphors can be used as an approximation when speaking about these topics. In my opinion, this idea is still highly relevant. What I find interesting about Augustine's approach is that he is open to multiple interpretations, provided they agree with the catholic faith. This way, he offers interpretations that are useful to the faithful, while simultaneously retaining the means to critically assess these same interpretations. Scripture can convey different messages to different readers, but we cannot make it say everything we want.

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