

Augustine's Case for the Multiplicity of Meanings

To begin with a rough generalization, one of the deep-rooted assumptions in various modern historical-critical methodologies has been that scriptural texts have one, true, and stable meaning, and that this one, true, and stable meaning is what a (human) author intended and how the “original” readers/hearers understood it.¹ This particular philosophy of meaning has determined how “proper” exegesis as *Wissenschaft* is supposed to look like. For example, in their highly-praised commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Davies and Allison say on Matt. 7:25:

According to Augustine (*dom. mon.* 2.24.87),² the storm that strikes the house built upon the rock stands for calamities and afflictions of everyday life. Indeed, carried away by allegorical fancy, he equates rain with “gloomy superstition,” rivers with “carnal lusts,” and winds with “rumors.” But we may well doubt whether 7:25 was 1) intended by Jesus or 2) understood by Matthew to depict the harsh vicissitudes of normal human existence.³

Why then did Augustine, in his “allegorical fancy,” suggest other meanings of Matt. 7:25? Can there even be meanings of a text other than the allegedly normative “original” meaning? Should not Scripture, first and foremost, be restricted to a single, normative meaning?⁴

¹ Literature on this topic is enormous. Some more recent acknowledgements and/or defenses of this assumption are: M.C. Moreland, “Historical Criticism: the New Testament,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. S.L. McKenzie, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 400a-408b, esp. 401a; and J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (New York: Paulist, 2009), 66-69, 87-91.

² The correct reference should be *dom. mon.* 2.25.87.

³ W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I – VII*, in *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 721, numbers highlighting the theses are added. Even an Augustinian scholar has recently pronounced that the bishop’s exegesis “is scarcely credible by modern literary (or theological) standards, and the allegorical readings he was so fond of have fallen almost completely out of favor in current Christian biblical interpretation” (J.D. BeDuhn, *Augustine’s Manichean Dilemma, 2: Making a “Catholic” Self, 388-401 C.E.* Divinations: Rereading late Ancient Religion [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013], 72).

⁴ For the sake of fairness, it has to be acknowledged that many biblical scholars, trained in historical-criticism, have modified their understanding of how meaning is constituted. They have also started to appreciate the semantic insights offered by patristic authors. Allison, for example, explicitly admits that after his commentary on Matthew (1988), he “began to read patristic literature” and consequently realized “how unfortunate it is that so many in the guild make so little use of older commentators” (D.C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present*

If one looks at Augustine's exegesis, he/she realizes soon enough that the bishop affirmed the very possibility of multiplicity of meanings⁵ and consequently refused to restrict and commit himself to one, exclusive, "original" meaning of a text.⁶ Although his hermeneutical theory took into consideration both the *uoluntas auctoris* and *sententia* (the interpreter's meaning as distinguished from *sensus*, the author's meaning), for Augustine, these were not the only and not even the most important criteria for determining the meaning(s) of a scriptural text. For several theoretical and theological reasons, which will be discussed below, he asserted that, in Scripture, one found "a vast array of true meanings (*multitudine uerorum intellectuum*)."⁷ For him, polysemy was not a hermeneutical deficiency,⁸ but a providential divine gift.⁹

This article attempts to reconstruct Augustine's case for the multiplicity of meanings.¹⁰ The very description of Augustine's exegetical practice and the (reconstructed) seven reasons for such a practice are taken as his argument for polysemy.

[Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 9 and 117-131). Thus, analyzing particular Matthean periscopes, he provides sections with titles, such as "Detours in the History of Exegesis," or "Opinions from the History of Exegesis." See also D.C. Allison, "Matthew and the History of Its Interpretation," *The Expository Times* 120/1 (2008): 1-7.

⁵ E.g., *conf.* 12.13.16-22.31; *en. Ps.* 118(5).2; *exp. Gal.* 13.6-7; 17.1-2. In *Gn. litt.* 1.20.40, Augustine wrote, "I have, to the best of my ability, winkled out and presented a great variety of possible meanings the words of the book of Genesis (*multipliciter . . . sententias de uerbis*) which have been darkly expressed in order to put us through our paces" (CSEL 28/1:29, trans. Hill, WSA I/13, 187).

⁶ "In discussing obscure matters that are far removed from our eyes and our experience, which are patient of various explanations (*alias atque alias . . . sententias*) that do not contradict the faith we are imbued with, let us never, if we read anything on them in the divine scriptures, throw ourselves head over heels into the headstrong assertion of any one of them (*in nullam earum nos praecipiti adfirmatione ita proiciamus*)" (*Gn. litt.* 1.18.37 [CSEL 28/1:29, trans. Hill, WSA I/13, 185-186; cf. *conf.* 12.25.35). Downing has shown that, in antiquity, there was actually no urge to restrict meaning to something precise and exclusive. Semantic freedom was a universally appreciated "right" (F.G. Downing, "Ambiguity, Ancient Semantics, and Faith," *NTS* 56 [2009]: 139-162, at 145-146, 160).

⁷ *Gn. litt.* 1.21.41 (CSEL 28/1:31, trans. Hill, WSA I/13, 188); cf. *conf.* 12.13.16-22.31; 13.24.36-37; *ep.* 137.3; *exp. Gal.* 13.6-7; 17.1-2.

⁸ The desire for scientific "objectivity" and the fear of the anarchical anything-goes stance caused the hermeneuts of the last centuries (e.g., Dilthey, Hirsch) to strive for a rule-governed interpretative activity which would secure the universally valid single meaning of a text (M. Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church, The Church and Postmodern Culture* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 15, 31-33, 45-50).

⁹ Isabelle Bochet and Goulven Madec, "Pluralité des interprétations scripturaires," in *La doctrine chrétienne/De doctrina Christiana*, BA 11/2 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1997): 558-562, at 560.

¹⁰ According to my knowledge, this topic has not been addressed before in the form of a full-length article or a book.

In addition, since this article operates with the rather contested notion of “meaning,” it has to be clarified that, in late antiquity and shortly before this, one can find deliberations on language and naming,¹¹ but no abstract treatises on meaning.¹² The church fathers did not write any either. Therefore, only by looking at Augustine’s exegesis one can envision what his theory of meaning might have looked like. It has to be admitted, though, that it is impossible to attain over-clarity about what Augustine meant by “meaning,” and how exactly he would have argued his case for the multiplicity of meanings.¹³

Scripture as a linguistic reality

Augustine’s first reason¹⁴ for affirming the multiplicity of meanings emerges from the obvious fact that Scripture exists in human languages. This basic truth implies that everything that is characteristic to language as such applies to Scripture as well.

¹¹ In addition to occasional considerations of meaning in various rhetorical manuals, one should mention Lucretius, *De rerum natura* (Book 5); Apuleius(?), *Peri hermeneias*; Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*; Ammonius, *In Aristotelis de interpretatio*, and Boethius, *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermeneias*.

¹² It could be that Stoics provided more elaborate accounts of meaning, but only fragments of these have survived in later works, such as Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* 8.11-13 (A. Graeser, “The Stoic Theory of Meaning,” in *Stoics*, ed. J.M. Rist [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978]: 77-100). Denotation, image, causal, picture, verification, and use theories of meaning are a modern phenomenon. See *The Theory of Meaning*, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); S.J. Odell, *On the Philosophy of Language* (Wadsworth: Thomson, 2006), 1-148; A.P. Martinich, “Philosophy of Language,” in *Philosophy of Meaning, Knowledge and Value in the Twentieth Century*, ed. J.V. Canfield, Routledge History of Philosophy, vol. 10 (London: Routledge, 1997): 11-38; and M. Richard, “Introduction: Conceptions of Meaning,” in *Meaning*, ed. M. Richard, Blackwell Readings in Philosophy (London: Blackwell, 2003): 1-35. Wittgenstein’s characterization of Augustine’s perception of language as referential (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3d ed. [Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958], par. 1) has proved to be a somewhat reductionist account, and perhaps deliberately so (D.G. Stern, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 72-87.)

¹³ That much seems clear though that, for Augustine, meaning was not an exclusive property of a text. Rather, meanings suggested by a text were constituted in the interpreter’s mind in the act of reading/understanding the given text. He said in *conf.* 13.24.36, “I know that . . . the mind can give a multiplicity of meanings to something which, at the physical level, is a single thing (*noui . . . et multipliciter mente intellegi, quod uno modo per corpus significatur*)” (CCL 27:263, trans. Chadwick [Oxford, 1991], 295). “That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well” (H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall [New York: Crossroad, 1989, reprint, New York: Continuum, 1995], 296).

¹⁴ Not his primary reason, but first in the reconstructed list of reasons as the most general one.

Augustine had learned that “every word is ambiguous (*ambiguum esse omne uerbum*).”¹⁵ Unlike the ancient rhetoricians, however, and while Augustine was talking about scriptural exegesis, he did not have intentional ambivalence (*uoluntas*) in mind, but rather the ambiguity created by natural linguistic properties (*scriptum*).¹⁶ Ambiguity from *scriptum*, in turn, could be lexical or syntactic, but it surely generated polysemy and sometimes obvious misinterpretations as well.

One of the examples of ambiguity, which Augustine used in *De doctrina Christiana*, is Phil. 1:23. This passage can be translated as “having a desire in two directions (*ex duobus concupiscentiam habens*)” or “I am torn in two directions (*compellor autem ex duobus*).”¹⁷ The ambiguity of the Greek phrase allowed different interpretations, neither of which was “at odds with the faith.”¹⁸ True, the immediate literary context made the choice quite clear for Augustine, yet ambiguity coming from *scriptum* had indeed created the possibility of alternative readings and meanings.

Another characteristic of linguistic statements, which facilitates polysemy, is that utterances can be obscure. Augustine contended that “some words of Scripture by their very obscurity (*obscuritate*) give rise to a variety of interpretations (*multas intelligentias pepererunt*).”¹⁹ Again, “I understand you to grant us the capacity and ability to articulate in many

¹⁵ Chrysippus, cited in *dial.* 9 (Aulus Gellius 11.12.1) (*Augustine: De dialectica*, ed. and trans. B. Darrell Jackson, Synthese Historical Library 16 [Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1975], 106-107). For the philosophical background of Augustine’s deliberations, see C. Atherton, *The Stoics on Ambiguity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 7.9.1; Augustine, *dial.* 8-10; *doctr. chr.* 2.6.7-8; 3.1.1-3.37.56 and an analysis in T. Toom, “Augustine on Ambiguity,” *AugStud* 38, no. 2 (2008): 407-433.

¹⁶ K. Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception*, in *Yale Studies in Hermeneutics* (New Haven, 1997), 56-57.

¹⁷ *Doctr. chr.* 3.2.6 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], 134-135).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *En. Ps.* 18(2).4 (CCL 38:108, trans. Boulding, WSA III/15, 208). In *en. Ps.* 74.12, Augustine preaches, “The obscurity of Scripture is such that a passage scarcely ever yields a single meaning only (*sic se habet obscuritas scripturarum: difficile est ut unum pariant intellectum*)” (CCL 39:1033, trans. Boulding, WSA III/18, 50) and, in *ep.*

ways (*multis modis*) what we hold to be a single concept, and to give a plurality of meanings to a single obscure expression in a text we have read (*et multis modis intellegere, quod obscure uno modo enuntiatum legerimus*).²⁰ In *De ciuitate Dei* [ciu.] 11.19, Augustine reiterates:

The obscurity (*obscuritas*) of the divine word is beneficial in this respect: that it causes many views (*plures sententias*) of the truth to appear and to be brought into the light of knowledge, as one reader understands a passage in one way and another in another. Any interpretation of an obscure passage should, however, be confirmed by the testimony of the manifest facts or by passages where the meaning is not in the least open to doubt. In this way we shall, by investigation of several views, either arrive at the meaning intended by whoever wrote the passage, or, failing this, the examination of a profoundly obscure passage will lead to the statement of a number of other truths (*sed ex occasione tractandae profundae obscuritatis alia quaedam uera dicantur*).²¹

Ambiguity and obscurity of linguistic statements can never be completely eliminated. Utterances just do not have tightly determined meanings which would successfully prevent all kind of uncertainties.²² There will always remain a leeway for the existence of alternative meanings.

Scripture as a system of signs

In addition to the first general reason for polysemy, Augustine provides another theoretical justification of plurisignification with his semiotic analysis in the first three books of *De doctrina Christiana*.²³

82.34, he writes, “One commentator can explain the same passage in different ways (*aliter atque aliter*) in accord with the same faith because the obscurity of the texts allows this (*quia hoc eius obscuritas patitur*)” (CSEL 38:386, trans. Teske, Letters, WSA II/1, 333).

²⁰ *Conf.* 13.24.37 (CCL 27:264, trans. Chadwick [Oxford, 1991], 296).

²¹ CCL 48:337-338, trans. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998), 472-473; cf. *conf.* 12.22.31.

²² This is amply demonstrated by Augustine’s clarifications of his own corrective statements in *Retractationes*.

²³ B.D. Jackson, “Semantics and Hermeneutics in Saint Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967, 87-193; K. Kahnert, *Entmachtung der Zeichen? Augustin über Sprache*, in

A particular element in Augustine's *scientia signorum*, which is relevant for showing how multiplicity of meanings come about, is his discussion of the second-level signification.²⁴ Words as signs (*signa*) point to realities (*res*). Or, said in a semiotic discourse, signs which consist of linguistic signifiers and their conceptual signifieds, designate the referents.²⁵ However, the *res*, the referents, can also take on a further function of signifying in which they themselves become *signa*² (*doctr. chr.* 2.10.15; cf. Heb. 8:5). Augustine offered an example of how the word "ox" could be used for an animal, which in turn could stand for an evangelist. While the first referent is provided by a conventional code of a natural language, the second must be provided by a system different from the given language, or by employing a larger system of denotation. Such *res*-turned-into-*signum*, or *res*², is called *res significans*,²⁶ or *figura*,²⁷ and it inaugurates a virtually endless chain of significations.²⁸ Augustine pointed out that, in Scripture, both *res* and *uerba* signify more than one idea or meaning (e.g., *cons. eu.* 2.72; *doctr. Chr.* 3.26.37-3.27.38).

Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie, vol. 29 (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 2000), 85-114; G. Manetti, *Theories of Sign in Classical Antiquity*, trans. C. Richardson, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 157-168; and K. Pollmann, *Doctrina Christiana: Untersuchungen zu den Anfängen der christlichen Hermeneutik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Augustinus*, 'De doctrina christiana,' in *Paradosis: Beiträge zur Geschichte der althristlichen Literatur und Theologie*, vol. 41 (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1996), 147-196.

²⁴ Cary has shown that while Greeks had a vocabulary to differentiate between semiotics and semantics, Latin-speaking authors employed the word *signum* for both. Consequently, the blurring of semiotics (inference) and semantics (meaning) came really easy to Latin speakers, including Augustine (P. Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 19 and 70).

²⁵ S. Witting, "A Theory of Multiple Meanings," *Semeia* 7 (1977): 75-103.

²⁶ *Doctr. chr.* 3.9.13 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 146). For the relation between *res significans* and Christology, see M. Cameron, "The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. P. Bright. *The Bible Through the Ages*, vol. 2 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999): 74-103, at 90-92.

²⁷ R.W. Bernard, "The Rhetoric of God in the Figurative Exegesis of Augustine," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. M.S. Burrows and P. Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991): 88-99.

²⁸ When Morgan and Barton assert that "a Bible that can mean anything means nothing" (R. Morgan and J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], 13), they are not thereby denying the multiplicity of meanings, but indicate quite rightly that true meanings have their limits. Vanhoozer seconds, "'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 1:28) is hardly a mandate for hermeneutical license" (K.J. Vanhoozer, "Four Theological Faces of Biblical Interpretation," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, ed. A.K.M. Adam et al. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 132; cf. *conf.* 13.24.37; *Gn. adu. Man.* 1.19.30), because not all multiplication of meaning proves fruitful. Therefore, an important caveat: Augustine postulated carefully a set of hermeneutical controls, such as *regula dilectionis* and *regula fidei*, which helped to avoid total semantic relativity. Despite allowing various interpretations, he could also say, "No, this is not the right

Scripture and reuse of texts

The third reason among the more general reasons for polysemy concerns the diachronic aspect of semantics. Meanings multiply in time as texts are used for other purposes than they were originally intended. For example, the originally non- or pre-Christian texts (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures²⁹) were used for Christian purposes. In addition, modern form and source critics distinguish between the earlier strata of textual units, which are incorporated by an author or a redactor to the given text and additionally, in the case of Scripture, are included to a collection of texts (i.e., to the canon). All this alters, at least to some extent, the meaning(s) of texts, minimizes the importance of authorial intention, and relativizes the notion of the “original” meaning of these texts.³⁰

Augustine certainly realized that one and the same text could function in various contexts and times independently from its original purpose and authorial intention. Although knowing all too well that the Books of Psalms was a literature of ancient Israelites, he asserted confidently, “This psalm . . . is not concerned with Israelites.”³¹ By saying so, he was not trying to agitate the Jews. Rather, he was concerned with the Psalms’ continuously edifying use for his Christian congregants.³²

interpretation” (*en. Ps.* 68[2].14 [CCL 39: 927; trans. Boulding, WSA III/17, 396]; cf. *c. ep. Man.* 6; *Gn. adu. Man.* 2.7.8; *Io. eu. tr.* 18.1; *util. cred.* 14.31).

²⁹ “A delicate balance between the elements of continuity and discontinuity” of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Old Testament, including the issues of texts, their scope, and order, are discussed in a chapter “The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Bible” in B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979): 659-671.

³⁰ “Texts . . . have been used and reused many times, and the attempt to fix an ‘original’ meaning is more or less bound to fail” (J. Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* [Louisville: John Knox, 2007], 79).

³¹ *En. Ps.* 70(1).2 (CCL 39: 942, trans. Boulding, WSA III/17, 415).

³² For a closer analysis of the Christian use of Psalms, see M. Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis*, in *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 169-186.

Augustine learned about the reuse of texts from Scripture itself.³³ Most significantly, the New Testament continued the tradition of reusing Old Testament texts in a new context as well as interpreting them from a new perspective. A particularly clear case is Paul's reuse of the exodus tradition in 1 Cor. 10:1-11 (e.g., *en. Ps.* 143.1). Then, in *De utilitate credendi* (*util. cred.*) 3.8, Augustine considered Matt. 12:39-40 (the sign of prophet Jonah), 1 Cor. 10:1-11 (Christ as the spiritual rock), and Gal. 4:22-26 (Abraham's two wives) as the biblical examples of reusing texts/events in a figurative sense. In *en. Ps.* 33(1).3, he likewise mentioned manna as a figure of spiritual food (1 Cor. 10:3), the parting of the sea as the figure of baptism (1 Cor. 10:1-2), the rock as the figure of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4), and Abraham's two sons as the figures of the two covenants (Gal. 4:24). That's how Apostle Paul re-read Scripture (i.e., the Old Testament); that's the apostle after whom Origen patterned his exegesis,³⁴ from whom Ambrose, in turn, adopted it, and finally, from whom Augustine learned it.³⁵ This was the holy "exegetical succession."

The fact that texts are constantly reused in new contexts shows, among other things, that their meaning is in no way frozen to their original *Sitz im Leben*. An appreciation of this fact, in turn, has led contemporary hermeneuts to speak about the "semantic autonomy of texts"³⁶ and

³³ Within the Old Testament, texts were re-used in new contexts and in this process, they gained new meanings. The so-called royal Psalms came to mean something different (i.e., the expected Messiah) after monarchy was abolished in 586 BC. The prophet Isaiah investigated what the exodus account from Egypt might have meant for those who returned from the exile in Babylon (Isa. 48). See M. Fishbane, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Interpretation: Volume 1: From the Beginning to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 33-48; E. Menn, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis in the Tanak," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation. Volume I: The Ancient Period*, ed. A.J. Hauser and D.F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 55-79; G. Stemberger, "From Inner-Biblical Interpretation to Rabbinic Exegesis," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to 600*, ed. J.C. Paget and J. Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 190-217.

³⁴ For Origen's appeal to Apostle Paul's example, see P.W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: Contours of the Exegetical Life*, in *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83-86.

³⁵ *Conf.* 5.13.23-24; Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*, 23-29. For a qualification, see G. Wills, *Augustine's Confessions: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 55-57.

³⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 32. By "autonomy," Ricoeur does not mean any kind of "total independence" where the author plays no role at all.

the phenomenon of “iterability.”³⁷ In addition, audiences of texts are indeterminate or universalized.³⁸ The author has no control over who reads his/her text. Potentially anyone can interpret it. “Texts . . . have no rights . . . They can be used in whatever way readers or interpreters choose.”³⁹ In other words, a text has to be rendered usable in other situations than the original historical circumstances, the authorial intention, and the understanding of the immediate audience. “The text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of situational reference,” writes Ricoeur.⁴⁰ And this certainly increases the possibility of multiple meanings of a text.⁴¹ It should be added, though, that diachronically constituted meanings do not erase the “original” meaning, but rather reveal its further significance.⁴² In *Contra Faustum Manicheum* (c. *Faust.*) 18.4, Augustine mentioned the Old Testament laws, and in *en. Ps.* 113(1).1, the Psalms, and then contended that the true signification of both were “manifested at the end of times.”⁴³

³⁷ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 315–316.

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 31; *Ibid.*, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. J.B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 139.

³⁹ Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 7.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 36. Gadamer, too, contends that meaning “does not depend on the contingences of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them . . .” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296).

⁴¹ The “opportunity for multiple readings is the dialectical counterpart of the semantic autonomy of the text” (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 32). For comparison, it is an undeniable fact of life that there are no absolutely identical performances of a musical piece, although the given piece is usually recognizable—unless it is the US National Anthem sung by some contemporary artists before a football game. A music score is normative not in the sense that it prohibits various interpretations, but rather in the sense that it secures the sameness of the piece. “However much it [i.e., a composition] is transformed and distorted in being presented, it still remains itself” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 122; cf. Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?*, 102-105).

⁴² Leithart offers a neat and clear example. At 10.00am, an assassin shoots a gun and hits his target. At 1.00pm, the victim dies at hospital. The meaning of the past event changed from 10.00am to 1.00pm, from a mere shooting to a murder. That is, the former event is brought into relation with a subsequent event and it acquires further, even a new significance (P.J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009], 41-43).

⁴³ CCL 40:1635; trans. Boulding, WSA III/19, 304-305.

The first three general reasons for polysemy alone suffice to demonstrate that texts can and do have many true meanings.⁴⁴ To reiterate, Scripture as a linguistic entity is inevitably ambiguous and obscure and as such, its meanings cannot be strictly determined. Second, semiotic processes open up the possibility of semantic pluralism. Third, texts function meaningfully in different contexts and for different purposes. All these reasons suggest that the phenomenon of multiplicity of meanings is a consequence of linguistic, semiotic, and semantic features of texts.

However, Augustine's thoughts hardly ever moved in a theology-free zone.⁴⁵ In the case of the art of interpretation, Augustine's theological justifications were intimately linked to his doctrine of Scripture.⁴⁶ After all, it is a truism that what Scripture is believed to be inevitably determines the way it is approached and interpreted. Accordingly, Augustine's perception of Scripture as *uerbum* or *sermo Dei* (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13) had its important hermeneutical implications.

Scripture and the double intentionality

The first reason for polysemy which grows out of Augustine's doctrine of Scripture is that Scripture is a double-authored text and consequently, there are two authorial intentions that

⁴⁴ For example, in *conf.* 12.20.29 and 12.21.30, Augustine lists five possible (true) meanings of Gen. 1:1 and 1:2, and then contends in 12.30.41 that texts indeed contain a diversity of true meanings.

⁴⁵ Fowl assesses, "For the most part, the various interpretative practices common in the pre-modern period arise from Christian theological convictions" (S. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* [Eugene: Cascade, 2009], 16).

⁴⁶ Bochet has pointed out the relative lack of studies on Augustine's concept of Scripture and then provides one of her own (I. Bochet, "*Le firmament de l'Écriture*": *l'herméneutique augustinienne*, in *Collection des études augustinienes*, Série Antiquité 172 [Paris: Institut d'études augustinienes, 2004], 11-12, 33-53). See also P. Bright, "St. Augustine," in *Christian Theologies of the Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. J.S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 39-59; A.D.R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 39-74; and T. Toom, "Augustine and Scripture," in *Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. C.C. Pecknold and T. Toom (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2013): 75-90.

need to be considered, the divine and the human.⁴⁷ For exegetes of the Word of God, the divine intention matters more than the human intention. *Signa divinitus data* matter more than *signa data*.⁴⁸ Augustine explicitly asserted, “True God-fearers are conscientious about seeking God’s will (or intention) (*deum uoluntatem*) in Scripture.”⁴⁹

To make his case, in *c. Faust.* 22.83, Augustine appealed to a scriptural example.⁵⁰ Caiaphas, with his “harmful and pernicious intention” suggested that it was better for one man to die than the whole people perish (John 11:50).⁵¹ However, the evangelist clarified, “He said this not of his own, but being the high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for his people” (John 11:51). There is an utterance itself and God’s use of that utterance. Put differently, we have an utterance according to human authorial intention, which is then employed (or, reused) by the evangelist who communicates the alleged divine intention of these very same words. So, in case a human authorial intention can be figured out and yet meanings are discerned, which do not match with it, these additional meanings may still be true and legitimate. They are true and legitimate when they are compatible with the *regula fidei*, *regula dilectionis*, and with the other passages in Scripture.

Another classic although non-scriptural case where the alleged divine intention overruled the human intention was the famous words *tolle, lege* in *conf.* 8.12.29.⁵² This time, the interpreter

⁴⁷ A more thorough assessment of the issue of double intentionality can be found in T. Toom, “Was Augustine an Intentionalist? Authorial Intention in Augustine’s Hermeneutics,” *SP* 70/18 (2013): 185-193. The double intentionality comes into play in addition to the fact that there can also be a plurality of communicative intentions (e.g., *Gn. litt.* 1.19.38) and at times, authorial intention just cannot be figured out (*conf.* 12.24.33; *mag.* 13.42.14-16). However, when authorial intention is not explicitly stated and when contextual clues, such as phrasing (*doctr. chr.* 3.2.2-4.8), intonation (*ciu.* 16.6; *doctr. chr.* 3.3.6), and gesticulation (*en. Ps.* 34[2].11) happen to be unavailable, there are no secret files attached to texts which would inform readers about it.

⁴⁸ *Doctr. chr.* 2.2.3 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 58).

⁴⁹ *Doctr. chr.* 3.1.1 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 132-133); cf. 2.5.6; 2.9.14; *conf.* 12.23.32, 32.43; *en. Ps.* 36(3).2.

⁵⁰ Cameron has drawn my attention to this example in his *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*, 275.

⁵¹ *C. Faust.* 22.83 (CSEL 25/1:686, trans. Teske, WSA I/20, 360).

⁵² CCL 27:131.

Augustine had no idea what the authorial intention of the child who happened to shout these words was. The human authorial intention simply did not govern the meaning of the given utterance in that situation.⁵³ For Augustine, *tolle, lege* meant a divine command to pick up the *Letter to Romans* and read Chapter 13, verses 13-14.

Augustine was quite convinced that the Spirit of God could intend meanings which human authors (if at all known) were not able to intend (*conf.* 12.32.43). Consequently, to follow the “letter” in the sense of being limited to human authorial intention and not to discern the intention of the Spirit, was nothing but a “carnal way” (*carnaliter*) of understanding Scripture.⁵⁴ It was so because what ultimately mattered was what God intended to say to the hearers of the Word at any time and place, rather than what human co-authors wanted to say to their immediate audiences.⁵⁵ True, a skilled exegete was never supposed to neglect the human co-authorial communicative intentions,⁵⁶ but neither was one supposed to be limited to them (*doctr. chr.* 1.36.40).⁵⁷

To reiterate the current point, Augustine’s conviction about the double authorship of and intentionality in Scripture means that he had to allow other meanings of scriptural texts besides the ones intended by their human co-authors.⁵⁸

Scripture and its Christological interpretation

The second and one might add a rather controversial reason for polysemy which grows out of Augustine’s doctrine of Scripture is that the Old Testament has to be read

⁵³ Cf. *ciu.* 11.19 and *Gn. litt.* 1.21.41.

⁵⁴ *Doctr. chr.* 3.5.9 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 140-141).

⁵⁵ For comparison, in Mark 10:2-9, Jesus pointed out the divine intention of the written law of Moses.

⁵⁶ *Conf.* 12.18.27; 12.23.32; 12.25.35; *cons. eu.* 2.12.2; 2.28.67; 2.46.97; *doctr. chr.* 1.36.41; 2.12.18; 3.27.38.

⁵⁷ Allison writes that “those hoping to recover and assent to nothing but the original intentions of Matthew are misguided, for the world in which those intentions were at home has ceased to be: we live in a different time and a different place” (“Matthew and the History of Its Interpretation,” 6).

⁵⁸ Bochet, “*Le firmament de l'Écriture*,” 49-50.

Christologically.⁵⁹ 1 Pet. 1:11 stated the basic Christian conviction that the Holy Writ “was testifying in advance to the sufferings coming to Christ and his subsequent glories.”⁶⁰ Such conviction enabled Christians to use the Hebrew Scriptures as (part of the) Christian Scripture. Christological/figurative interpretation of the Old Testament, however, required the texts to have multiple meanings. After all, only figurative interpretations enabled Augustine to hold a view that almost all the truth of the Gospel could be found in the Old Testament (*c. Adim.* 3.4 [*retr.* 1.22(21)]; *c. Faust.* 12.7).

Augustine famously claimed, “Christ meets and refreshes me everywhere in these books (*Christus mihi ubique illorum librorum . . . occurrit et reficit*)”⁶¹ and mentioned “the resurrection of our Lord” as being the reason why a Christian should seek a spiritual understanding of the Old Testament.⁶² Augustine also contended that Ps. 80:1 testified to “Christ and his church, the total mystery with which all the Scriptures are concerned (*confitetur . . . totum omnium scripturarum mysterium Christum et ecclesiam*).”⁶³

⁵⁹ Fiedrowicz points out that *mysterium Christi* had the *hermeneutische Schlüsselfunktion* for patristic interpreters (M. Fiedrowicz, *Prinzipien der Schriftauslegung in der Alten Kirche* [Bern: Peter Lang, 1998], xi). Gusdorf, in turn, observes that the emergence of Christianity brought about a seismic hermeneutical shift in the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures (G. Gusdorf, *Les origines de l’herméneutique* [Paris: Payot, 1988], 54-56). De Lubac, too, has argued persuasively that figurative (i.e., Christological) interpretation is precisely the way a Christian *should* approach the Old Testament (*The Sources of Revelation*, trans. L. O’Neill [New York: Herder and Herder, 1968], 159-194). Even Fitzmyer, in his defense of the historical-critical method, grants that “what is valid in the patristic interpretation is the continuation of the christological meaning of the OT given by inspired NT writers” (*The Interpretation of Scripture*, 93). Long before the authors, Origen contended that the Good News caused all things to appear as gospel (*Comm. Jo.* 1.18 [SC 120:66, trans. Heine, FC 80, 36], and Augustine seconded, “All of the divine scripture that was written before the Lord’s coming [i.e., the Old Testament] was written to announce that coming” (*cat. rud.* 4.8 [CCL 46:128, trans. Canning, The Augustine Series 5, 70]. Cf. *cons. eu.* 1.1.1).

⁶⁰ Cf. Luke 24:27, 44; Heb. 1:5, 2:5-9.

⁶¹ *C. Faust.* 12.27 (CSEL 25/1:366, trans. Teske, WSA I/20, 143).

⁶² *Doctr. chr.* 3.9.13 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 146-147). Likewise, in *doctr. chr.* 3.22.32, Augustine mentions “the Lord’s coming” (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 164-165), after which much of what the Old Testament speaks about in a literal way, also has the additional figurative; that is, Christological meaning. Again, in *ciu.* 18.28-39, Augustine goes through various Minor Prophets in order to show how these spoke about Jesus Christ. Such passages cannot be dismissed as somewhat strange and unnecessary excursus in the otherwise fascinating diatribe of Augustine, because they are as insightful for Augustine’s Christological approach as is, for example, *Contra Faustum*.

⁶³ *En. Ps.* 79.1 (CCL 39:1111; trans. Boulding, WSA III/18, 141).

Again, it was the New Testament that planted the idea of Christological interpretation into Augustine's mind. Passages such as John 5:46 ("If you believed in Moses, you would believe in me, for he wrote of me") and Luke 24:27 (cf. 24:44) ("Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself") suggested this particular interpretative stance as Jesus' own hermeneutical approach.⁶⁴ Augustine deliberated, "In the prophets he was proclaiming himself, for he is the Word of God, and everything they said was full of the Word of God."⁶⁵ The result was that while Christians were reading the Old Testament, they were not just reading the History of Israel or the Religion in Ancient Palestine,⁶⁶ but a very long first book of the *New Testament*.⁶⁷ So, once again, Augustine was not breaking new ground with his insistence on Christological interpretation. He was merely following the apostolic⁶⁸ and post-apostolic hermeneutical practice.⁶⁹

If this gets into one's head—as it perhaps should for Christians—that the Old Testament is about Christ, he/she operates with a fundamental hermeneutical preunderstanding that determines, to a large extent, his/her interpretation of this sacred collection of texts. Such

⁶⁴ Referred to in *C. Faust.* 4.4, 12.3, 16.1, 22.69.

⁶⁵ *En. Ps.* 142.1 (CCL 40:2060, trans. Boulding, WSA III/20, 344).

⁶⁶ A similar point is made by R.B. Hays, *The Conversation of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 9.

⁶⁷ The title of Chapter Eight in Cameron's *Christ Meets Me Everywhere* is "The Old Testament as the First Book of the New" (251) and, in the third century, Origen claimed that "both [Testaments] are the 'New Testament' for us" (*Hom. Num.* 9.4.2 [SC 415:240, trans. Scheck, ACT [Downers Grove, 2009], 39). Such a claim was and is hermeneutical—the Hebrew Scriptures can be and are, in fact, read as Christian Scripture.

⁶⁸ Apostle Paul used a rhetorical device of *metalepsis* which evoked Christological resonances in the Old Testament texts in addition to their "original" meaning (R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 14-21; and H. Hübner, "Intertextualität—die hermeneutische Strategie des Paulus," *TLZ* 166 [1991]: 881-898, at 886-887).

⁶⁹ Examples can easily be multiplied, but perhaps the first Christian post-canonical text to make the global claim that the whole Old Testament was about Christ was the *Epistle of Barnabas*. The whole Law of Moses was a parable about Christ and his kingdom (6.8-19). The same point was allegedly made in Ariston of Pella's lost *Iasonos kai Papiskou antilogia peri Christou* (Origen, *c. Cels.* 4.52; Eusebius, *HE* 4.6.3). Next, Irenaeus wrote that anyone who read Scripture with attention would find in them a discourse about Christ (*haer.* 4.26.1), and that the words of Moses can be referred to as the words of Christ (4.2.3). The first *testimonia* type of treatises that are known—Cyprian's *Ad Quirinum* and Melito of Sardis' six books (no longer extant)—consisted of Old Testament citations "concerning the Savior and our faith" (Eusebius, *HE* 4.26.13 [GCS, Eusebius Werke 2/1:387; trans. is my own]). Jerome, too, pointed out that Christ was prefigured in the Law and Prophets (*ep.* 53.14). Cassian, in turn, contended that the whole Scripture was written with reference to the incarnation of Christ (*Inc.* 4.7).

preunderstanding, in turn, necessitates the existence of multiple meanings⁷⁰ and the “iterability” of texts, as well as affirms the usefulness of figurative interpretation.

To summarize, seeing Christ everywhere in the Old Testament (*c. Faust.* 12.27) was not an embarrassing blunder of the hermeneutically naïve “primitive” church, but rather a very Christian way of making (Christological) sense of the Old Testament.⁷¹ It’s a consequence of the belief that the “veil” is removed in Christ (2 Cor. 3:14-16; *util. cred.* 3.9), that the Old Testament events are “the shadow of the things to come” (Col. 2:17; *c. Faust.* 6.2, 32.9), and that the New Testament is in the Old Testament “as fruit is in the root (*tamquam fructus in radice*).”⁷²

Scripture and its spiritual utility

The third reason for polysemy which grows out of Augustine’s doctrine of Scripture, is: in order that “all Scripture” might be spiritually “useful” (*ōphelimos, utilis*; 2 Tim. 3:16),⁷³ figurative meanings beyond strictly Christological interpretations should be allowed. It is a troubling question indeed: how can all the accounts of wars, killings, rapes, and murders, which are narrated in the Old Testament, be spiritually useful? Origen had an answer: “The most wonderful thing is that by means of stories of wars and the conquerors and the conquered certain secret truths are revealed to those who are capable of examining these narratives.”⁷⁴ Augustine

⁷⁰ Steinmetz gets at something truly important when he contends that “[o]nly by confessing the multiple senses of the Scripture is it possible for the church to make use of the Hebrew Bible at all” (D. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Ex Auditu* 1 [1985]: 74-82, at 78). Augustine would have concurred; cf. Gusdorf, *Les origines de l’herméneutique*, 56.

⁷¹ Good examples of Augustine’s sophisticated techniques of figurative/Christological interpretation can be found in *s.* 341 (Dolbeau 22), which is about how obscurities can be avoided in Scripture by investigating how it speaks about Christ (i.e., Christ in his divine nature; Christ incarnated, and *totus Christus*), and the prosopological exegesis in *en. Ps.* 37.6, where Christ spoke 1) of himself, or 2) as the representative of human beings, or 3) both together as the head of the church.

⁷² *En. Ps.* 72.1 (CCL 39:986, trans. Boulding, WSA III/17, 470). A rather unique *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) meticulously covers the practice of reinterpreting the Old Testament texts in the entire New Testament.

⁷³ Referred to in *s.* 23.3 and *spec.* 40; cf. Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 17-22.

⁷⁴ Origen, *PArch.* 4.2.8 (H. Gögermanns and H. Karpp, *Origenes: Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, 3d ed. [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992], 724-725; trans. Butterworth [Gloucester, 1973], 284-285).

agreed with Origen about the “usefulness of the divine reading (*utilitatem diuinae lectionis*),”⁷⁵ for precisely figurative interpretation turned the *signa data* of the Old Testament into the “useful signs (*signa utilia*).”⁷⁶ He wrote,

If . . . no other way is available of reaching an understanding of what is written that is religious and worthy of God, except by supposing that it has all been set before us in a figurative sense and in riddles (*figurate atque in aenigmatibus*), we have the authority of apostles (*habentes auctoritatem apostolicam*) for doing this, seeing that they solved so many riddles in the books of the Old Testament in this manner.⁷⁷

Augustine considered scriptural texts as sort of wrapped-up parcels which have “something important concealed inside [them].”⁷⁸ “Think of it in this way: the verses of the psalm which have been proclaimed but not yet expounded are like tightly-wrapped parcels that have been brought along from the divine giver.”⁷⁹ Such perception suited well with a Platonic conviction that sensible reality was an image or sign of the intelligible reality,⁸⁰ as well as with the late antique cultural assumption that language was always invested with a meaning that preceded, went beyond, or even differed from the uttered words themselves.⁸¹ On the other hand, if the legitimacy of figurative reading is denied, then Hebrew Scriptures are vulnerable to being

Clark reiterates that “allegory . . . allows any Biblical text to be brought within the religious experience of the Christian believer” (E. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], 85-86).

⁷⁵ *C. Faust.* 13.18 (CSEL 25/1:401, trans. Teske, WSA I/20, 173).

⁷⁶ *Doctr. chr.* 3.8.12 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 144-145); cf. *conf.* 6.3.6; *en. Ps.* 131.2.

⁷⁷ *Gn. adu. Man.* 2.2.3 (CSEL 91:121, trans. Hill, WSA I/13, 72).

⁷⁸ *En. Ps.* 127.2 (CCL 40:1868, trans. Boulding, WSA III/20, 99); cf. 2 Cor. 4:7.

⁷⁹ *En. Ps.* 147.2 (CCL 40: 2140, trans. Boulding, WSA III/20, 443-444).

⁸⁰ Plato, *Crat.* 422d; cf. Augustine, *mag.* 8.24.150; 10.35.170, 11.36.1; *cat. rud.* 9.13; *doctr. chr.* 1.4.4.

⁸¹ B. Stefaniw, *Mind, Text, and Commentary: Noetic Exegesis in Origen of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, and Evagrius Ponticus*, in *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity 6* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 63-73.

reduced to a historical chronicle, or to an account of ancient faith, and are consequently robbed of their having a spiritual usefulness for Christians of all times.⁸²

Here, too, one should notice that it was the apostle Paul who suggested the continuous spiritual benefit of the Hebrew Scriptures. Does not 1 Cor. 9:9-10 ask, “Is it for the oxen that God cares? Or does he say it altogether for our sake?” Does not Rom. 4:23 say, “These words (i.e., Gen. 15:6) were written not for Abraham’s sake alone, but for our sake too?”⁸³ Such interpretation does not deny that scriptural passages have their “original” meaning. Rather, it suggests that this is not all there is to the given passage and its usefulness.⁸⁴ Augustine deliberated: “All these things are related to David, the David of old. But let us look deeper for the mysteries (*mysteria*) they contain . . . Recall the apostle’s wise saying, *All these things happened to them as examples and were written for our instruction* (1 Cor. 10:11).”⁸⁵

Augustine simply refused to accept the idea that what had been written for past generations had basically nothing to say to Christian readers at any time.⁸⁶ While considering various Old Testament events, he explicitly wondered, “How is it possible that all this had no significance (*unde fieri potest ut non hoc aliquid significaret*) [for us]?”⁸⁷ Or again, speaking about the serpent in Genesis, “The reason all this is written down, after all, is to put us on guard

⁸² Early Christians hardly ever read Scripture outside the context of the divine economy. Origen seriously wondered, “Who would dare to say that what is written ‘by the Word of God’ (Num. 33:2) is of no use and makes no contribution to our salvation, but merely narrates an event that happened?” (*Hom. Num.* 27.2.1 [SC 461:278, trans. Scheck, ACT [Downers Grove, 2009], 170).

⁸³ Augustine cites these passages in various places, including *cat. rud.* 3.6; *c. Faust.* 4.2, 6.2, 12.29, 16.15-17; *en. Ps.* 33(1).3; *util. cred.* 3.8.

⁸⁴ Especially an unfulfilled prophecy was taken as an indicator that a further meaning was intended. For example, Ps. 138:4 says, “May all earth’s kings confess to you, O Lord” and Augustine preaches, “It is plain that these words were not spoken pointlessly; they were prophetic and were uttered only because they were to be proved true in the future” (*en. Ps.* 137.9 [CCL 40:1984, trans. Boulding, WSA III/20, 248]; cf. 77.26 and 78.1).

⁸⁵ *En. Ps.* 143.1 (CCL 40:2073, trans. Boulding, WSA III/20, 360).

⁸⁶ Allison, who was quoted in the beginning of this article, seconds, “I prefer to think that the history of interpretation confronts us with the Spirit’s continuing revelatory activity” (“Matthew and the History of Its Interpretation,” 7).

⁸⁷ *En. Ps.* 33[1].3 (CCL 38:275, trans. Boulding, WSA III/16, 15).

against such things at the present time (*ut iam talia caueamus*).”⁸⁸ The Old Testament did not just tell about past historical events; it also provided the historical groundwork for the “useful” salvation-historical meaning of these events.

The overall point is the following: in order that ancient religious texts might have a continuous spiritual usefulness in the present—either in late antiquity or the 21st century—at times they just have to be read figuratively and their polysemous character has to be acknowledged. Such an understanding comes from deliberate hermeneutics, which operates with explicit criteria (*doctr. chr.* 3.10.14-25.35),⁸⁹ and it cannot be dismissed as mere light-weight homiletics.⁹⁰

Scripture as canonized literature

The fourth reason for polysemy which grows out of Augustine’s doctrine of Scripture is that the *skopos* of Scripture often overrules the “original” meaning of a text. Obviously, all canonical texts have their individual provenance, setting, and the originally intended meaning of their human authors. After all, they are occasional texts. But in time, these very texts were elevated into a new literary-theological context—into the context of the canon. Now, they are canonical texts as well and have additional meanings coming from their new context.⁹¹ Put slightly differently, the canon does not only provide the authoritative texts in their final form, but

⁸⁸ *Gn. adu. Man.* 2.15.22 (CSEL 91:88, trans. Hill, WSA I/13, 86).

⁸⁹ R.J. Teske, “Criteria for Figurative Interpretation,” in *De doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. D.W.H. Arnold and P. Bright, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 9 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995): 109-122.

⁹⁰ Assessing patristic figurative exegesis, which was concerned with relevant theological insights for their times, a contemporary biblical scholar gives a verdict, “That is homiletics, not hermeneutics” (R. Miller, “An Historical Critic’s Response,” in *Syriac and Antiochian Exegesis and Biblical Theology for the 3rd Millennium*, ed. R. Miller, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 6 [Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008], 273-280, at 276).

⁹¹ Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 46-103, and J. Barton, “Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern,” in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H.J. De Jonge (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 199-209. Various authors have defended the idea that the canon functions as God’s ongoing communicative act: e.g., K. Barker, “Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Canonical Hermeneutics: Making Sense of *Sensus Plenior*,” in *JTI* 3/2 (2009): 227-239; and K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 264-265.

also the larger literary-theological context in which a particular book or passage must now be interpreted. The point is that everything in Scripture has to be read as *Scripture*. In Augustine's words, "The marvelous providential plan of the Holy Spirit"⁹² has united texts from different times into a "single utterance of God (*unus sermo Dei*)."⁹³

Augustine recommended reading the whole Scripture and memorizing as much of it as possible (*doctr. chr.* 2.8.12; 9.14). He made it clear that by the phrase "whole Scripture" he meant only "those pronounced canonical" (*quae appellantur canonicae*).⁹⁴ Here is also the reason why Augustine's hermeneutical treatise *De doctrina Christiana* has Book One, which is about the *skopos* of Scripture,⁹⁵ before Books Two and Three, which discuss various types of referential word-signs. After all, already Aristotle had suggested that the whole (*to holon*) had to be given a priority over the part (*to meros*) (*Rhet.* 1.13.18).⁹⁶ Embedded deep in the ancient rhetorical tradition, Augustine likewise deliberated, "What occurs in the psalm as a whole (*in toto cantico*) occurs in its particular pieces and its individual syllables (*in singulis particulis eius*). The same is true of a longer action (*in actio longiore*) in which perhaps that psalm is a part."⁹⁷ Interpreting Scripture with Scripture and all scriptural books in their new canonical context opens up yet another possibility of texts having new/multiple meanings.

⁹² *Mor.* 1.17.30 (CSEL 90:35, trans. Teske, WSA I/19, 45).

⁹³ *En. Ps.* 103[4].1 (CCL 40:1521, trans. Boulding, WSA III/19, 167).

⁹⁴ *Doctr. chr.* 2.8.12 (Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green, 66-67). Augustine provided his list of canonical books in *doctr. chr.* 2.8.13, which is repeated verbatim in Cassiodorus, *Inst.* 1.13.1. While the idea of the canon existed long before, the earliest attested Latin Bible comprising all scriptural books in a single volume (i.e., a pandect Bible) goes back to the mid-sixth century (M.T. Gibson, *The Bible in the Latin West*, in *The Medieval Book*, vol. 1 [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993], 3; P.-M. Bogaert, "The Latin Bible, c. 600 to c. 900," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 69-92; and J.J. Contreni, "The Patristic Legacy to c. 1000," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 505-535, at 507).

⁹⁵ According to Augustine, the overall reference of Scripture, the *skopos*, is the *caritas* of God and neighbor (*doctr. chr.* 1.35.39-40.44, 3.12.20, 15.23, 16.24; *Gn. adu. Man.* 2.23.37).

⁹⁶ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, LCL 193, trans. Freese (Harvard, 1967), 146-147; cf. Tertullian, *adv. Prax.* 20. Eden reiterates that, in antiquity, literary interpreters subordinated "the individual parts of the discourse to the overall plan of the whole" and presupposed "the whole in the disposition of the parts" (Eden, *Hermeneutics*, 30). Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 175 and 291.

⁹⁷ *Conf.* 11.28.38 (CCL 27:214; trans. Chadwick [Oxford, 1991], 243); cf. *ord.* 2.19.51; s. 50.13.

In conclusion, Augustine had several reasons—linguistic, semiotic, semantic, and theological—for affirming the phenomenon of multiple meanings. He definitely did not suffer from polysemiophobia, but neither was he “carried away by allegorical fancy”—to use again the phrase of Davies and Allison of 1988. Augustine acknowledged and accepted multiplicity of meanings for at least the seven reconstructed reasons and, at the same time, employed specific criteria to prevent anything-goes, arbitrary semantic relativity.