

SAINT AUGUSTINE ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

THE story of saint Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (*Acts* 9, 1-19) is too well known to bear repetition here. Hitherto unacknowledged however, is saint Augustine's indebtedness to that particular account for the portrayal of his own conversion in the now-famous garden-scene of the eighth book of his *Confessions* (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 28-29). The title of the present article derives from its argument that there is a discernible dependence of the author of this latter description upon the former account of Paul.

The conversion of Augustine is portrayed as the immediate effect of the divinely directed reading of Paul's *Romans* 13, 13-14 (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29). Taking the resulting importance of this text as a working hypothesis, in a previous article¹ I demonstrated an incredible absence of allusions to the same *Romans* 13, 13-14 in Augustine's numerous writings subsequent to his conversion (in 386 A.D.) and prior to the account of it in his *Confessions* of 397-401. Given Augustine's immense memory, his passionate nature and his fondness for quoting Paul (the works in question contain references to over eight hundred verses from *Romans* alone), then it follows that *Romans* 13, 13-14 had no particular significance for Augustine in the time-period examined, namely between his conversion and the description of it in the *Confessions*. From which it would follow that while there can be no doubting the sincerity of Augustine's conversion, it did *not* take place as a result of the divinely directed reading of *Romans* 13, 13-14 as described in the eighth book of the *Confessions*.

This conclusion is further fortified by a disturbing inconsistency noticed by Merki.² There is a similar episode to the above, earlier in the *Confessions* where Augustine is inflamed with a desire for philosophy by the chance reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*.³ There can be no doubting the factuality of the event, as Augustine refers to it in several works subsequent to the episode itself.⁴ Yet to judge by the accounts in the *Confes-*

1. L. C. Ferrari, 'Paul at the Conversion of Augustine (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29-30),' *Augustinian Studies*, to add details.

2. P. H. Merki, 'Tolle, lege! Interpretation zu Augustinus, (*Confessiones* VIII, 5-12)' *Zeitschrift für die höhere Schule* (München) 13 (1967) 168-183, especially 179-180.

3. *Conf.* III, 4, 7-8.

4. Thus, Augustine refers to the transformation effected by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* in *De beata vita*, 4 and also in *Soliloquia* 1, 10, 17 (both written in 386).

sions, immeasurably more important was the reading of *Romans* 13, 13–14. All the more reason therefore why one would expect this episode to receive attention on many occasions in works subsequent to the event itself.⁵ Augustine's silence in this regard seems highly significant.

This consideration, added to the other evidence in the previous article, inclines me to regard as virtually certain the conclusion that while there can be no doubting Augustine's sincere and profound conversion, in actual fact it did *not* take place as a consequence of the well-known reading of *Romans* 13, 13–14 as described in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. Rather would that conversion-scene have been constructed by the genius of Augustine with a view to maximum dramatic impact upon the reader and also as a fitting climax to one of the most inspiring books of our literary heritage.

However, the demonstrably fictional nature of the reading from *Romans* 13, 13–14 raises the larger question about the factuality of the entire conversion-scene in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. Could not this too have been invented by the genius of Augustine with a view to stirring the minds and hearts of his readers to a greater knowledge and love of God?⁶ By considering quite another aspect of Augustine's indebtedness to Paul, it is my intention to demonstrate yet again that from another viewpoint there is also a strong case for regarding as literary fictions some other elements in the conversion-scene.

To those who are familiar with the works of Augustine, the influence of Paul is too obvious to require labouring here. Further, the presence of Paul becomes particularly powerful with the approach of the conversion-scene in the *Confessions*.⁷ Indeed, so powerful is this presence that one is justified in wondering if it may not extend even further to the actual shaping of the events of the conversion-scene.

For instance, in considering the account which we have of Paul's conversion, there is the fact that, as with Augustine, the account is by the subject of the conversion, namely by Paul himself.⁸ Again, he too, like

5. In the article mentioned in footnote 1, I have argued that the reading from *Rom.* 13, 13–14 in the conversion-scene, is essentially fictional in nature. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that there was really an early stage in Augustine's conversion where he did indeed seize most eagerly upon the writings of Paul. My position is that it is to this earlier experience (and *not* to the taking up of the volume of Paul in the conversion-scene) that Augustine keeps referring (*Conf.* VII, 21, 27; *De beata vita*, 4 and *Contra academicos* 2, 2, 5). Unlike the current interpretation, my explanation also possesses the advantage of being in accord with the sequence of events which intervenes between *Conf.* VII, 21, 27 and VIII, 12, 29.

6. *Conf.* X, 3, 3 to 4, 6.

7. M. Lods, 'La personne du Christ dans la conversion de saint Augustin,' *Recherches Augustiniennes* 11 (1976) 3–34. See especially the section entitled 'Collationnement des citations de Saint Paul.'

8. This is explicit in *Acta* 22, 6–15 and 26, 12–18, while the description in *Acta* 9, 1–18 is in the third person.

Augustine, was converted by a most extraordinary event. Further, when both accounts are compared, certain suspicious similarities immediately emerge. Thus, both men had fallen to the ground immediately prior to the events.⁹ Further, in both cases there were silent witnesses to the conversions.¹⁰ Then again, immediately prior to the supernatural communication in each case, there was an affecting of the eyes—with Paul being blinded and with Augustine weeping copious tears. Next, both men claim to have heard a mysterious voice which was taken to be of divine origin. Paul was called twice by name and asked why he was persecuting Jesus Christ. Augustine however, was not addressed as personally as Paul, so that he wondered at first if he might not be hearing some child chanting. Again, both men had to depart from the place where they had heard the voice and receive final enlightenment in another place—Paul had to go to Damascus and wait upon God's pleasure, while Augustine had to go back to the place where Alypius was sitting in silence in order to consult the book of Paul's writings which he had been commanded to take up and read. Finally, both conversions end with a dramatic transition from darkness to light. Paul receives his sight back again, to which there is also a spiritual significance in that his sight had been restored in order that through him the Gentiles might be turned from darkness to light (*Acts* 26, 17–18). Likewise, the concluding detail of Augustine's description of his own conversion also contains a transition from darkness to light, for immediately after reading *Romans* 13, 13–14, he observes of the effect upon himself:

No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended,—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart,—all the gloom of doubt vanished away (*omnes dubitationis tenebrae diffugerunt*).'' (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29.).

In addition to the above more evident aspects of both conversions, suspicious similarities become evident when the words which Augustine claims to have heard are compared with the first part of Paul's communication. Thus, each communication contains one particular repeated word. Again, when the repeated word in each case is compared with its counterpart in the other communication, a peculiar assonance becomes evident. For purposes of comparison, the two communications may be set out as follows, with appropriate italics added:

9. *Acta* 9, 4: 'Et cadens in terram audivit vocem.' Cf. *Acta* 22, 7 and 26, 14. This detail in the three descriptions is to be compared with the words of Augustine: 'ego sub quadam fici arbore stravi me.' (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 28).

10. The astonished witnesses are present in all three accounts in *Acta*. Likewise, regarding Alypius, immediately prior to the scene under the fig-tree, Augustine observes: 'mansit ergo ille ubi sedebamus nimie stupens.' (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 28).

Paul's account: "Saule, Saule, quare me persequeris?"

Augustine's account: "Tolle lege, tolle lege."

The above considerations would suggest that Augustine's account of his conversion in the *Confessions* is a description which owes much to the account of the conversion of the Apostle Paul, whom he so much loved and admired. Nor is there any reason to doubt that the similarity would have been wasted on the more learned of Augustine's contemporaries. Thus, in several works written even at the same time as the *Confessions*, Augustine alludes to the fact that the details of Paul's conversion were well known to all.¹¹ Further, in an age with more respect for tradition than ours, similarities with the well known and more ancient account of Paul's conversion would have increased, rather than decreased, the appeal of Augustine's own story.¹² In any case, the above similarities suggest yet another means of showing that the description of Augustine's conversion is indebted to the description of Paul's own conversion as set forth in the *Acta Apostolorum*.

Assuming, for the moment, the viewpoint of the "Historicists" in this ancient dispute over the reality of the conversion-scene of the *Confessions*,¹³ then, with every detail of the description being historical fact, Augustine could not but have been profoundly impressed by the incredible similarities already noted, between his own experience and that of Paul. Such being the case, then Augustine must surely have betrayed his awareness of those similarities in the many writings which intervened in the ten years or so from his conversion in 386 until his description of it in the *Confessions*, written in the time-range of 397-401. Consequently, from the point of view of the Historicists, one would expect to find a heightened interest in the conversion of Paul in Augustine's writings from 386 to 396.

On the other hand, assuming the viewpoint of the "Fictionalists" (for whom the conversion-scene is a mere literary fiction), then such evidence would be conspicuous by its absence. In other words, from this viewpoint

11. *Contra epistolam Mani quam vocant fundamenti*, 5, 6; *De actis cum Felice Manichaeo* 1, 1.

12. In our present future-oriented society, it is difficult indeed to appreciate this aspect of Augustine's appeal to the prior experience of Paul. Therefore, due to our cultural bias, it tends to be seen as something which should not be done.

13. Cf. H.-I. Marrou, 'La querelle autour du "Tolle lege",' *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 53 (1958) 47-57. The topic is treated at length in F. Bolgiani, *La conversione di S. Agostino e l'VIII° libro delle "Confessioni"*, (Turin, 1956). See also Solignac's valuable notes (pp. 546-549) in *Les Confessions*, Livres VIII-XIII, in vol. 14 (1962) of the series: *Oeuvres de saint Augustin* published by Etudes Augustiniennes (Paris). See also the observations of the principal author of the controversy in Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (1968), pp. 188-202. For the ingenious arguments of a recent 'Historicist', see: W. Schmidt-Dengler, 'Der rhetorische Aufbau des achten Buches der Konfessionen des heiligen Augustin,' *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 15 (1969) 195-208.

one would expect to find *no* significant interest in Paul's conversion on the part of Augustine over the decade from 386 to 396 inclusive. Or, failing that, one would expect to see a growing interest in the topic as a prospective literary fiction, which interest would find its obvious expression in the conversion-scene of the *Confessions* of 397–401. However, in this event, it would also have to be clearly demonstrated that the growing interest did *not* focus on any event in 386 as its source.

The next question concerns the means of detecting Augustine's interest in Paul's conversion over the above-stated time-span. The first and most obvious method would seem to be merely *quantitative*—by ascertaining when and just how many times Augustine refers to the event in his writings over that period. Secondly, added to this is the *qualitative* approach, which would be concerned with just what kind of interest Augustine displays on the occasion of each reference detected by the previous method. It is hoped that the combination of the two methods would give some reliable criterion of the interest in Paul's conversion on the part of Augustine as manifested by his writings over the period of 386 to 396 inclusive.

These considerations suggest a second aspect to the investigation, which would also be a means of testing the validity of the above approach. It is commonly agreed that the writing of the *Confessions* took place between 397 and 401, inclusive. Using the above methods of detection, it should be possible to demonstrate a heightened interest in the conversion of Paul on the part of Augustine over the same time-period, while writing his *Confessions*. Such a discovery would confirm the validity of the method of inquiry and also constitute positive evidence for the influence of Paul in the portrayal of Augustine's own conversion-scene. Finally, for purposes of comparison, yet a third aspect of the investigation suggests itself. This concerns the interest of Augustine in the conversion of Paul from 402 onwards, which would involve extending the method of inquiry over the works of that third time-period.

To recapitulate then, the first part of the investigation will involve the careful sifting of Augustine's works prior to the *Confessions* with a view to detecting heightened interest in the conversion of Paul. The second part will consist of a similar investigation of the works written in the years from 397–401 inclusive, during the writing of the *Confessions*. The third part of the inquiry will search the writings from 402 onwards. The object of all three searches will be the detecting of elements deriving from the description of Paul's conversion as set out in *Acts* 9, 1–19 (and also *Acts* 22, 4–16 and 26, 9–18). It would be a matter of considerable surprise if Augustine's immense memory, his predilection for quoting Paul and the similarities between both conversions did not provide bountiful material for the investigation. Finally, in addition to the quantitative aspect, all

material detected will be qualitatively appraised to try and detect Augustine's attitude towards the conversion of Paul at the time of mentioning it in his writing. This will involve both the allusion and its context.

Regarding the works of Augustine to be searched, only those will be used of which there is scholarly uniformity about the dates of composition.¹⁴ This qualification would have meant the elimination of most of the sermonal material, were it not for the fact that such material contains an abundance of allusions which merit separate investigation. Accordingly, there will be a subsequent and subsidiary section devoted to Paul's conversion in Augustine's sermonal writings. Finally, an attempt will be made to relate this material to that of the principal part of the investigation. All investigations will be using the texts of the Gaume edition of the *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1836-1839).

(A) *Paul's Conversion in Augustine's Firmly Dated Works:*

In surveying the early works of Augustine, one is struck by the tardy appearance of any references to *Acts*. The first such occasion would seem to be the *De utilitate credendi* of 391/2, which contains a solitary citation.¹⁵ No more quotes are found until the *De fide et symbolo* of 393 with two references.¹⁶ It is not until the *De sermone Domini in monte* in the following year of 394 that citations from *Acts* become fairly regular features of Augustine's earlier writings.

The above findings make an interesting comparison with Augustine's early use of references from Paul's writings. Some half-dozen years before the first quote from *Acts*, Paul is cited in the *De beata vita* of 386 and again in the *De ordine* of the same year.¹⁷ From then on, there are only two early works which lack quotes from Paul.¹⁸ In fact, by the time of the first citation from *Acts*, Augustine had referred to close to one hundred and fifty verses from Paul.

In attempting to understand the above difference in the dates of the first quotes, it is well to bear in mind that Augustine had been a Manichee for some nine years prior to his conversion. While that sect held Paul's writings in the highest regard,¹⁹ we know from Augustine himself that

14. Works are dated from the chronological tables in Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo; A Biography* (University of California Press, 1969).

15. *De utilitate credendi*, 7, where a reference is made to *Acta* 2, 2-4.

16. *Op. cit.*, 8, 15 and 9, 19.

17. *De beata vita*, 34 (where Augustine quotes from *I Cor.* 1, 24) and *De ordine* 1, 32 (referring to *Col.* 2, 8).

18. The *Contra academicos* of 386 and the *De immortalitate animae* of 387.

19. The Manichean manuscripts discovered in the present century offer bountiful evidence of the reverence accorded to Paul through the large number of invocations. The subject is also treated in F. Decret, *Aspects du Manichéisme dans l'Afrique romaine; les controverses de Fortunatus, Faustus et Felix avec saint Augustin* (Paris, 1970), especially pp. 151-182. See also W. H. C. Frend's 'The Gnostic-Manichaeic Tradition in Roman North Africa,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 4 (1953) 13-26.

many of the Manichees did not have too favourable an opinion of the *Acts of the Apostles*.²⁰ As a convert with a Manichean background, Augustine may well have continued to remain suspicious of that work, at least for the first few years after his conversion.²¹

Following upon the *De sermone Domini in monte* of 394 which contains some ten references to *Acts*, the *Contra Adimantum* of the same year invokes *Acts* some five times, while (not unexpectedly) the *Psalmus contra partem Donati* of the same year is devoid of such references. Other works continue to make allusions to *Acts* with such regularity that writings up to the end of 395 contain a grand total of about forty references. What is highly significant for present purposes is that *not one* of these concerns the conversion of Paul; a silence which is surely significant.

Turning next to the writings completed in 396, the *De diversis quaestionibus* 83 dates from as early as 388, but according to Augustine (*I Retract.* 26), the scattered sheets were not gathered together and edited until its publication in 396. This work contains some nine references to *Acts*. Of particular importance for the present topic is the fact that one of these concerns the conversion of Paul. Making allowance for the possibility that the allusion may date from any period between 388 and 396 inclusive, the reference itself is of considerable importance for present purposes. It proceeds as follows:

Ergo facere contra legem, hoc est inimicum esse in Deum: non quia Deo aliquis nocere potest, sed sibi nocet quisquis resistit voluntati Dei: hoc est enim adversus stimulum calces mittere, ut Paulo apostolo, cum adhuc Ecclesiam persequeretur, divinitus dictum est. (*Op. cit.*, Q. 66, 6).

This passage becomes most significant when one bears in mind the conversion-scene of the eighth book of the *Confessions* and particularly the *tolle lege* episode. The above cited extract betrays no emotional associations of one who had supposedly undergone a remarkably similar experience to Paul's in the not too distant past. In alluding to Paul's experience, Augustine quite casually reports that Paul was divinely told that he had been kicking against the goad in persecuting God's Church. There is absolutely no excitement about the fact that Paul too had received that communication in a most extraordinary manner which consisted of a divine voice. This is a most incredible omission for the Augustine of the conversion-scene in the *Confessions* and particularly for the Augustine who heard the mysterious voice (which he took to be of heavenly origin) telling him to take up and read: *tolle lege, tolle lege*. Further, the casual

20. *De utilitate credendi*, 7; *Contra Faustum* 32, 16 and *Epistola* 237, 2.

21. One gets the strong feeling that this was so, on the basis of Augustine's own testimony in *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti* 5, 6 and 9, 10. This work dates from 396.

attitude to the divine voice makes an interesting comparison with subsequent allusions hereunder.

Beginning in 396 and extending through the succeeding five years until 401, there is to be found in Augustine's writings a most interesting cluster of references to Paul's conversion. The first work examined; the *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti* of 396 contains an allusion to the story of Paul's conversion as being well known: "In eodem etiam libro [i.e. *Acta Apostolorum*] de vocatione atque apostolatu Pauli vulgatissimam tenemus historiam." (*Op. cit.* V, 6). Again in the same year, at the end of the first book of the *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, the topic of Paul's conversion is adduced as an example of conversion through divine election of the will, which election is not in the power of man to achieve. Further, Augustine describes how Paul was laid low and transformed from a marvellous persecutor of the Church to a more marvellous preacher, by that divine voice calling him but once: "una de super voce prostratus." Likewise in the case of Augustine, due to the mysterious voice he heard while lying on the ground, one can see him too transformed into the marvellous preacher known to posterity.

Yet again in the year 396, another allusion to Paul's conversion is to be found in the prologue to the *De doctrina christiana*. In the fifth paragraph of that prologue, Augustine warns against the presumption of those who despise human means of instruction in God's word and expect rather to be caught up into the third heaven (*cf. II Cor. 12, 2-4*) there to be instructed by Christ himself. Then he proceeds to say of such expectations in the succeeding paragraph:

Caveamus tales tentationes superbissimas et periculosissimas, magisque cogitemus et ipsum apostolum Paulum licet divina et coelesti voce prostratum et instructum, ad hominem tamen missum esse, ut sacramenta perciperet, atque copularetur Ecclesiae.

Again, as with the other preceding allusions, there is the element of being called by a divine voice. In addition, there is the reason for alluding to Paul's conversion, namely the fact that God also uses human agencies to instruct His chosen ones, as in the case of Paul who was sent to Ananias. This brings to mind the detail at the beginning of the eighth book of the *Confessions* where Augustine expresses his conviction that it was God Himself who put the idea in Augustine's head to consult the holy Simplicianus (*Conf. VIII, 1, 1*), through whom the conversion of Augustine was to be brought to its conclusion *ut copularetur Ecclesiae*.

This concludes the first part of the investigation which is concerned with the writings up to and including the year of 396. Only in this last year have significant allusions to Paul's conversion been discovered. Such evidence is most damaging to the position of the Historicists, who could counter with the claim that the tardy appearance of references to *Acts*

helps explain the lack of earlier allusions to Paul's conversion in Augustine's writings. Against this it can be pointed out that with Paul having been so greatly admired by the Manichees, it would have been a matter for some surprise if his conversion was not also common knowledge among members of the sect.²² That such was indeed the case is openly stated by Augustine himself in the beginning pages of two of his anti-Manichean treatises.²³ Furthermore, had Augustine been converted in the manner described in the *Confessions*, then the remarkable similarity of his conversion to that of Paul would no doubt have dramatically overcome any suspicions he may have had, at least about that conversion, so that he would have begun to allude to it early in his writings, and perhaps also to certain other passages from the *Acts*. But since neither of these conditions is fulfilled, all the stronger is the evidence that Paul's conversion was not of personal significance to Augustine prior to 396. These considerations, as well as the negative findings of the previous investigation, would seem sufficient to undermine the position of the Historicists.

On the other hand, and by contrast, highly significant for the Fictionalists is the sudden appearance in 396 of the three allusions to Paul's conversion, each of which features the calling (*vocatus*) aspect of the experience. As subsequent allusions amply demonstrate, these three references are but the forerunners of yet more such allusions in the years immediately following 396, which of course means entering upon the second part of the investigation concerning such allusions in the writings from 397 to 401 inclusive, when Augustine was working on his *Confessions*. In view of this preoccupation, the three references of 396 acquire added significance.

Coming next to the *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* of 397–8, one encounters numerous allusions to the conversion of Paul. In the first of these, Augustine addresses the following amazing charge at Faustus: "Non enim vidisti Christum, aut quemadmodum cum Apostolis, locutus est tecum, aut de coelo te, sicut Saulum vocavit." (*op. cit.*, XVI, 11). With rhetorical finesse however, the charge is modified by the sentence which follows: "Quid de illo sentire, quid credere possumus, nisi quod Scriptura testatur?" (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, here is yet another allusion to Paul having been called by God. Again, further along, this time in the twenty-second book, two more allusions to the same episode are to be found: "Saulum Ecclesiam persequentem, de coelo Deus vocavit, prostravit, erexit, implevit." (*loc. cit.*, 70); and ". . . Christus, qui de coelo Saulum

22. Strong circumstantial evidence for this is the fact that Paul was so much admired by the sect. As one author has put it: 'Paul est devenu un favori de la secte.' See J. Ries, 'La Bible chez saint Augustin et chez les Manichéens,' *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 10 (1964), p. 323. Pp. 322–325 are devoted to the topic of Paul's popularity with the Manicheans.

23. See footnote 11.

vocavit, et ex lupo factum ovem, in medium luporum misit . . ." (*loc. cit.*, 76). Finally, the twenty-eighth book of the same work contains a fourth allusion to the Paul who was called by God: ". . . ipse apostolus Paulus post ascensionem Domini de coelo vocatus . . ." (*loc. cit.*, 4). Added to these instances, there is yet another anti-Manichean treatise of 398 which opens with an allusion to the conversion of Paul. Thus, in the first few paragraphs of the *Contra Felicem Manichaeum* one encounters the following: ". . . et quis postea Domini voce de coelo vocatus sit, hoc est Paulus apostolus, omnes recognoscunt."

In the *Annotationes in Job* of 399, the "Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris?" is cited (in 38) as one of the several examples of God communicating with man. The second book of the *Quaestiones evangeliorum* of 397-400 also features the conversion of Paul, with his having been sent (after having heard the voice of the Lord) to Ananias for instruction and approval of his sincerity (*loc. cit.*, Q. 40). This latter aspect of the allusion also reminds one of the reference already cited from the prologue of the *De doctrina christiana* of 396 with its resulting twofold relation to the *Confessions*. It is also worthy of mention that in the *De catechizandis rudibus* of 399-400 (in ch. 23, 43), the characters of Paul before and after his conversion are contrasted, without the conversion itself being featured.

Again, in the *De consensu evangelistarum* of 400, Augustine points out that though Paul had not been a disciple of Christ's during the latter's lifetime, and had even persecuted the Church, nevertheless Christ subsequently called him from Heaven and made him a disciple of his: ". . . de coelo vocavit, et suum discipulum et apostolum fecit." (*Op. cit.*, I, 10.16). Finally, in the *De baptismo contra Donatistas* of 400-401, Augustine refers to Paul as the former Saul of whom Christ had said: "quid me persequeris?" (*Op. cit.*, V, 11, 29).

With these allusions in the writings of the years 400-401, the subject of Paul's conversion disappears abruptly from Augustine's writings with established dates of composition. It is probably significant also that Augustine studiously ignores the same topic of the conversion when it is twice raised in the taunts of the Donatist Petilianus, about the year 402.²⁴ As far as I have been able to ascertain, the subject of Paul's conversion receives only the rarest of mentions in the rest of the above-mentioned writings. Indeed, in the writings not destined for preaching, there are only about half a dozen references in the space of twenty-eight years, from 402 until Augustine's death in 430.²⁵

24. *Contra litteras Petiliani* 2, 20, 44 and 2, 21, 47.

25. *De Trinitate* 15, 34; *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* 1, 19, 37; *De gratia et libero arbitrio* 5, 12; *De civitate Dei* 17, 9; *Collatio cum Maximino*, 9; *De praedestinatione sanctorum* 2, 4 & *Contra responsionem Juliani* (imperf.) 1, 93.

In summary then, the preceding investigation has been concerned with Augustine's works with established dates of composition, ranging in sequential order from the earliest in 386 to the latest in 430. The works have been sifted for allusions to the conversion of Paul as recorded in *Acts*. With one notable exception, there were found to be absolutely no such allusions in the works dating from 386 until the end of 395. This, it is argued, indicates that the episode was not of particular interest to Augustine prior to 396. Such disinterest would undermine the claims for the historical nature of the events in the conversion-scene of the *Confessions*.

However, in the writings over the next six years, beginning in 396 and concluding with the year 401, there are some thirteen references to the conversion of Paul. Furthermore, what is interesting for present purposes, is that in eleven of these thirteen cases, there is the definite element of voice (*vox*), or of vocation (*vocatio*, *vocare*, *vocatus*), whether in the allusion itself, or in the context. One is reminded of the Augustine of the conversion-scene: "ecce audio vocem de vicina domo" (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29). Considerations will return to the aspect of the voice later on.

Meanwhile, with the virtual disappearance of allusions to Paul's conversion in Augustine's subsequent writings, the above cluster of allusions acquires a prominent significance; being without precedence, and (at least in the present perspective of firmly dated works), without a similar recurrence in his subsequent works.

In identifying this cluster, the investigation thereby also validates in a very positive manner the method which has been employed, since these allusions are distributed over the years from 396 to 401 inclusive, while the *Confessions* dates from 397 to 401. The method has therefore detected a heightened interest by Augustine in Paul's conversion almost precisely (allowance being made for a year of forethought) during the very time that Augustine was working on the *Confessions*.

Next it should be pointed out that the previous investigation has not included the correspondence of Augustine which has come down to us. Interestingly enough (as with the previous works), quotes from *Acts* make a tardy appearance in the letters, when compared with the first quotes from Paul. The first quotes from *Acts* appear in *Epistola* 36 of 396.²⁶ In the subsequent references to *Acts*, the few allusions to Paul's conversion confirm, rather than disturb previous findings. Thus, the first such allusion is found in *Epistola* 55 of about 400, in which letter is found the following rather surprising metaphor:

26. *Op. cit.*, 12, 28.

Qui utique in corpore suo, quod est Ecclesia, adhuc patitur inimicos. Unde illi persecutori quem voce mactavit, et in suum corpus trajiciens quodammodo manducavit, sonuit de coelo: 'Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris?'

²⁷

In subsequent letters, the conversion is mentioned only three times in the period 408 to 412.²⁸ In addition, the subject receives a paragraph of treatment in *Epistola 185*, written about 417, and is merely mentioned in *Epistola 237* of which the date is not known.²⁹ In summary then, the correspondence of Augustine is supportive of the previous findings about the distribution of allusions to Paul's conversion in firmly dated works of Augustine.

*Paul's Conversion in Augustine's Sermonal Works*³⁰

If the previous investigation had been concerned with *all* the extant works of Augustine, then the case could now be closed concerning a significant chronological distribution of such allusions. However, as was mentioned earlier, there still remains the sermonal material containing an abundance of allusions to the conversion of Paul. In regard to this material, it should be observed that these allusions, however abundant, would strengthen rather than threaten the previous findings, provided that it could be proved that *none* of the allusions fell in the 386 to 395 time-period; or if there were the occasional rare allusion there, that it was of such a nature as to belie any special significance imputed to the conversion of Augustine during that important period.

On the other hand, owing to a most incomplete knowledge of the chronology of the great majority of the sermonal material, it becomes impossible to date firmly most of the allusions to Paul's conversion in those writings. Consequently, owing to default of evidence, it is impossible to demonstrate that all, or even most, of the allusions in the sermonal material conform to the chronological distribution revealed by the previous investigation.

Failing this, a more realistic challenge to the previous findings would be to see if any of the allusions in the sermonal writings can be firmly dated and then to see if any of these allusions fall in the critical period of 386 to 395 inclusive. In addition, if such allusions also display a heightened interest by Augustine in Paul's conversion, then both their frequency of chronological distribution in that time-period and their tone (if en-

27. *Op. cit.*, 17, 31. Cf.: *De doctrina christiana* 2, 6, 7. See also my article, 'The Gustatory Augustin,' *Augustiniana* 29 (1979) 304-315.

28. *Ep.* 93, 5 (of 408); *Ep.* 120, 2, 9 (410-411) and *Ep.* 140, 18 (412).

29. *Ep.* 185, 22 and *Ep.* 237, 6.

30. The title 'sermonal works' refers to those works destined for preaching (whether actually delivered, or not), as to also the records of the *notarius* in the congregation. The largest collections of such works are the *Enarrationes in psalmos* and the *Sermones* themselves.

thusiastic) could constitute a challenge to the previously found pattern of distribution of such allusions.

However, before embarking on the above investigation, it would be advisable to consider the prominent general question about the conspicuous presence of those allusions in the sermonal material where they are about *six times* as frequently encountered as in the previously considered material.³¹ This relative abundance would certainly seem to indicate the covert influence of powerful factors making for the inequality of distribution. As to the identity of these factors, a relevant consideration would seem to be the bald question of why the conversion of Paul commended itself six times more frequently to Augustine the preacher than to Augustine the writer of religious treatises.

Having made this distinction of the two aspects of Augustine, the first thing to come to mind about the conversion of Paul, is that *per se* it would *not* be expected to be a popular ingredient of sermons to a faithful congregation when it would seem to be literally a matter of preaching to the converted. However, as will be seen, Paul's conversion often commended itself to Augustine for another reason; namely that it was a dramatic illustration of the unity of the Body of the Church. Christ, as Head of that Church, was chastising Saul for his persecutions of the earthly members of that same holy Body. Yet, of itself alone, this reason does not manifestly explain why Paul's conversion was so much more popular in the sermonal setting than in the context of the writing of religious treatises.

A more convincing reason would seem to derive from the widespread popularity of the *Confessions*,³² together with its most unforgettable climax of the conversion-scene. As a result of both factors, from about 401 onwards, Augustine stood before his audiences as a living example of God's transforming grace.³³ Further, by reason of the conversion-scene with its implicit assimilation of his own conversion to that of Paul some few centuries previously, Augustine identified himself with the new tradition of miraculous conversions, stemming ultimately from the same supernatural source of Pentecost. Consequently, God's transforming grace, which would have otherwise remained in the realm of abstract doctrine for Augustine's audiences, was skilfully transformed by the holy author of the *Confessions* into convincing concrete reality.

31. On a rough estimate, there are about seventy references to Paul's conversion in the sermonal works as a whole, as against about two dozen references in all Augustine's other works, which are about twice as voluminous as the former. By elementary proportion, this means that the references in the sermonal works are about six times as frequent as those in the other works.

32. *Retractiones* 2, 6, 1: 'Multis tamen fratribus eos (i.e. the *Confessiones*) multum placuisse et placere scio.'

33. As Augustine says, when addressing God, after completing the autobiographical section of the *Confessions*: 'Bona mea instituta tua sunt et dona tua, mala mea delicta mea sunt et iudicia tua.' (*Conf.* X, 4, 5).

Turning next to the chronology of the sermonal material, as has already been remarked there is the handicap that most of the allusions to Paul's conversion simply cannot be dated with any accuracy. Furthermore, even in cases where dates have been advanced, there is the discomfiting phenomenon of frequent diversity of opinions which leave one with widely divergent choices, whence the importance of establishing criteria for regarding sermons as firmly dated, or not. In this regard, minimal requirement would seem to be coincident dates by two independent investigators, together with *no* other divergent opinion, or opinions. On the other hand, one would need almost universal unanimity before being able to regard any sermon as firmly dated. Failing this however, to the extent that the number of independent coincident findings exceeds two, together with *no* dissident opinions, then to that extent can the sermons in question be regarded as being more firmly dated.

Regarding the sermonal material itself, the *Enarrationes in psalmos* can be treated first, since they are minimally informative about Augustine's early interest in Paul's conversion. The reason for this is that it is far from clear just when Augustine began working on these commentaries. Two possible dates are both beyond the time-interval of present interest.³⁴ On the other hand, a third option would situate the commencement quite early in Augustine's ecclesiastical career, to the extent that he would have completed the commentaries on the first thirty-two psalms by the year 392.³⁵ This possibility could be quite supportive of the present hypothesis, if it again reflected an early indifference by Augustine to Paul's conversion. This is found to be so. The *Enarrationes* on the first thirty-two psalms are quite devoid of allusions,³⁶ while the commentaries on the remaining one hundred seventeen psalms, with a total of thirty-three allusions, average out to about one allusion for every four psalms. The commentaries on the first thirty-two psalms are therefore singularly anomalous. On the other hand, such an amazing absence of allusions becomes understandable in the context of the present hypothesis, if it be conceded that Augustine did begin his *Enarrationes* early in his ecclesiastical career and if he did indeed proceed in the same order as the psalms themselves. The absence of allusions in the commentaries on the first thirty-one psalms then becomes quite understandable. These commentaries were written before he came to composing the *Confessions* which involved his first prolonged preoccupation with the phenomenon of

34. See *Ep.* 72, 3, 5 (403-404) and *Ep.* 169, 1 (415-417).

35. H. Rondet, 'Essais sur la chronologie des *Enarrationes in psalmos*' de saint Augustin,' *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 61 (1960) 111-127; 258-286.

36. The first allusion to Paul's conversion in the *Enarrationes* is to be found in the second *enarratio* on psalm 32 which (unlike the first *enarratio*) dates from 403. See Rondet, *art. cit.*, footnote 35.

Paul's conversion; a phenomenon which had previously not been of particular interest to Augustine.

Turning next to the common characteristics of those allusions in the *Enarrationes*, it is noteworthy that about three-quarters of them contain what can be called the *caput-membra* metaphor. Christ, as head (*caput*) of the Body of the Church, spoke from Heaven in reproaching Saul for persecuting the earthly members of that same spiritual Body.³⁷ While this metaphor is not confined to the allusions in the *Enarrationes*,³⁸ its relative abundance there does raise the question of some covert cause at work. In seeking to identify that cause, one is reminded of the passionate presence of the psalms during the early days of Augustine's conversion.³⁹ Along with their manifest importance on that occasion, there is also the significant penchant of Augustine to depict the process of conversion in terms of ingestion, with the convert (like nourishment) being finally absorbed into the Body of the Church.⁴⁰ These factors would seem relevant to an explanation of the popularity of the *caput-membra* in the allusions to Paul's conversion in the *Enarrationes*.

Regarding the remainder of the sermonal material, there are two works which can be dismissed here, since they do not pose questions of chronology, nor are they of critical importance to the present study, being situated outside the period of 386 to 401. The two works in question are the *Tractatus in epistolam Johannis ad Parthos* (407–408) and the *Tractatus in Johannis evangelium* (407–417). It is noteworthy that they contain eight allusions to Paul's conversion.⁴¹

While the *Sermones* pose problems of chronology for the majority of allusions, thanks to the valuable volume of Verbraken⁴² it would seem possible to select a small number of the sermons which at least meet the above-stipulated criteria for reliability of dates of composition; namely two coincident independent opinions, with no dissenting estimate(s).⁴³ For

37. Also noteworthy is that *vox* and its variants is only found in four of the 33 allusions, in contrast to the recurring presence of that word (and its variants) in the firmly dated works of 396–401.

38. The *caput-membra* metaphor occurs in about a third of the allusions in the *Sermones*. Also noteworthy is that it is absent from the firmly dated works prior to 402.

39. *Conf.* IX, 4, 8–11.

40. See footnote 27.

41. *Tractatus in Johannis epistolam* 8, 2; 10, 3; 10, 9 and *Tractatus in Johannis evangelium* 6, 18; 21, 7; 28, 1; 31, 10 and 57, 1.

42. P.-P. Verbraken, *Etudes critiques sur les sermons authentiques de saint Augustin* (Nijhoff, 1976).

43. Sometimes the opinions are not coincident, but sufficiently close (with no dissenting dates) for purposes of the present study. In such a case, the entire range of the coincident (or almost coincident) estimates is taken. Thus, *Sermo 1* has the following numbers of researchers (in brackets) for the estimated years of composition: 391–393 (2); 393 (2) and 394–395 (1). For present purposes, the range 391–395 is acceptable, but 391–393 would be considered more firmly based. Not all sermons have such a chronological spread. Thus, *Sermo 2* has three estimates for the year 391.

present purposes, one can select twenty such sermons, with estimated dates of composition as 401 or earlier.⁴⁴ Of these twenty sermons, eight are dated as being from 396, or earlier, and in accord with previous findings, they are all devoid of allusions to Paul's conversion.⁴⁵ Of the remaining twelve sermons (dating from 397 to 401 and therefore covering the same time that Augustine was working on the *Confessions*), four were found to contain allusions to Paul's conversion,⁴⁶ which again is within the range of previous findings.

Highly interested for present purposes are some of the findings which come to light upon examining the collection of twenty sermons. Thus, in *Sermo 12* (dated in the period 393–395), Augustine considers the varieties of ways in which God has been known to communicate with mortal man. The examples go so far as to include voices from Heaven: “loquitur per aliquam vocalem sonantemque creaturam, sicut de coelo voces factas, cum oculis nullus videretur, legimus et tenemus.” (*Op. cit.*, 4, 4). What is interesting here, is that Augustine comes so close to the classical case of Paul's conversion, *without* citing it as an example. From this omission, it would seem that in the time-period of 393–395, that particular conversion was not of particular significance to Augustine. Another significant aspect of the above extract is contained implicitly in the words “legimus et credimus”. These words mean that Augustine believed in such voices from Heaven *by having read of them*, in contrast to the first-hand personal experience of having been the subject of just such a communication. This latter possibility would have been fulfilled less than ten years previously if Augustine had really been the subject of the *tolle lege* episode exactly as described in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. That Augustine relies upon reading for knowledge of such mysterious manners of communication, contradicts yet once again, the claimed factuality of the conversion scene.

Again, the above omission of the classical case of Paul from the list of the various occasions on which God has communicated with man, is to be contrasted with a slightly later consideration of the same topic, dating this time from 399, or from the period of composition of the *Confessions*. In the *Annotationes in Job*, when commenting on the words “vocabis nubem voce”, Augustine observes: “vocabis nubem voce: aut interiore; aut illa

44. The *Sermones* selected are as follows: 1, 2, 12, 20, 24, 28, 50, 60, 72, 88, 89, 133, 252, 273, 279, 288, 302, 330, 343 and 353.

45. The eight *Sermones* selected as being composed in 396, or earlier, are: 1, 2, 12, 20, 50, 252, 273 and 353. *Sermo 89* straddles the dividing line, having four estimates for the date 396–397. However, it also contains an allusion to Paul's conversion; a fact which is quite compatible with previous findings. Hence, because of that allusion, it seems quite fitting to list *Sermo 89* as one of the twelve, composed between 397 and 401 inclusive.

46. The *Sermones*, with estimated dates of composition and the number of opinions (in brackets), are as follows: 24: 401 (8); 89: 396–397 (4); 133: 397 (3) and 279: 401 (7).

qua dictum est, *Sequere me* [Joan. 21, 19]; aut illa qua dictum est, *Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris?*⁴⁷ Here, as would be expected, and in contrast to the previous extract, the case of Paul is very explicit, and indeed, as can be seen from the text, Augustine reverts to it again, a few lines farther along, thus revealing considerably more interest than in the case of the earlier *Sermo* 12.

Sermo 279 (dated as 401) is also an interesting member of the collection in that it is entirely devoted to the topic of Paul's conversion and in this regard is unique among all the extant sermons of Augustine. It is therefore, in a way, a monument to the interest of Augustine in that conversion in the year 401, when he was also completing the composition of his *Confessions*. However, apart from its lengthy and general preoccupation with Paul's conversion, the sermon has not been found to contain details of relevance to the present topic.

Much more interesting for throwing light upon the composition of the conversion-scene of the *Confessions* are certain details of *Sermo* 89 which is dated as 396-7,⁴⁸ or during the composition of the previously mentioned work. Suffice it to recall how the conversion-scene had Augustine weeping copious tears under a certain fig-tree when he heard the mysterious chanting of the *tolle lege* command. With this in mind, the first detail of interest in *Sermo* 89 is the lengthy preoccupation (through the first four paragraphs) with the cursed fig-tree of *Matt.* 21, 19-22. After a short digression (which need not concern us here), consideration returns yet again to the fig-tree about a third of the way through the fifth paragraph; only this time it is not the same particular fig-tree. Here, Augustine is concerned with the fig-tree under which Nathanaël was situated when his brother went looking for him, to tell him about the Christ (*Joan.* 1, 45-48). When Nathanaël asked Christ how he knew him, Christ replied that he had seen him under the fig-tree, before his brother called him (*ibid.*). But Augustine's paraphrasing of the observation is possessed of a marked relevance to his own case, in the conversion-scene. As his paraphrasing puts it in *Sermo* 89: "et Dominus ad eum, Cum esses sub arbore fici, vidi te: tanquam diceret, Cum esses sub umbra peccati; praedestinavi te." The relevance of these words to Augustine's own case has already been the subject of scholarly investigations.⁴⁹

47. *Op. cit.*, in 38 (re. verse 34).

48. Two opinions date the *Sermo* as 396 and two as 397.

49. The significance of the fig-tree in the conversion-scene was first pointed out by Courcelle in his earlier edition of the *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*. Those observations were justified and extended in depth and detail in the fine study of V. Buchheit: 'Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu *Conf. VIII*),' *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1968) 257-271. The latest version of Courcelle's identification of the fig-tree of the *Confessions* with the tree of Nathanaël is found on p. 193 in the second edition of the *Recherches*.

But there is yet more of relevance in *Sermo* 89. As to Christ's promise to Nathanaël that he would see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (*Joan.* 1, 49–51), Augustine explains this motion in the following manner:

Nec tamen dixit, Ascendentes a Filio hominis et descendentes ad Filium hominis, quasi tantummodo sursum esset: sed, 'ascendentes et descendentes ad Filium hominis.' Audi sursum clamantem Filium hominis: 'Saule, Saule.' Audi deorsum Filium hominis: 'Quid me persequeris?'"⁵⁰

Here again, the previous *caput-membra* metaphor is implicit. However, the point of principal significance in the above extract is that Augustine has joined together two quite unrelated elements which also enter into rare combination in the conversion-scene of the *Confessions*, itself dating from the same time. On the one hand, there is the condition of Nathanël being under the fig-tree; on the other hand are the divine words spoken to Saul as he lay stricken on the road to Damascus: "Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris?" It is the argument of this present study that at about the same time as the above extract, those two elements were united by the genius of Augustine in a dramatic *tour de force* to form the climax of the conversion-scene of his *Confessions*.⁵¹ Accordingly, Augustine pictured himself under the fig-tree, weeping copiously for his sins, when he heard the mysterious chanting: *tolle lege; tolle lege*; words which, with their assonance and repetitive ring, recall a strangely similar communication with the stricken Saul some few centuries previously on the road to Damascus.

Summary and Conclusion

While there can be no doubting the profound sincerity of Augustine's total and unqualified conversion back to the Catholic Church of his childhood, there are substantial reasons for doubting that his conversion transpired exactly as depicted in the eighth book of his *Confessions* (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 28–29). In a previous article I demonstrated the absence of certain cogent consequences which should have been fulfilled if the famous reading of *Romans* 13, 13–14 had been the recount of an actual fact. The present study goes further, in calling into question the factual reality of the entire conversion-scene beneath the fig-tree, as described at the above-mentioned location in the *Confessions*.

The present study began with the observation that there are many strange similarities of detail between the account of Paul's conversion in *Acts* 9, 1–19 (and also *Acts* 22, 4–16 and 26, 9–18) and the description of

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, 5.

⁵¹ It is noteworthy here that the conjunction of the stricken Saul with Nathanaël under the fig-tree is also found on at least two other occasions in the writings of Augustine; *Sermo* 122 6, 6 and *Sermo* 123 4, 4.

Augustine's own conversion in *Conf.* VIII, 12, 28–29. These similarities would suggest that this latter description is patterned upon the former. On the other hand, it also remained possible that both accounts were indeed of two independent conversions which happened to possess striking similarities.

A means of deciding between the above two possibilities was offered by the large volume of Augustine's works which were written between his conversion in 386 and his description of it in the *Confessions*, written in the period 397–401. Had Augustine been converted in a manner whose concrete details bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the conversion of Paul, then this similarity could not but have overwhelmed the newly converted Augustine. As a result, allusions to Paul's conversion would have been plentiful in the early writings of Augustine, especially from 386 onwards. In actual fact, for all Augustine's early interest in Paul's writings, no such allusions are to be found in the voluminous output of those years, thereby indicating an indifference to that other conversion. This absence of allusions in Augustine's early works therefore constitutes strong *negative evidence against* the factuality of the conversion-scene beneath the fig-tree in the eighth book of the *Confessions*.

In a complementary fashion also, *positive evidence for* the fictional nature of Augustine's same conversion-scene is forthcoming from the many allusions to Paul's conversion which suddenly appear in Augustine's writings at the very same time when he is known to have been working on his *Confessions*. Furthermore, with few exceptions, such allusions in his other firmly dated works virtually cease after the completion of the *Confessions* in 401, thereby indicating a lapse from the profound and prolonged preoccupation with Paul's conversion in the time-period of 397 to 401.

The above-mentioned positive and negative aspects of the study of Augustine's allusions to Paul's conversion are in surprising accord with the exigencies of this present study. In addition, further support is forthcoming from Augustine's sermonal works, at least as far as the known chronology has permitted the investigation of the many allusions to be found there. Evidence from all sources underscores: a) Augustine's indifference to Paul's conversion in works prior to the period when working on the *Confessions*; b) a preoccupation with the topic during the years 397–401 inclusive, while writing the *Confessions*, and c) only the rarest of references to Paul's conversion in firmly dated works from 402 till Augustine's death in 430. The many allusions in his sermonal works must of course qualify the conclusion under c) and a convincing reason was advanced for their presence in those works. Furthermore, in no case were these allusions found to militate against the conclusions under a) and b) above.

From the many preceding considerations, the conclusion would seem to follow that the conversion-scene under the fig-tree in the eighth book of Augustine's *Confessions* is *not* an account of an actual personal experience on Augustine's part, but has been carefully constructed in accord with the declared over-all aim of the work, which is to raise the mind and heart of the reader to a greater knowledge and love of God.⁵²

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52. Accordingly, after the autobiographical sections of the *Confessions*, Augustine addresses God in the following significant manner: 'Nam confessiones praeteritorum malorum meorum, quae remisisti et texisti . . . cum leguntur et audiuntur, excitant cor, ne dormiat in desperatione et dicat: 'non possum', sed evigilet in amore misericordiae tuae et dulcedine gratiae tuae, qua potens est omnis infirmus.' (*Conf.* X, 3, 4).