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AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

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Biographical Sketch of the Author

Writing a biography of a monumental figure such as Augustine is no small task. Augustine stands atop the mountain of Christian theology. It seems fair to say that Christian theology has stood on the shoulders of Augustine through the ages. Therefore, writing a book that traces the outward as well as inward development of such a man, particular tracing such things throughout Augustine's course of life, requires intimate familiarity with the man and his works. Peter Brown is such a man.

Brown is Philip and Beulah Rollins (emeritus) Professor of History at Princeton University and is a graduate of Oxford University. He has lectured in the area of history at numerous places, including All Souls College, Oxford. Brown is also credited with "having created the field of study referred to as late antiquity (250-800 A.D.)."[1] In addition to his biography on Augustine, Brown has authored numerous books, including *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* and *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*.

Brown brings an intimate knowledge of this era of history to bear on the life of Augustine. He is able to present to the reader not only the theological giant of Christian theology, but also Augustine, the historically situated man. That is, we are not simply introduced to the theology of Augustine, but we meet the man who lived and breathed in a world full of change.

[1] https://history.princeton.edu/people/peter-brown

Summary of the Contents

In the *Chronicles of Narnia* C. S. Lewis introduced us to Aslan. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* Aslan is "on the move." Brown presents Augustine in a similar fashion. He is, indeed, a man on the move. Brown writes, "Not only did Augustine live in an age of rapid and dramatic change; he himself was constantly changing" (Brown, ix). Augustine is changing on multiple fronts.

These changes were both inward and outward. In other words, Augustine is a man whose soul is on the move, moves intellectually as he seeks wisdom, and undergoes a change of beliefs over time. While he is moving inwardly, the world around Augustine is busy changing as well. The Roman world Augustine knew at birth (A.D. 354) is not the Roman world he knows when he goes to his deathbed (A.D. 430). Therefore, Brown seeks to give "some impression of the subtle overlapping of the differing levels of change...to [help the reader] glimpse a figure in so distant a past" (ix). That is, Brown hopes to show how the inner and outer changes overlap in the life of Augustine. If we glimpse the overlapping changes, then perhaps we progress in understanding this giant of a man.

Given the amount of ground to cover, Brown breaks Augustine's life into manageable chunks. Brown divides the biography into specific periods, beginning with Augustine's birth in 354.

The first period (A. D. 354–385) covers the birth of Augustine in Thagaste, his movement through early educational pursuits, and ends with Augustine surrounded by friends as his serves as professor of rhetoric in Milan. During this period, we are introduced to a number of individuals, including the father and mother of Augustine. Monica, Augustine's mother, is presented as the persistent woman of prayer who sought to see her son embrace the Catholic

faith. During these years, Augustine reads Cicero, who moves Augustine to pursue Wisdom. In his search, Augustine finds the Bible "was a great disappointment" (31). Thus, he keeps searching, and comes to test the waters of Manichaeism. The Manichee's provided an answer to the problem of evil, a problem Augustine had wrestled with at a profound level. And yet, he becomes disillusioned with the Manichaean philosophy. Now, with his friends, and at the behest Symmachus (the cousin of Ambrose), Augustine lands in Milan (circa. A. D. 384). Here, in this great city, Augustine would hear the preaching of Ambrose.

A discussion of the bishop Ambrose, a towering Christian figure in his own right, opens the second section (A. D. 386–395) of Brown's work. This section is important in showing not only the move geographically of Augustine, but his intellectual journey takes important turns. Ambrose will show Augustine that the Christian faith is other-worldly (75). This is a key point in Augustine's development. As Brown points out, "most thinkers in the ancient world…were materialists in the strict sense…the divine was also an element" (75). But here, as with the Platonists later, Augustine is introduced to something literally out of this world. What Augustine found in Ambrose, he found again in Porphyry, the populizer of Plotinus, the heir of Plato. Both Christianity and Platonism "pointed in the same direction. Both were radically other-worldly" (84).

By 395, Augustine had drunk deeply from the neo-Platonic ideas. Neo-Platonism had changed Augustine in drastic ways, most notably in the fact that Augustine now saw God as transcendent and, rather than conforming God into the image of Augustine, God was busy (re)forming Augustine into the *imago dei*. Augustine wrestled with ideas, and Platonism had helped him, but it would be left to St. Paul to convert him. Augustine begins to wrestle in his soul, and during one particular instance of inward turmoil, of painful wrestling with meaning, he

hears the words, “take it and read, take it and read” (101). Augustine would turn to the Bible, open the book, and read Paul, who called him to “arm [himself] with the Lord Jesus Christ” (101). Captivated by Paul and having put on Jesus, Augustine and his friends retreat to the foot of the Alps for a life of contemplation. This life or retirement does not last. Eventually, Augustine will return to Milan “to seek to wash away his sins in baptism” (117).

On April 24–25 of 387, Ambrose baptized Augustine, his son, and Alypius, the close friend of Augustine. Soon thereafter, the group departs Milan only to land in Ostia. Here, Augustine would lose Monica to death, the last enemy. Eventually, with a stop in Rome to await safe passage home, Augustine heads back to Thagaste. In Thagaste the group will move towards a more active or public life. Alypius eventually becomes the bishop of Thagaste, with Augustine rising to the bishopric of Hippo. From here, after so much intellectual and religious movement, Augustine seeks to reveal his inner depths to his friends in what would become his most famous work, *The Confessions*.

The third period runs from 395–410. Augustine, who once desired nothing but the contemplative life, living with his friends in Cassiciacum, was now a public figure. He lived in Hippo Regius, an ancient town surrounded by cornfields. In this town, Augustine is no longer living in leisure, enjoying the ancient idea of *otium liberale*. Instead, he has discovered the active life of St. Paul and entered into a life of service. He was a servant of the *populus dei,* and whatever he learned in Scripture, he would turn around and give to God’s people.

Yet, the pressures from the outside were significant. The Donatist controversy, one that will demand significant time from Augustine, raised ecclesiological questions. Where is the church, *ubi ecclesia*? For the Donatists, they were the true church, a place of refuge for the pure. For Augustine, the church was full of those in process, still moving forward, and one day it

"might absorb, transform, and perfect, the existing bonds of human relations" (220). The debates would develop until the Edict of Unity (A. D. 405) "branded the Donatists as heretics" (230). Augustine contributes to the controversy by offering reasons that the state had the right (responsibility?) to put down heretics. Thus, Brown asserts that Augustine "may be the first theorist of the Inquisition" (236).

From a life of leisure to activity, Augustine is in the fight. The change in outward circumstances and the inner changes are indeed overlapping. Augustine had been captivated by the philosophy of St. Paul and of Jesus. He was now a bishop, serving the *populus Dei*, writing *Doctrina Christiana*, and calling those around him to seek the face of God always. All the while, he is fighting on both the inward and outward fronts. The enemies God's people needed to fight were mostly found inside themselves. "The Devil is not to be blamed for everything: there are times when a man is his own devil" (241). And yet, outward battles were not infrequent. The Donatist controversy required the intellectual and political powers of the bishop at Hippo, and new controversies were just over the horizon.

Part IV covers only a decade but will witness the fall of Rome and the rise of the Pelagian controversy. Both of these external circumstances would effect the production of the *City of God* and the collection of writings known as Augustine's anti-Pelagian works. Within this body of literary achievement, we find the mature thought of Augustine on a number of fronts as he seeks to defend the faith and help his people live as *civitas peregrine*. Though the world around them did not look the same as days gone by, the people of God must remember they are other-worldly, citizens of a heavenly city, and thus resident strangers in the present age.

It is also during this decade where one group is put down and another group rises. The Donatists are systematically oppressed, with heavy fines and other penalties imposed by all who

would fail to join the Catholic church. The Donatist controversy had exacted a great deal of energy from Augustine but seemed to come to a close. However, Pelagius, a British man, had come to Rome and brought his own ideas with him.

Pelagius and Augustine, or at least Pelagian ideas and Augustine, would enter into battle until the final days of Augustine himself. It is during this period that Augustine produces writings and ideas that would profoundly influence later theological development. Pelagius saw in man the potential for sinless perfectionism. The problem of original sin was cast aside and a rather optimistic view of human ability asserted. Augustine, however, would have none of it. Though sinlessness might have been a theoretical possibility, mankind could not simply choose to be good, to not sin. They simply were unable to *want* to make that decision. This doctrine of total inability would influence later theology and is felt even today, particularly in Augustinian and Calvinistic streams of thought.

Part V covers the final nine years of Augustine's life (A. D. 421–430). Though Pelagius is dead, his ideas live on in Julian of Eclanum. This younger man, writing from circumstances of leisure, would continue to hound the elder Augustine. And yet, Augustine would meet the challenge. Julian made recourse to the justice of God to disprove Augustine (a just God would not command something that was impossible for man). What Julian must remember, however, is that "you must distinguish the justice of God from human ideas of justice" (395). It was in these years where Augustine set forth more plainly his doctrine of predestination. Not simply to win theological debates, but in light of the fall of Rome and the complexities that accompanied the Pelagian debates, Augustine wished to set forth predestination as "a doctrine of survival" (410).

Augustine will hand the reigns to Eraclius. The swan will sit in silence as Eraclius, the cricket chirps. He was an old man now, more open to the possibilities of miracles and God

speaking through dreams. Changes had taken place, both in his intellectual and spiritual development, even while the world around him gave way to a new age. Even towards the end, changes were on the horizon. The Vandals were heading for North Africa and would soon come to Hippo. Yet, even then, Augustine exerts his influence. He encourages his bishops to stand their ground, to trust in the providence of God and if they must die, to die well. For Augustine, death was just around the corner. The North African man, surrounded by friends for a good portion of his life, was now surrounded by the enemies of Rome and was content to die alone. Augustine, on whose shoulders we stand, passed from this life and entered the city of God on August 28th in the 430th year of his Lord.

Brown closes his work with an Epilogue that introduces new material that provides fresh insight into Augustinian scholarship. In 1975 what is known today as the Divjak letters are discovered. New correspondence provides new evidence into the life of Augustine. In 1990 over twenty-five new sermons are discovered and are today known as the Dolbeau sermons. These documents show us a bishop in action, preaching to his people.

Given the presence of new material, Brown reflects on the original publication of his biography, published in the 1960's. Though the new evidence does not substantially change what he has written, there are new qualifications. He finds in these documents an Augustine "considerably less authoritarian" (445). In addition, Brown notes how he did not give "sufficient attention to his sermons and letters" (446). In the end, given the presence of the Divjak letters, the Dolbeau sermons, and even advances in the field of history connected to the Roman world, we now have more information that sheds brighter light on the life of Augustine. Any up-to-date work on Augustine must pay attention to the new evidence available.

Evaluation

Brown has written a thorough account of the development of Augustine. He has done so not by focusing solely, or really much at all, on the various writings of Augustine, but on how Augustine developed as a man situated in a particular historical world. That world was Roman to the core, but it was a world changing in numerous ways. Rome itself was losing its influence and by the end, would crumble. Augustine, however, is on the exact opposite trajectory, a man on the rise. What Brown does is show us how the external changes in the world Augustine lived in impacted the inner life of a man on the move.

Augustine was indeed a man on the move. Though born in Thagaste, he would not fail to traverse the Roman world and see the sights and take in the culture. The *geographical* movement of Augustine is worth noting and Brown takes us along for the journey. We watch as Augustine leaves Thagaste for Carthage when he is still a teenager. From Carthage back to Thagaste and then, after some time teaching in his hometown, he moves off to Carthage, Rome, and finally lands a job teaching rhetoric in Milan. There will be trips to Rome, a season at Cassiciacum, a brief stay in Ostia, back to Rome, and eventually home to Thagaste. Even here, he will not stay long. Augustine will land in Hippo Regius and from here exert his lasting influence.

Brown set out to introduce us to a man on the move. The geographical moves help do that, but not simply because we read interesting travel narratives. No, these movements bring Augustine into contact with significant figures and important ideas. These figures and their ideas would impact Augustine and his thought. During his journey's he is introduced to Cicero. The call of Cicero to pursue Wisdom sets Augustine on a course that would ensure he meets those who followed the philosophy of Mani. This would lead ultimately to disillusionment. In that state of disillusionment, traveling to Milan, he meets Ambrose and is impressed by his other-

worldly religion, which he also finds in Platonism. All along the way, Augustine is changing geographical scenes while the inner man is himself undergoing transformation.

This, I believe, is Browns most helpful contribution. He introduces us to an Augustine who did not appear out of nowhere, sit down at his desk, and write the *Confessions*, *The City of God*, or his commentary on Genesis. Augustine was not born into a family that taught him the doctrine of total depravity and prepared him for a fight with Pelagius. No, Augustine developed over time, through numerous journeys, and in constant wrestling with the ideas of his day. He was a man who grew, and never stopped growing, as he sought to explain the world and take hold of true Wisdom. The lesson for us is found in this fact. As we stand on the shoulders of Augustine and his theological formulation, we continue to learn and grow and develop. We do not cease to wrestle with ideas, to search for Wisdom. And in that search, when we find Wisdom in the God of Christian theology, we find rest for our restless hearts.

At the same time, we dare not forget how the age in which we live and the geographical space that we occupy impacts our growth. Just as Augustine was a man of the times, so are we. We may not find Manichaeism floating around in Minneapolis or Chicago, but dualistic ideologies are certainly present. Neo-Platonism may have waned, but the pagan philosophies of the day are exerting influence. And the people around us, the circles we run in, the authors we choose to read, perhaps shape us more than we know. Cicero had a lasting impact on Augustine, long after he had closed the *Hortensius*. John Piper and John MacArthur likely continue to influence your thinking, long after you have closed *Desiring God* or *The Gospel According to Jesus*. Therefore, let us not be naïve about the influences present in our development, whether it be the influences stemming from our place(s) of residence or from those we read on a consistent basis.

Conclusion

Peter Brown has written one of the best biography's I have ever read. Whether or not it is the best and most faithful presentation of Augustine is something I leave to the professional Augustinian scholars. Regardless of their evaluation, this book has introduced me to a man whose theological formulations have created a stream of theological thinking in which I now swim. To walk away from this book having glimpsed at the bishop of Hippo leaves me intellectually satisfied for now.

Yet, Brown's book is not perfect. At times it is hard to track what exactly Brown is trying to do in a particular chapter. At other times it is not clear where Augustine is geographically, how he got there, and what point in Augustine's life we talking about. For someone who loves clearly delineated linear thinking and presentations, the way Brown writes is at times frustrating, though admittedly, for those who think in more circular patterns, this is likely a commendable characteristic of the work. To each his own, as they say.

Overall, Brown's work is comprehensive. No point of Augustine's life if left untouched. The figures present in Augustine's life, the places that impacted him, the philosophies that shaped him, and the ministry that marked him are laid before our eyes. We watch the life of Augustine as the outer circumstances change and the inner man progresses until finally, he rests in the presence of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.