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Laato, Anni Maria

*Published in:*  
From Text to Persuasion

Published: 01/01/2021

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

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[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Laato, A. M. (2021). The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) in Augustine’s Many Interpretations. In A. Voitila, N. Lahti, M. Sundkvist, & L. Valve (Eds.), *From Text to Persuasion: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Lauri Thurén on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (pp. 232–251). (Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society; Vol. 123). Suomen eksegeettinen seura. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201148583>

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# The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) in Augustine’s Many Interpretations

Anni Maria Laato

## 1. Introduction

Ever since the publication of *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* by Adolf Jülicher in 1886, for many scholars Augustine’s allegorical exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan in *Quaestionum evangelicarum libri II* 2.19 has been a classic example of how the parables of Jesus should not be interpreted.<sup>1</sup> It has been pointed out—quite correctly—that neither Luke nor the original listeners of Jesus could have understood the parables of Jesus in the way Augustine does. Instead of giving allegorical interpretation to every detail in the story, one should find its focus. However, Augustine’s interpretations of this parable—in the above-mentioned passage and several other texts—have been vastly influential in the history of theology,<sup>2</sup> and offer important insights to the discussion on biblical interpretation as well as into Augustine’s own theology too. He built on principles commonly accepted in the early church,<sup>3</sup> and developed new ways to read this parable.

In his article “The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) in Augustine’s Exegesis” (2004) Roland Teske discusses the gulf between the views of many modern exegetes and Augustine’s allegorical interpretation.<sup>4</sup> He accepts the claim that allegorical interpretation is not what Luke had in mind but, nonetheless, he still—together with e.g. Jean Daniélou, Dominique Sanchis and Henri de Lubac—argues for the ongoing relevance of Augustine’s interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Others who have discussed the problem and spoken for Augustine’s interpretations of this parable include Birger Gerhardsson, Rieker Roukema and Patrick M. Clark.<sup>6</sup> In this discussion, however, Augustine’s most extreme allegory in the above-mentioned passage prevails, and the fact that he offered several other interpretations in different situations is largely ignored. does not come into focus.

In this article, therefore, my aim is to describe and clarify the different interpretations Augustine gave this particular parable and, where possible, to see to whom and in what kind of situations he produced them and to explain what he wanted to achieve when using them. I focus on the following texts where Augustine explains this parable in different ways: *Quaestionum evangelicarum libri II*, 2.19, *De doctrina christiana* 1.30–31, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 48, *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 43 as well as *Sermones* 131 and 171. I have chosen these specific passages because they present the different approaches Augustine had; one could have included other similar passages, too.<sup>7</sup>

Augustine is one of the few early Christian theologians who, in his books, consciously reflected on the methods of interpretation of Scripture. He did this, above all, in *De doctrina christiana*. He did not invent the principles he presents in this work but rather built on the work of many of his predecessors—Christian, Jewish and Pagan—and thus developed existing ideas and practices. He had received a classical training in rhetoric and had learned Christian biblical interpretation—

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<sup>1</sup> For the problems of the interpretation of the Lukan parables, and a new way to read them, see Thurén 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g. Akinwale 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For a general introduction to early Christian interpretation of the Bible, see O’Keefe and Reno 2005; for Augustine’s biblical interpretation, see Cameron 2012 and Van Fleteren & Schnaubelt 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Teske 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Daniélou 1956; Sanchis 1961, de Lubac 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Gerhardsson 1958; Roukema 2001; Clark 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For a more comprehensive list, see Teske 2004, 358-367.

primarily from Ambrose of Milan who, in turn, had been influenced by Origen. Additionally, it is important to remember that Augustine was not only a scholar, but first and foremost a bishop who preached and wrote in the context of the Church and his congregation in his own hometown, Hippo Rhegius in Roman Africa, (and sometimes in other African cities too). Therefore, in due course, I discuss whether Augustine's many interpretations of this parable are in line with his own theory of interpretation.

## 2. The Mother of All Allegorical Interpretations: *Quaestionum evangelicarum libri II 2.19*

Augustine's most quoted and most criticised interpretation of Luke 10:25–37 goes like this,<sup>8</sup>

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; by "Adam" the whole mankind is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means "the moon", and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely; of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means "Guardian" and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travellers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle. The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the gospel was new, though it was lawful to him 'to live by the gospel'. (*Quaest. ev. 2.19*)

For a modern reader it is easy to see the problems with this kind of interpretation: the original context in Luke is not mentioned, there is no evidence of any attempt to present the original meaning of the parable, the interpretation does not answer the question "who is my neighbour?",

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<sup>8</sup> quaest. ev. 2.19: Homo quidam descendebat ab Ierusalem in Iericho, ipse Adam intellegitur in genere humano; Ierusalem civitas pacis illa caelestis (Cf. Hebr 12, 22), a cuius beatitudine lapsus est; Iericho luna interpretatur et significat mortalitatem nostram propter quod nascitur, crescit, senescit et occidit; latrones diabolus et angeli eius, qui eum spoliaverunt immortalitate et plagis impositis peccata suadendo reliquerunt semivivum, quia ex parte qua potest intellegere et cognoscere Deum vivus est, homo, ex parte qua peccatis contabescit et premitur mortuus est, et ideo semivivus dicitur (cf. Gen 3). Sacerdos autem et levita qui eo viso praeterierunt sacerdotium et ministerium Veteris Testamenti significant, quod non poterat prodesse ad salutem. Samaritanus custos interpretatur, et ideo ipse Dominus significatur hoc nomine. Alligatio vulnerum est cohibitio peccatorum; oleum consolatio spei bonae propter indulgentiam datam ad reconciliationem pacis; vinum exhortatio ad operandum ferventissimo spiritu. Iumentum eius est caro in qua ad nos venire dignatus est. Imponi iumento est in ipsam incarnationem Christi credere. Stabulum est Ecclesia, ubi reficiuntur viatores de peregrinatione in aeternam patriam redeuntes. Altera dies est post resurrectionem Domini. Duo denarii sunt vel duo praecepta caritatis, quam per Spiritum Sanctum acceperunt Apostoli ad evangelizandum ceteris, vel promissio vitae praesentis et futurae, secundum enim duas promissiones dictum est: Accipiet in hoc saeculo septies tantum, et in saeculo futuro vitam aeternam consequetur (Lc 18, 30; Mt 19, 29). Stabularius ergo est Apostolus. Quod supererogat aut illud consilium est quod ait: De virginibus autem praeceptum Domini non habeo, consilium autem do (1 Cor 7, 25), aut quod etiam manibus suis operatus est (Cf. 1 Cor 4, 12), ne infirmorum aliquem in novitate Evangelii gravaret (Cf. 2 Thess 3, 8–9), cum ei liceret pasci ex Evangelio.

and the final punchline “Go and do the same!” is missing. Additionally, both the whole story and individual words are given allegorical interpretations which the listeners of Jesus would not have been able to understand.

It is obvious that by using this kind of figurative interpretation, the interpreter could easily make the text say whatever he or she wanted and could even read his or her favourite thoughts into the text. However, in late antiquity and even later, using different kinds of Christological and soteriological interpretations was the normal way to read the parable of the Good Samaritan,<sup>9</sup> and, for example, in his Church Postil, Luther (a former Augustinian monk) explains it in much the same way as Augustine does.<sup>10</sup> Interpreters applying the allegorical method did not, however, consider themselves to be reading the texts in an arbitrary way, and later in this article we shall return to what kinds of rules Augustine set himself for his allegorical interpretations.

*Quaestionum evangelicarum libri II*, in which this particular interpretation of the parable is found, is not a systematic study, but rather a collection of Augustine’s answers to questions posed to him about the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.<sup>11</sup> He published the work around the year 400, that is, quite early in his career as a bishop. In this text, his exposition on the parable of the Good Samaritan is cut out of its immediate context in the Gospel of Luke and is not even presented in its totality; it is preceded and followed by completely different themes: instructions on fasting and the story of Martha and Mary. The addressees of this explanation are not known, but it is apparent that they are not ordinary Christians addressed in the context of a church service. The understanding of Augustine’s explanation requires quite an extensive knowledge of the Bible and Christian theology.

In this particular interpretation, Augustine was influenced by Ambrose (*Exp. Luc. 7.69–84*), who in turn was influenced by Origen (*Hom. Luc. 34*).<sup>12</sup> Despite some similarities, all three theologians employed unique traits.<sup>13</sup> Both Origen and Ambrose included the discussion between Jesus and the teacher of the Law, quoted Deut 6:5, and in so doing, put the parable in the context of dealing with the question “Who is my neighbour?” Their expositions are much longer than Augustine’s. In his homily on the Gospel of Luke 34, Origen first gave a literal interpretation of the parable. He then told that “one of the elders” wanted to interpret the parable as follows, and at that point he retold his allegorical interpretation (*Hom. Luc. 34.3*). In both Origen’s second interpretation and in Ambrose there is the idea that the man represents Adam and that Jericho means the world. Origen stated that Jerusalem meant Paradise, while Ambrose connected Jerusalem with the heavenly Jerusalem. Both gave a Christological interpretation and explained the spiritual meaning of the details.

Augustine took over the idea of an allegorical interpretation of the whole parable and several of its details, but offered a developed version of it. He read the parable as a story of humankind from its beginning to its end. The starting point for the journey was Jerusalem as the “heavenly city of peace”, an interpretation he learned from Ambrose,<sup>14</sup> denoting the time before the Fall or as being

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine’s above quoted interpretation of the Good Samaritan belongs to a long patristic tradition both in the East and the West -- the first examples are found in Origen (*Hom. Luc. 34*); Irenaeus (*Haer. 3.17.2*) and Ambrose (*Exp. Luc. 7.69–84*). The idea, thus, did not originate with Augustine but rather was something he learned from tradition. For earlier interpretations, see Roukema 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The thirteenth Sunday after Trinity Sunday.

<sup>11</sup> Fitzgerald 1991b, 691.

<sup>12</sup> In the times of Augustine, and even earlier, it was normal to interpret the Adam-story as an image of the history of humankind. See, e.g. Anderson and Stone 1999.

<sup>13</sup> For Augustine’s dependence on Ambrose and Origen, see Sanchis 1961.

<sup>14</sup> Hiericho enim figura istius mundi est, in quam de paradiso, hoc est, de Hierusalem illa coelesti eiectionis Adam praevaricationis prolapsione descendit. Ambrose, *Exp. Luc. 7.73*. PL 15.

about immortality. In Augustine's texts, the heavenly Jerusalem denoted the Church or the Jerusalem above.<sup>15</sup> The idea of peace comes from the etymology of the name of Jerusalem, which Augustine consistently translates as "a vision of peace".<sup>16</sup> The idea of Jericho as the moon is based on etymology, which was one of popular interpretative methods in antiquity. In this text, as well as in others, an interesting and telling detail is to be found. In Latin, the poor victim is characterized as *semivivus* (half-alive), not *semimortuus* (half-dead), both of which are usual words in Latin. In the English translations "half-dead" is used consistently. "Half-alive" would have a more positive connotation than half-dead but is, apparently, not good English.

Scholars have usually focussed on this particular interpretation, but the following examples show that it is, in fact, not typical for Augustine. We shall see that he went on to develop new and creative ways to read the parable of the Good Samaritan.

### 3. Must We Love the Angels?—*De doctrina Christiana* 1.30.31–33

The second example is from *De doctrina christiana* which Augustine started to write already in the 390s, but which was finished in the late 420s.<sup>17</sup> In this influential and much read work, Augustine presents both theoretical discussion and pragmatic advice for biblical interpretation. It was written for his colleagues and his goal was to teach others to teach Scripture. The parable of the Good Samaritan is used in a completely different way to that presented above.

The exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan is found in a context where Augustine presents his famous distinction *uti* (to use) and *frui* (to enjoy). He has already discussed at length what love is and addresses how Christians must love God and their neighbours (Matt 22:37–39). He goes on to ask whether one must love the angels, too, as it is already clear that we must love all human beings. Are the angels also our neighbours (*proximi*)? He answers this question using the parable under scrutiny.<sup>18</sup>

You remember that when the man to whom he quoted those two commandments, saying that the whole law and the prophets depended on them, went on to ask him, *And who is my neighbour?* (Lk10:29), he presented him with the case of a certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who fell among thieves and was badly wounded by them, and left seriously hurt and half dead. The lesson he taught was that the only one who acted as neighbor to this man was the one who took pity on him to the extent of reviving him and treating his wounds, as the man who had asked him the question was obliged to admit when questioned in his turn. To him the Lord said, *Go and do likewise yourself* (Lk 10:37). In this

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<sup>15</sup> For early Christian interpretations on heavenly Jerusalem, see Antti Laato (ed) 2019, *passim*. For Augustine's interpretations on Jerusalem, see Van Fleteren 1999, 462–63.

<sup>16</sup> Aug. Gen. Man. 2.10.13.

<sup>17</sup> See O'Donnell 1999, 278–80. Books 1–2 were published in 398, the other books were added later.

<sup>18</sup> Namque ille cui duo ipsa praecepta protulerat atque in eis pendere totam Legem Prophetasque omnes dixerat, cum interrogaret eum dicens: Et quis est mihi proximus? (Luke 10:29) hominem quemdam proposuit descendentem ab Hierusalem ad Iericho incidisse in latrones et ab eis graviter vulneratum saucium et semivivum esse derelictum (cf Luke 10:30–33). Cui proximum esse non docuit, nisi qui erga illum recreandum atque curandum misericors exstitit, ita ut hoc qui interrogaverat interrogatus ipse fateretur. Cui Dominus ait: Vade et tu fac similiter (Luke 10:37), ut videlicet eum proximum esse intellegamus, cui vel exhibendum est officium misericordiae, si indiget, vel exhibendum esset, si indigeret. Ex quo est iam consequens ut etiam ille a quo nobis hoc vicissim exhibendum est, proximus sit noster. Proximi enim nomen ad aliquid est, nec quisquam esse proximus nisi proximo potest. Nullum autem exceptum esse cui misericordiae denegetur officium, quis non videat, quando usque ad inimicos etiam porrectum est, eodem Domino dicente: Diligite inimicos vestros, benefacite eis qui vos oderunt (Matt 5:4)? Doctr. Chr. 1.30. 31.

way we are given to understand that anyone is our neighbour to whom the duty of compassion is to be extended when needed. From which it now follows that anyone by whom such a kindness in turn should be shown to us is also our neighbour. But anybody can see that no exception is made to any to whom the duty of compassion can be denied, when the command is extended even to our enemies, with the Lord also telling us, *Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you* (Mt 5:44). (*Doctr. Chr.* 1.30.31)

So now then, if anyone is rightly to be called a neighbour, either to whom the duty of compassion is to be extended, or by whom it is to be extended to us, it clearly follows that the holy angels are included as well in this commandment bidding us to love our neighbors. They do, after all, show us so many courtesies and kindnesses, as it is easy to note from many places in the divine scriptures. For the same reason our Lord and God himself wished to be called ur neighbour, because it is himself that the Lord Jesus Christ is indicating as the one who came to help of that man lying half dead on the road, beaten up and left there by the robbers, and the prophet says in prayer, *As for a neighbour, as for our brother, so I sought to please* (Ps 35:14).

But because the divine substance is altogether more excellent than our nature and high above it, the commandment bidding us to love God was distinguished from the one about love of neighbour. He, after all, takes pity on us because of his own goodness, while we take pity on each other, not because of our goodness but again because of his. In other words, he takes pity on us, so that we may enjoy him, while we take pity on each other, again so that we may all enjoy him, not one another. (*Doctr. Chr.* 1.30.33)<sup>19</sup>

In this lengthy text, of which I have quoted passages 31 and 33 (ch. 32 states that Paul teaches the same), Augustine focuses on the concept of neighbour (*proximus*) whom we must love. The issue here was whether the angels were to be included in this; must they be loved, too? He presents the parable in its context in Luke without giving an allegorical interpretation. Instead, he emphasizes the punchline, “Go and do likewise!”. In his explanation, the man who helped the other (it is not said that he is a Samaritan) is used to clarify what “neighbour” means. According to Augustine, this concept expresses a relation between the helper and the one who is helped. In passage 33, he finally addresses the question of the angels. Neighbours are the ones to whom we must show mercy, but who also must show mercy to us. Angels, on the other hand, show great acts of mercy to us and, thus, belong to this category: they are our neighbours. Moreover, not only are the angels our neighbours, but the Lord himself has become our neighbour.

Augustine subsequently presented the theory of his ethical teaching. He did not merely say that we ought to love our neighbours but also explained how that is indeed possible since we cannot love our neighbour by ourselves. He reminded his readers that when Christ describes the one who came to help in this parable, he is referring to himself. Our nature, however, is different from Christ’s: Christ shows mercy because of his own goodness; we show mercy to each other because of the love of Christ. As noted above, Augustine used this image to explain his famous distinction *uti - frui*, “to use” and “to enjoy”. Only the Triune God is to be enjoyed; material things are to be used, and

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<sup>19</sup> English translation by Edmund Hill. 1996. *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Teaching Christianity I/II.* Hyde Park, New York: New City Press.

human beings are to be enjoyed in God. God gives us mercy so that we can enjoy him (or “rest in him”) and we can show mercy to one another when we enjoy God.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Who is Close to Us and Who is Not? *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 48(49)

*Enarrationes in Psalmos* was written between 392–418. It is a homiletic commentary and based on preached sermons which secretaries noted down.<sup>21</sup> It was primarily aimed at ordinary Christians. Augustine interpreted the Psalms mainly figuratively and christologically and throughout the work highlighted connections between the Old and the New Testaments. The passage containing the interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the explanation of Psalm 48(49), gives an impression of unedited notes, as Augustine addressed his audience (*fratres*) directly and reminded them of what he had said earlier. In his explanation, Augustine does not use the allegorical method.

When explaining the words in Psalm 48(49):11 *et relinquunt alienis divitias suas* (they will leave their wealth to others and not to their sons), Augustine focuses on the word *alienus* (stranger). He states that the Psalm seems to reckon accursed those whose goods will be owned by strangers after their death, but this is not what the Psalm really means.<sup>22</sup> The Psalm must be interpreted spiritually. He chose to use the Lukan parable to explain how “strangers”<sup>23</sup> can become “sons”, and *vice versa*, and to identify the one who is truly close to one and conversely who is not.<sup>24</sup> He starts by reminding his listeners of how the Lord in the Gospel had responded to the one who questioned him on what, “Love your neighbour (*proximus*) as yourself” meant, and was asked in return, “Who is my neighbor (*mihi proximus*)?” Augustine then tells the whole parable in his own words focusing on the theme “close-far away” or “closely related-stranger”, and characterizes the Samaritan as follows: “just some unknown Samaritan, a stranger” (*Samaritanus nescio quis, extraneus erat*). He concludes the story by stating that when the Lord asked who was closest (*proximus*) to the wounded man, he was given the answer “I suppose it is the one who dealt mercifully with him”. Here, Augustine draws the conclusion that the one who shows mercy is one’s neighbour. In this way, a stranger (*extraneus*) becomes close (*proximus*) to someone by treating him kindly and helping him, and those who do not come to one’s aid when they are in trouble become strangers (*alieni*). He continues by quoting the punchline of the parable: Go and do the same! Your neighbour is the one to whom you show mercy. This interpretation is not christological (the Samaritan is not identified as Christ but referred to as a stranger). It is an ethical interpretation, but, above all, it is a discussion about what “neighbour” means. At the end he returns to his original question: in what way do “those who lead bad lives” (Ps 48/49:11) leave their wealth to strangers?

#### 5. A Christological Interpretation of the Samaritan: *Sermo* 171 and *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 124.43

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<sup>20</sup> Clark 2014 focusses on Augustine’s ethical teaching based on this parable, but fails to use this and other interpretations that would have been useful for his argument.

<sup>21</sup> Cameron 1999a, 290–296, esp, 291.

<sup>22</sup> English translation by Maria Boulding. 2000. *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21th Century. Expositions of the Psalms III/16*. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press.

<sup>23</sup> One of main meanings of *extraneus* is “one not belonging to the family”, which suits well to the discussion of inheritance.

<sup>24</sup> *Propinquus* is usually translated as closely related, or neighbour.

It is not known when and where Augustine preached his homily 171. The epistle text he preached on was Phil 4:4–6 “Rejoice in the Lord”, which he connected with Acts 17:28 (“In him we live, and move, and are”) and Phil 4:5–6 (“The Lord is very near; do not be anxious about anything”, according to *Vetus Latina: Dominus in proximo est, nihil solliciti fueritis*). Augustine leads his listeners to wonder how God could be both far and close, both above all the heavens and here on earth as stated in Acts. He posed the question: who is this who is both far away (*longinquus*) and very close (*proximus*), if not he, who in his mercy has become close to us? (*Sermo* 171.1)

This question leads Augustine and his listeners to the parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>25</sup> We have already seen above that, for Augustine, it is precisely the act of mercy that made the Samaritan “close” (*proximus*). In this particular sermon, he develops this theme christologically: in the incarnation God became close to human beings. God was not far away from human beings in relation to place, but in relation to essence: God is immortal whereas people are mortal; he is just, whereas people are sinners. In his mercy, God chose to descend to us so that the one who was far away from us would be close. (*Sermo* 171.3)

Augustine retold the parable with the distinction “far away – close” in his mind. He preached his homily to an audience who already knew the story; he did not have to tell them everything. He started by stating that the Samaritan means Christ and then went on to initiate the story. He told them about the discussion between Christ and “someone” who enquired about the greatest commandment of the Law; and Christ’s answer, “You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself”. After reiterating the question, “who is my neighbor?” Augustine retold the parable in a few sentences. The man lying half-dead symbolizes all human beings. Unlike Luke, Augustine knows the nationality of the victim, and says that he is—by birth (*genere*)—close to the priest and the Levite, who bypassed him, that is, he is an Israelite. The Samaritan, who was “far removed from him in nationality, but a near neighbor in mercy” helped him. Augustine reminded his audience that the word *Samaritanus* means “a guardian”, and therefore refers to Christ, who is the guardian of Israel (Ps 120/121:4).

A rather similar interpretation is presented in *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 43 where Augustine explains John 8:48–59.<sup>26</sup> Tractates on the Gospel of John—124 texts altogether—were written

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<sup>25</sup>Totum enim genus humanum est homo ille qui iacebat in via semivivus a latronibus relictus, quem contempsit transiens sacerdos et levites, et accessit ad eum curandum eique opitulandum transiens Samaritanus. Ut autem narraret hoc, unde causa descendit? Quemdam quaerentem quae sint optima praecepta et summa in lege, admonuit duo esse: Diliges Dominum Deum tuum ex toto corde tuo, et ex tota anima tua, et ex tota mente tua; et diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum. Ille autem: Et quis est mihi proximus? 5 Et narravit Dominus: Homo quidam descendebat ab Ierusalem in Iericho. Ostendit illum quodammodo Israelitam. Et incidit in latrones. Cum exspoliassent, et plagas ei graves irrogassent, dimiserunt eum in via semivivum. Transiit sacerdos, utique genere proximus, praeteriit iacentem. Transiit Levites, et hic genere proximus, iacentem etiam ipse contempsit. Transiit Samaritanus, genere longinquus, misericordia proximus, fecitque quod nostis 6. In quo Samaritano se voluit intellegi Dominus Iesus Christus. "Samaritanus" enim "Custos" interpretatur. Ideo surgens a mortuis, iam non moritur, et mors ei ultra non dominabitur 7; quia: Non dormit, neque dormitat qui custodit Israel 8. Denique quando conviciis tantis blasphemabant Iudaei, dixerunt illi: Nonne verum dicimus, quia Samaritanus es, et daemonium habes? 9 Cum ergo duo essent verba conviciosa obiecta Domino, dictumque illi esset: Nonne verum dicimus, quia Samaritanus es, et daemonium habes? poterat respondere: Nec Samaritanus sum, nec daemonium habeo; respondit autem: Ego daemonium non habeo 10. Quod respondit, refutavit; quod tacuit, confirmavit. Negavit se habere daemonium, qui se noverat daemoniorum exclusorem; non se negavit infirmi custodem. Ergo Dominus in proximo est 11; quia Dominus nobis factus est in proximo. (*sermo* 171.2). English translation by E. Hill 2013. *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Sermons III/5.* Hyde Park, New York: New City Press.

<sup>26</sup> Est ergo ille custos noster, qui creator noster. Num enim pertinuit ad eum ut redimeremur, et non pertineret ut servaremur? Denique ut plenius noveritis mysterium quare se Samaritanum negare non debuit, parabolam illam notissimam attendite, ubi homo quidam descendebat ab Ierusalem in Iericho, et incidit in latrones, qui eum graviter



sometime between 408–420. It is debated whether the last tractates were ever preached.<sup>27</sup> Here, too, Augustine takes the meaning of the word *Samaritanus* as his point of departure. He emphasizes that, in the Gospel of John, Jesus did not deny that the man who offered help was a Samaritan, which means “a guardian” or “a keeper”, and thus used the parable to explain in what ways Christ is our guardian:

He then is our Keeper who is our Creator. For did it belong to Him to redeem us, and would it not be His to preserve us? Finally, that you may know more fully the hidden reason why He ought not to have denied that He was a Samaritan, call to mind that well-known parable, where a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who wounded him severely, and left him half dead on the road. A priest came along and took no notice of him. A Levite came up, and he also passed on his way. A certain Samaritan came up—He who is our Keeper. He went up to the wounded man. He exercised mercy, and did a neighbor's part to one whom He did not account an alien. To this, then, He only replied that He had not a devil, but not that He was not a Samaritan.<sup>28</sup>

These passages summarize the interpretation that was common in the early Church, and can be seen as a general interpretive key for understanding of the parable: Christ is the Samaritan who saves human beings.<sup>29</sup>

## 6. Sin and Sanation: *Sermo* 131.6

*Sermo* 131 is one of the few of Augustine's homilies which can be dated with precision. It was given in Carthage on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 417. In this homily, Augustine explained John 6:53-66, which was probably the text read in the service just prior to his sermon. The explanation is directed against the Pelagians.<sup>30</sup> As is often in his sermons, Augustine used the device of fictitious dialogue, *sermocinatio*, that is, letting a fictive interlocutor pose questions during his sermon.<sup>31</sup>

On this occasion, Augustine used this well-known Lukan parable to teach about Christian anthropology, free will and grace, and also to argue against the Pelagian views on these topics. Here too he could count on the parable being known to his audience; he started immediately with its spiritual interpretation without re-telling the story. As in Origen and Ambrose's expositions, the man lying on the ground was explained as symbolizing the whole of humanity. Augustine subsequently departs from traditional interpretations, however, and uses the story to teach about contemporaneous and much debated questions of free will, salvation in baptism and the Christian life that follows. Using the parable, he states that human beings had been created with free will, but they had lost it because of sin. Christ, the Samaritan, lifted up the poor man, that is, human beings. Augustine states that remission of all sins happened in baptism. Nonetheless, he wants to emphasize that the journey of a Christian does not end at baptism: the process of healing is still ongoing.

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vulnerantes, semivivum in via reliquerunt. Transiit sacerdos, neglexit eum: transiit Levites, et ipse praeteriit: transiit quidam Samaritanus, ipse est custos noster; ipse accessit ad saucium, ipse impendit misericordiam, eique se praestitit proximum, quem non deputavit alienum (Luc. X, 30–37). Ad hoc ergo solum quod daemonium non haberet, non autem se Samaritanum non esse, respondit.

<sup>27</sup> Fitzgerald 1999c, 474–75.

<sup>28</sup> English translation by John Gibb. 1888. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Father. First Series, Vol. 7. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

<sup>29</sup> See Teske 2004, 353.

<sup>30</sup> Hill 1992, 323.

<sup>31</sup> For *sermocinatio*, see Nisula 2021.

Baptism is, according to Augustine, only “oil and wine” poured onto wounds, and he reminds his listeners that, after treating the injured man’s wounds with these, the Keeper still carried the man to the inn. The inn of course symbolizes the church, where the man was given more help: he was still in the process of being cured. The image of the church as a hospital and Christ as *medicus* is one of Augustine’s favourites, and it was natural for him to incorporate it into his interpretation of this story, too. Because of this unusual spiritual interpretation of the parable, I quote it in its entirety:

It’s true that man, when he was created, received great powers of free decision-making, but he lost them by sinning. He collapsed into death, became sickly, was left by robbers half-dead at the roadside; the Samaritan passing by (it means “guardian”, by the way) lifted him up onto his beast; he is still being taken along to the inn. What has he got to be bigheaded about? He is still being cured.

“But all that’s necessary,” he<sup>32</sup> says, “is that in baptism I received remission of all my sins.” Just because iniquity was eliminated, does that mean an end to infirmity? I received, he says, remission of all my sins. That’s absolutely true, of course. All sins were erased in the sacrament of baptism, absolutely all of them, words, deeds, thoughts, they were all blotted out. But that’s the oil and wine that was poured in by the roadside. You remember, dearly beloved, that man half-dead by the roadside, beaten up by robbers, and how he was attended to, being given wine and oil for his wounds. That means, certainly, that he has already being pardoned for the error of his ways, and yet his feebleness still has to be healed at the inn. If you recognize the inn, it’s the Church; an inn now, because we still live, we are travellers. But it’s going to be house and home, from which we shall never more depart, when we arrive hale and hearty at the kingdom of heaven. Meanwhile let us gladly accept being cured at the inn; don’t let’s boast of our health while we are still feeble; because all we achieve by getting proud is to ensure that we will never be healed by taking the cure.<sup>33</sup>

In this text Augustine used the parable in a new way, inspired by the Pelagian controversy. He used it to discuss both anthropology and free will, and he also gave some details a sacramental interpretation. Finally, Augustine uses this parable to give his listeners an eschatological hope: the Church is now an inn (*stabulum*), because we still are on the way, but it is going to be a home in the kingdom of heaven.

## 7. Allegory and Other Methods of Interpretation

The examples of Augustine’s interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan show that he was both dependent on previous Christian authors and at other times felt free to apply the parable to new situations in new ways.<sup>34</sup> The example of allegorical interpretation presented at the beginning of this article, in *Quaestionum evangelicarum libri II*, is probably the earliest of his dealings with this parable and shows the most dependence on other theologians. It is also the only instance when he used extreme allegory. In the other examples, he is more independent, and uses the parable differently. He seems to rely on his audience already knowing the story and is, thus, able to emphasize different aspects in it and interpret it in different ways.

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<sup>32</sup> “He” refers to a fictional person Augustine is discussing with.

<sup>33</sup> Translated by Edmund Hill. 1992. *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Sermond III/4*. Brooklyn, New York: New City Press.

<sup>34</sup> For Augustine’s view that a text can have several meanings, see Teske 2004, 354-355.

Christian allegorical interpretation was based on the idea expressed in the words of Jesus in Luke 8:10 (compare Matt 13:11; Mark 4:11) “To you it has been given to understand God’s secrets but to others everything comes in parables”. Early Christian theologians thus thought that Christ opens the Scriptures for Christians, while others cannot see the hidden, deeper meaning in the text. O’Keefe and Reno aptly named their book on early Christian interpretation of the Bible as “Sanctified vision”: amongst others Augustine thought that the mind of a human being must be cleansed so that it can see the divine light.<sup>35</sup> They point out that patristic exegesis is based on the structuring principle that the divine economy of Christ shapes the whole Scripture so that it forms a coherent unity.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, everything in the Scripture (including the parables) teaches Christ’s salvific work. This does not mean that the literal meaning of the text was not important: on the contrary, in most cases the spiritual interpretation is built on the literal one and simply gives more to it.<sup>37</sup>

Augustine presents his theory of interpretation principally in *De doctrina christiana*.<sup>38</sup> According to his sign–theory, all words are signs, and all things are taught by signs. Along these lines, it is natural to understand that both the parable as a whole, and its every detail, can carry a deeper meaning. In order to lead others to the correct way of interpretation, Augustine gives concrete rules for the reading of Scripture (not only the parables). First, the text should be read so that the reader knows the books and remembers their content (2.14). Second, one must carefully find all the clearly formulated “precepts about how to live and rules of what to believe” (2.14). Linguistic skills, knowledge of history and other things, are important in this second step (2.16). Only after taking these first two steps can one proceed to interpreting more difficult passages, which must be read in the light of the clearer ones (2.30–31). From this it is clear that parables are to be understood in the light of the rule of faith as it is visible in the clearer passages of Scripture. Parables are even easier to handle than other texts as they do not report historical events but are stories which have the goal of teaching something other than the literary meaning of the text.

Augustine’s allegorical interpretations are not random or arbitrary in the sense that he stated whatever came to mind. In fact, he warns against this kind of interpretation. According to him, all Scriptural interpretation must be in accordance with two hermeneutical principles, that of love, *caritas*, and that of the Rule of Faith, *regula fidei* (*Doctr. Chr.* 2.9.14; 3.3); everything must be examined in the light of these.

Why then is there allegory in the Scripture? Augustine’s answers are: so that no one should be bored, and also because these kinds of texts are more pleasing for the reader and thus interesting. He writes, “Discovering things is much more gratifying if there has been some difficulty in the search of them.” (*Doctr. Chr.* 2.8). There are of course other reasons, too. As a skilled rhetor, Augustine used different rhetorical methods to make his point to his congregation, and parables were easy for him to use in different ways for different purposes. The parables were read and interpreted in the context of the Church and used to teach about contemporaneous questions.

## 8. Conclusions

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<sup>35</sup> O’Keefe and Reno 2005, 23. They quote *Doctr. Chr.* 1.10.

<sup>36</sup> O’Keefe and Reno 2005, 110-111.

<sup>37</sup> O’Keefe and Reno 2005, 90. 100.

<sup>38</sup> For Augustine’s sign-theory, see Markus 1996; Cameron 1999b, 793-798; Alici 1996, 28-53.

Augustine was conscious of his interpretation of the Scripture. For him, it was important to understand the true meaning of Scripture, and he stressed the importance of knowledge of languages and history. According to his sign-theory, parables are signs, and the details in the parables are signs too. A sign points to something that is real. Augustine shared the early Christian thought that the spiritual understanding Christ gave to the Christians opened a deeper understanding of the text. The whole Scripture speaks about Christ, and Christ speaks through the Scripture. From this point of view it is logical to think that even the parables of Christ taught the economy of salvation.

It is difficult to date all of Augustine's texts, but it seems that the most extreme example of allegory, in *Quaestionum evangelicarum libri II*, is the earliest. The example of the Good Samaritan shows that Augustine gave different kinds of interpretations to one and the same parable: an extremely allegorical interpretation—learned from tradition and subsequently developed further—and more creative ones, with different emphases. These were not seen as contradictory for him. For Augustine, the parables of Jesus were polyvalent; they could have several meanings. In several interpretations, he focussed on the question that Luke's text introduces: who is my neighbour? He offers an answer which is quite in line with the original intention. For him, ethical, christological, ecclesiological, soteriological, sacramental and eschatological interpretations were all possible as well. In his mind, parables were—from their inception—meant to make the listeners realise something over and above the direct literary meaning of the story and were, therefore, open to several interpretations. According to Augustine, Scripture uses allegory to make the reading more interesting too. As a rhetor, he thought that the preacher's task was to teach, delight and move (*docere, delectare* and *flectere*), and parables could be used for these purposes in various ways.

On occasion, as Augustine ponders over a correct interpretation of a passage, he states that it is sometimes very difficult to understand with certainty what the original author of a Biblical text intended, but argues it is more important that the lesson learned is in accordance with two criteria: *caritas* and *regula fidei*, love and the rule of faith. One could say that even before Augustine starts to read Scripture, he knows what it says. He goes as far as to say that it is not so harmful to make mistakes in interpretation provided it, nevertheless, still builds up charity.<sup>39</sup> Augustine's exegesis is practical: for him, Scripture is a living salvific text that has the purpose of transforming the listener. His interpretations of the parables were intended not only to teach Christian doctrine (that, too), but even more to change the Christians' behaviour.

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<sup>39</sup> Doctr. Chr. 1.36.40; Teske 2004, 356-357.

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