Augustine’s Defense of the Sacred Against the Profanation of Genesis 1:1-1:3

Augustine of Hippo’s On Genesis against the Manichees (De Genesi contra Manichaeos (DGnM)) is an early Christian apologetic text -- ca. 388 AD -- that responds, verse by verse, to a series of textual critiques of the first three chapters of Genesis. The critiques are alleged to come from Manichaeans; although direct attribution of the critiques to individuals is never performed. Augustine writes with a fervor fueled by faith and indignation. He had been a Manichaean himself, in part due to “problems he encountered with the Scriptures,” such that “he believed that the Catholic Church held [an] anthropomorphic view of God,” (Teske, 9-10, 1991). The Manichaean religion was a highly developed and sophisticated world religion, premised on a “universal dualistic gnosis” of two uncreated principles: good and evil or light and darkness (Teske, 7-8, 1991). “During his years as a Manichee Augustine thought of God as ‘an immense shining body’ of which he himself was a part,” (Teske, 8, 1991). After his conversion to Christianity, he considered Manichaeanism a Christian heresy (Teske, 7, 1991). However, he made the aim of DGnM not “the refutation of the whole Manichaean error,” (Teske, 7, 1991), but rather “to defend, to the extent that the Lord grants us strength, those things with which [the Manichees] find fault in the Old Testament and to show in these matters that the blindness of men can do nothing against the truth of God,” (DGnM, 55, 1991)\(^1\).

Augustine does not take a strictly literal interpretation of Genesis -- his goal is to make the meaning of the text, as he understands it, manifest to the layman. That meaning is obscure by divine design. “Divine Providence permits many heretics with their differing errors so that at least, when they insult us and ask us what we do not know, we may shake off our sluggishness and long to know the divine Scriptures,” (DGnM, 48, 1991). We aren’t given an explanation for why Augustine’s account is true, but it is implicit in the metaphysics he adopts, namely, that each person has a soul whose inner light “of which we read in the gospel” can find this truth: “If they wish to, all men can do this, because that light enlightens every man coming into this world,” (DGnM, 53-4, 1991). Early in his exposition, Augustine makes clear that the imagery in Genesis is symbolic, as “these things are called by the names of visible things on account of the weakness of the little ones who are less suited for grasping invisible things,” (DGnM, 57, 1991). Some of those visible things include “water” as in the “face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2) which the Manichees “with their perverted minds” mock as some sort of aquatic dwelling place of the divine spirit (DGnM, 56, 1991). To complete the

---

\(^1\) For clarity, citations in the style (DGnM, XX, 1991) refer to Teske’s translation of Augustine, whereas (Teske, XX, 1991) refers to Teske’s introduction and/or footnotes.
example, Augustine suggests that in reading “And the Spirit of God was borne over the water” we should not take the text literally, but rather, that we should read that “the Spirit of God was not borne over the water through stretches of space, as the sun is borne over earth, but by the power of its invisible grandeur,” (DGnM, 56, 1991). Given that Augustine’s goal is thus to defend and render the meaning of this symbolic text, his interpretation is amenable to an analysis in terms of Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*. Eliade’s goal in writing *The Sacred and the Profane* was to “show in what ways religious man attempts to remain as long as possible in a sacred universe, and hence what his total experience of life proves to be in comparison with the experience of the man without religious feeling, of the man who lives, or wishes to live, in a desacralized world,” (Eliade, 13, 1957). In this essay, we’ll examine Augustine’s treatment of Genesis 1:1-3. We’ll show how Augustine appeals to what Eliade calls *hierophany*, “the act of manifestation of the sacred” by which, paradoxically, “any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself,” in his interpretation of Genesis 1:1-1:3 (Eliade, 11-12, 1957).

**Genesis 1:1**

From Augustine’s Christian perspective, the heretical attack on the opening verse of Genesis is an attempt by the Manichees to live in a desacralized world. “About the words, ‘In the beginning God made heaven and earth’ they ask, ‘In what beginning?’” (DGnM, 49, 1991). The sacred, for Augustine, begins with Christ, through which, according to the Gospel of John, “All things came into being.” (John 1:3, NSRV, 1991). “We answer them that God made heaven and earth in the beginning, not in the beginning of time, but in Christ,” (DGnM, 49, 1991). Teske claims that “Augustine interprets *in principio*, ‘in the beginning’ or ‘principle’ as referring to Christ on the basis of John 8:25,” (Teske, 49, 1991), but there is further textual justification for taking *in principio* to mean Christ: the Gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” (NSRV, 1991). Or, in the Latin Vulgate version, a late 4th century translation from Hebrew to Latin, “In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum,” (LVB, 2017). Augustine might not have been using the Latin Vulgate version, but he certainly approved of it, having written in Book XVII, Chapter 43 of the *City of God*, “Our times, however, have enjoyed the advantage of the presbyter Jerome, a man most learned, and skilled in all three languages, who translated these same Scriptures into the Latin speech, not from the Greek, but from the Hebrew,” (CoG, 2017). Thus for Augustine, *in principio*, in the beginning, is Christ, “for, when the Jews asked him who he was, our Lord Jesus Christ answered, ‘The beginning; that is why I am speaking to you,’” (DGnM, 49, 1991).

A cosmos created through Christ is a sacred cosmos; a Christian cosmos. On the topic of sacred space, Eliade writes, “a sacred space possesses existential value for religious man; for nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without a previous orientation -- and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point,” and for Augustine, that fixed point is the Word (and thereby the *word* of God, (Eliade, 22, 1957). Concurrently
with the question of what “the beginning” is, Augustine fields the question of why God “suddenly” decided to make “what he had not previously made through eternal time” (DGnM, 49, 1991). The idea that there could have been eternal, uncreated time before God (and thereby before Christ) is a profane time for Augustine. Augustine asks, “For how could there be a time that God had not made since he is the maker of all time?” (DGnM, 50, 1991). The answer is simply that no such time existed, and furthermore, inquiries into why God “suddenly” decided to make heaven and earth may be recast as inquiries into why God made earth; and if there is an answer to this question, there would be a reason - a cause - for the will of God, “though the will of God is itself the cause of all that exists,” (DGnM, 51, 1991). The transfiguration of the visible reality of causality onto the invisible reality of God is a profanation for Augustine, in Eliade’s sense. It is to deny the sovereignty of God. Eliade explains that “if the world is to be lived in, it must be founded--and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space,” for the religious man; for Augustine to live in the Christian world, then, its birth must be made wholly consistent with his understanding of God (Eliade, 22, 1957). “Hence,” Augustine cautions, “let human temerity hold itself in check, and let it not seek what is not lest it not find what is,” (DGnM, 52, 1991).

**Genesis 1:2**

Augustine’s discussion of Genesis 1:1 constitutes and centers on a hierophany. There’s something of an artistic touch in Augustine’s account, because, on his terms, Christ was implied in the words “in principio”, from the beginning (the moment they were first written or read). So the revelation that Christ is what is meant (referred to) by in principio (in Genesis as well as in John) is itself a breaking into sacred space of the same character as God’s creation of the world: it always was and yet had a beginning: the moment of realization. The experience of this revelation is modelled on the myth (the text of Genesis) and is thus circular in a sense. In Eliade’s terms: “the myth relates a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, ab initio,” (Eliade, 95, 1957). The first mythological moment in Genesis is Genesis 1:1, however, there is no sensory imagery to render the content of Genesis 1:1 to the imagination. The next mythological development of the text of Genesis reads “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” (Gen. 1:2, NSRV, 1991).

Genesis 1:2, by contrast, introduces language we can visualize. This doesn’t mean, for Augustine, that the visualization is the meaning. Augustine introduces the critique of the Manichees of Genesis 1:2 who, “in finding fault with what follows in the Book of Genesis, ‘But the earth was invisible and without form,’ ask, ‘How did God make heaven and earth in the beginning if the earth was already invisible and without form?’” (DGnM, 52, 1991). This is an attempt by the imagined Manichaean interlocutor to transgress sacred space and time and suggest that some sort of invisible and formless world existed in the beginning, that, because our universe is a place that is visible and formed, the invisible and formless world could have existed before
God. It is an attempt to inject the profane, everyday world into the sacred myth. Those who question the text in this way have made something out of nothing, on Augustine’s account, and thereby failed to see how something could be made from nothing: “For what could be said more clearly than the words, ‘In the beginning God made heaven and earth, but the earth was invisible and without form’? That is, in the beginning God made heaven and earth, but the very earth which God made was invisible and without form before God arranged the forms of all things by ordering and distinguishing them in their places and ranks, before he said, ‘Let there be light’ … and the remaining things which are explained in order in the same book so that even the little ones can grasp them,” (DGnM, 53, 1991). The visual language of Genesis 1:2 opens the sacred to human understanding.

In a similar way, Augustine is attempting to form and differentiate a *meaning*, an interpretation of the creation story of Genesis, by virtue of the words of Genesis. It is interesting to model Augustine’s behavior on the mythology he delineates: an author or artisan attempts to form a world -- an experience -- using the word of God. Eliade writes that the “rituals and symbolisms of passage, we must add, express a particular conception of human existence: when brought to birth, man is not yet completed,” (Eliade, 181, 1957). Augustine’s interpretation of the second verse of Genesis can be read as a passage, from the primordial and unformed state of the world (in the story), of the story (in the world²), of the meaning (which Augustine intends), into the differentiated world of form. When brought to birth, in our Eliadean reading of Augustine’s interpretation, the world was not completed, and was tended over the six days of creation as a father tends to a child as they grow. Augustine’s account of the prophetic symbolism of the six days of creation (cf. DGnM, 83-8, 1991) uses a similar symbolic system, but that is beyond the reach of our current discussion. “Every human experience is capable of being transfigured, lived on a different, a transhuman plane,” Eliade writes, but in our reading of Augustine, the opposite is also true: the world of text and form -- the transhuman plane -- *informs* the manner in which Augustine defends his text and his sacred world (Eliade, 171, 1957).

**Genesis 1:3**

“This then God said, ‘Let there be light,’; and there was light,” (Gen. 1:3, NSRV, 1991). The Manichaean interlocutor would object to this by saying that, therefore, God had been basking in darkness before the creation of light. To counter this objection, Augustine denies that darkness has a “positive reality” (Teske, 54, 1991). “The very absence of light is called darkness. So too, silence is not some reality, but silence is said to be where there is no sound.... So darkness is not something, but darkness is said to be where there is no light,”

---

² In the world, physically. The paper and ink copy of Genesis before us. We’re only a verse in and have spoken only in abstraction -- no mythology -- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” is meaningless in isolation. So paradoxically, there is form, there is content (the very words), but they are unformed and their content invisible.
and thus we see the power of words to create something out of nothing: reification. Darkness is the profane for Augustine, along with all other nonrealities which do not partake in God, “for it is” as Eliade writes “the sacred that is pre-eminently the real. Whatever belongs to the sphere of the profane does not participate in being, for the profane was not ontologically established by myth,” (and we note: nowhere in Genesis does God say “Let there be darkness”; he divides the Light from the Darkness and calls the Darkness Night (Genesis 1:4-5))(Eliade, 95-6, 1957). Darkness “has no perfect model,” (Eliade, 96, 1957). Therefore, it is no surprise that Augustine calls such mythology that makes a positive reality of darkness (Manichaean dualism), “nonsense” -- it literally makes no sense, because only the real could be sensed. “They say this as if darkness was something, but, as we said, the absence of light bears this name. They were deceived by their myths and believe that there is a nation of darkness… but as silence is nothing, so darkness is nothing,” (DnGnM, 55, 1991).

**Conclusion**

Augustine’s account of the first three verses of *Genesis* can be read as hierophany on multiple levels. According to his metaphysics, any reader will have the requisite inner light to find the meaning he has found in the text, and thereby, the attempt to render that meaning is Augustine’s attempt at the manifestation of the sacred. Augustine’s account of the content of Genesis 1:1-1:3 constitutes a hierophany in its manifestation of sacred space (Creation). We have modeled Augustine’s hierophanic rendering of the meaning of Genesis 1:1-1:3 on the mythological model provided by those very verses to show that, on some level, Augustine succeeds in rendering the revelation of the text in defense of some miscellaneous “Manichaean” objections. The reader for whom Augustine’s hierophanies are “experiences and not simply ideas” is in a different “existential situation” than the reader for whom they are mere words; the very fact that Augustine is able to create meaning on the model of the Genesis mythology would itself be an experience for Homo religiosus that speaks to the sacred, transhuman dimension of Augustine’s work and account of Creation (Eliade, 166, 1957).
References

Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods,  

