

Scripture for Dummies: Augustine on Ignorant Readers of the Bible

St. Augustine is often held up as a champion of postmodern hermeneutics for his liberal views on the number of meanings to be found in a passage of Scripture (Bochet 1998, Matthews 2008, Kenney 2010, Pelttari 2014). Scholarship has given less attention, however, to the constraints he puts on interpretation, particularly in regard to the literal (*ad litteram*) meaning(s) of a text. In this paper I will discuss one difficulty that Augustine faces in allowing multiple literal meanings in the text: how to reconcile the truth of Scripture with its accessibility to ignorant readers. He addresses this issue in book XII of the *Confessions* while considering the first two verses of Genesis. The difficulty arises because of two conflicting principles. First, the meaning of the verses, as intended by Moses or the Holy Spirit, must agree with the truth of the matter—in this case, philosophical truths about the creation. Yet, second, all readers, even ignorant ones (*sensu tardiores*), should be able to find meanings in the text under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Augustine argues throughout book XII that the meaning of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth,” depends on abstract concepts of time, immateriality, and contingency (McDonald forthcoming). The meaning of the verse thus seems inaccessible to the ignorant reader, especially since Augustine specifically states that naïve materialistic interpretations of Scripture (*carnales sententiae*) are not true and that multiplicity of meanings in the author’s intention excludes false interpretations (XII.41-43). Yet he insists that even those who understand Genesis 1:1 in a crass material way (*ex familiaritate carnis*) understand an important point, that God made all natures, although the only natures they know are the material ones which they observe (XII.37). In what way, then, does the ignorant reader learn from these verses under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

I argue that we can understand Augustine's position in XII.37 by looking at arguments in the *Confessions* and his treatises on lying, *De Mendacio* and *Contra Mendacium*. First, Augustine's treatment of lying demonstrates that the Holy Spirit could provide ignorant readers with a true meaning of the verses while concealing certain elements. Specifically, the Spirit could inspire an indeterminate interpretation in these readers' minds, allowing them to understand that God made everything without knowing exactly what "everything" is. Second, Augustine's explanation of Moses' style as both "pleasant to little ones" and full of "wonderful profundity" (XII.17) shows how Moses' words particularly accommodate this kind of interpretation while still speaking to the higher truth. And third, Augustine clearly recognizes the place of indeterminate "knowledge" in the *Confessions*, as shown by his considerations about the nature of time: "If no one asks me [what time is], I know; if I want to explain it to someone asking, I do not know" (XI.17). But he also knows from his own experience that indeterminate knowledge of this sort can easily be turned into error when subjected to criticism, just as his youthful concept of God fell apart before the questions of the Manicheans (III.12). Once we have understood these points, we can understand how Augustine handles the situation of ignorant readers and why he warns this kind of reader about the instability of their position in XII.37.

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