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# The Two Books of God: The Metaphor of the Book of Nature in Augustine

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## Abstract

Augustine is considered a leading figure in the history of the book of nature. But what exactly did he say about it? This article examines all the metaphors with which Augustine refers, or seems to refer, to the visible world as a divine book. It is found that four of the often-cited passages have a different meaning, but two of them refer to the material creation as a book. The article further explores how the idea of God's two books—nature and Scripture—influences Augustine's literal interpretation of Genesis and his trinitarian theology. Finally, it argues that the ultimate foundation for the Augustinian book of nature should be sought in his theology of the Word.

**Keywords:** Augustine, Book of Nature, Faith and Reason, Metaphor, Natural Theology

## Introduction

Augustine is widely considered as one of the originators of the famous metaphor of the book of nature.<sup>1</sup> A master of rhetoric, he coined numerous renowned expressions such as that of «reading a kind of large book of the nature of reality» (*quasi legens magnum quendam librum naturae rerum*).<sup>2</sup> In another text, Augustine compared the «page of divine scripture» to the «the book of the world» (*liber orbis terrarum*), which is open to all, including the illiterate.<sup>3</sup> He also spoke of the *liber creaturae caeli et terrae*<sup>4</sup> as well as «a certain great big book, the book of created nature» (*magnus liber ipsa species creaturae*),<sup>5</sup> and stated that «our greater book

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<sup>1</sup> See for example H. M. Nobis, *Buch der Natur*, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. J. Ritter, vol. 1, Basel: Schwabe 1971, 957. He is the only patristic author cited in H. Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1981, 47–50, and E. Rothacker, *Das Buch der Natur: Materialien und Grundsätzliches zur Metaphorengeschichte*, ed. W. Perpeet, Bonn 1979, 44–46. On the history of the book nature as a theological metaphor, see generally A. Vanderjagt and K. van Berkel, eds., *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Leuven: Peeters 2005; A. Vanderjagt and K. van Berkel, eds., *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, Leuven: Peeters 2006; G. Tanzella-Nitti, *The Two Books Prior to the Scientific Revolution*, in *Annales Theologici* 18 (2004), 51–83; G. Tanzella-Nitti, *La metafora dei 'due libri': un breve itinerario storico-teologico*, in *Teologia fondamentale in contesto scientifico*, vol. 3: Religione e rivelazione, Roma: Città Nuova 2018, 360–94.

<sup>2</sup> *c. Faust.* 32, 20 (CSEL 25/1, 782).

<sup>3</sup> *en. Ps.* 45, 7 (CCSL 38, 522).

<sup>4</sup> *Gen. litt.* 5, 1 (CSEL 28/1, 137).

<sup>5</sup> *s.* 68, 6 (Miscellanea Augustiniana 1, 360; Patrologia Latina, Supplementum 2, 505).

is the entire [480] world» (*maior liber noster orbis terrarum est*).<sup>6</sup> In the *Confessions*, he also invited his readers to «contemplate the heavens», the work of God’s fingers, because «we know no other books with the like power to lay pride low and so surely to silence the obstinate contender who tries to thwart your reconciling work by defending his sins.»<sup>7</sup>

But what did Augustine mean by these famous phrases? How much of the subsequent theology of the book of nature may be attributed to the great bishop of Hippo? Some have questioned the Augustinian provenance of the metaphor altogether or at least downplayed it significantly. For example, Mews contends that Augustine «never develops a fully fledged theology of the “book of nature” as comparable to the book of scripture.»<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as we will see, some of the expressions cited above have little to do with the book of nature.

Surprisingly, the role and meaning of the metaphor of the book of nature in Augustine have not been systematically studied. The *Augustinus-Lexikon* refers to the metaphor under two entries (*Liber* and *Natura*), but only very briefly.<sup>9</sup> The most important contribution is an article by Volker Henning Drecoll that focuses on the expression *liber naturae* in *Contra Faustum*.<sup>10</sup> Drecoll argues that the combination of the words *liber* and *naturae*—widely employed in medieval and early modern literature—is not found before Augustine, and he provides an extensive commentary on the text in which the expression appears. Many other sources refer to Augustine’s book of nature in passing, and Augustine-related quotes abound in internet sources related to the metaphor, but the question has only received limited scholarly attention.

[481] The present article fills this gap by providing the first complete study of the texts in which Augustine uses, or appears to use, the metaphor of the book of nature. It covers all the relevant passages in their original context to clarify the question and facilitate further studies on the question. It also provides a tentative proposal for the correct foundation of the metaphor in Augustine’s theology.

The article is divided into four parts. The first—a kind of *pars destruens*—covers those metaphors and expressions that misleadingly resemble the book of nature but were meant to communicate something different. These false leads are quite a few, which may give the impression that Augustine had nothing to do with the metaphor. Nevertheless, the rest of the article—we may call it the *pars construens*—shows that it is by no means incorrect to associate Augustine with the book of nature. This is done in three steps. The first step is to identify passages in which he uses the metaphor to refer to the visible creation. The second step is to take the analysis beyond specific expressions and to look at the broader ideas of Augustine’s theology. That will show that the idea of the material creation as a divine book parallel with the Scriptures is deeply rooted in Augustine’s thinking. Thus, it is correct to speak about a genuinely Augustinian theology of the book of nature. Finally, we will briefly enquire into the question concerning the ultimate foundation of Augustine’s metaphor of the book of nature.

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<sup>6</sup> *ep.* 43, 25 (CSEL 34/2, 107).

<sup>7</sup> *conf.* 13, 15, 17 (CCSL 27, 251): *uideamus, domine, caelos, opera digitorum tuorum [Ps 8,4] ... neque enim nouimus alios libros ita destruentes superbiam, ita destruentes inimicum et defensorem resistentem reconciliationi tuae defendendo peccata sua.*

<sup>8</sup> C. J. Mews, *The World as Text: The Bible and the Book of Nature in Twelfth Century Theology*, in *Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. T. J. Heffernan and T. E. Burman, Leiden: Brill 2005, 102.

<sup>9</sup> See W. Hübner, *Liber (libellus)*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 3, ed. C. Mayer, Basel: Schwabe 2004, 959; J. Söder, *Natura*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 4, ed. R. Dodaro, C. Mayer and C. Müller, Basel: Schwabe 2012, 171.

<sup>10</sup> See V. H. Drecoll, “*Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum*” (*Augustine*, c. Faust. 32:20): *The Origin of the Combination Liber Naturae in Augustine and Chrysostomus*, in *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Vanderjagt and K. van Berkel, Leuven: Peeters 2005, 35–48.

## 1. *Pars Destruens*: Misleading Quotations

### 1.1 *Liber Creaturae Caeli et Terrae*

Let us start by clearing the path and removing some false leads that have circulated in the literature. First of all, Herbert Nobis' seminal dictionary entry traces Augustine's book of nature to the expression *liber creaturae caeli et terrae* in his commentary on *Gen. 2,4* (LXX) in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, published in 416.<sup>11</sup> Here, however, Augustine is simply borrowing a phrase that describes a specific part of the biblical book with the words: «*This is the book of the creating of heaven and earth when the day was made...*».<sup>12</sup> It is clear from the text itself that, in this connection, [482] Augustine has no such metaphor in mind but is focused on showing that the world was created in one day.

### 1.2 *Liber Tibi Sit Orbis Terrarum*

What about the famous expression *liber orbis terrarum*? It appears in the *Expositions on the Psalms*, one of Augustine's most comprehensive works on which he labored for nearly three decades (and the dating of which is fraught with difficulties). Commenting on *Ps. 45* (Vulgate), he employs an actualizing method of interpretation, typical of patristic exegesis. It is a bit complex, but let us try to get the gist of it to understand the meaning of the metaphor.

Augustine describes the tribulations of a guilty conscience and the peace and strength found in Christ. It is an allegorical and Christological interpretation of the Psalm, applied to our personal struggles, our experience of weakness, and sin. Christ is depicted as the counterpoint of our weakness, the source of that faith which has the power to move mountains. The second part of verse 4 reads *conturbati sunt montes in fortitudine ejus* (Vulgate; the English Standard Version has «though the mountains tremble at its swelling»). Here, Augustine offers a mighty description of Christ as the highest of all mountains and of the apostles as men given the power to move mountains if they only have faith. Thus, when the Jews in the Acts of the Apostles reject their preaching, the apostles turn to the gentiles, transplanting the mountains into the open sea of paganism. What follows from all this? It is here that Augustine states:

Pay attention, and see the truth of it. When these predictions were made, they were obscure, because the events had not yet taken place; but is there anyone around today who is unaware that they have? There is for you the book of the divinely inspired page, so that you might hear these things; there is for you the book of the wide world (*liber tibi sit orbis terrarum*), so that you might see these things. Only the literate can read the books, but even the illiterate can read the book of the world (*in toto mundo legat et idiota*).<sup>13</sup>

[483] In other words, Augustine pictures the apostles as mighty warriors and divine instruments who shook the ancient world by the grace that was working in them through faith. An essential qualification is, therefore, in order. Read in isolation, the passage might be understood in the sense of the later standard use of the metaphor of the book of nature, namely that the works of creation are a kind of universal book that proclaims divine lessons to the illiterate. However, what Augustine has in mind here is something more particular: it is

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<sup>11</sup> See *Gen. litt.* 5, 1; 5, 3, 5; 5, 5, 16; 5, 11, 27; 5, 23, 46 (same phrase repeated). See Nobis, *Buch der Natur*, 957. This is at least apparently repeated (without further comment) in Hübner, *Liber (libellus)*, 959 n. 46.

<sup>12</sup> The Latin text used by Augustine is based on the Septuagint which reads: Αὕτη ἡ βίβλος γενέσεως οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὅτε ἐγένετο, that is, «This book is that of the origin of heaven and earth, when it came into being».

<sup>13</sup> *en. Ps. 45, 7* (CCSL 38, 522): ... *liber tibi sit pagina diuina, ut haec audias; liber tibi sit orbis terrarum, ut haec uideas. in istis codicibus non ea legunt, nisi qui litteras nouerunt; in toto mundo legat et idiota*. I have slightly emended the English translation in *Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms, 33–50*, translated by M. Boulding, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 2000 (The Works of Saint Augustine III/16).

not the works of creation but the events of history that proclaim the Christological meaning of the Psalm. We should classify the passage as an example of the metaphor of the book of history, not that of the book of nature.

### 1.3. *Maior Liber Noster Orbis Terrarum*

The third quotation is similar to the one we just saw: Augustine states that «our greater book is the entire world» (*maior liber noster orbis terrarum est*).<sup>14</sup> Several authors have interpreted this in terms of the book of nature.<sup>15</sup> It has even found its way to the title of a recent book, the author of which further writes that «according to Augustine, the created world itself, the greatest of all visible things, testifies to the truth of Scripture.»<sup>16</sup> The overall claim may be correct, but we must again take a closer look at the actual text.

The passage is found in Augustine's Letter 43, written towards late 396 or early 397. He writes to a group of Donatist leaders intending to establish ecclesial unity. The letter is reconciliatory but firm, as it discusses both theological principles and historical events surrounding the conflict between the Donatists and the Catholics. Augustine delivers a lengthy review of the case of Caecilianus, whose appointment as the Catholic bishop of Carthage in 311 had led to the Donatist schism when the rigoristic party opposed Caecilianus. They further argued that Caecilianus' ordination by Felix of Aptunga had been invalid because Felix was accused by some of having been a *traditor*—a traitor, or literally, someone who “handed over” Scriptures, sacred vessels, or the names of their brethren to the Roman authorities during the persecutions.

[484] After presenting a Catholic view of the events, Augustine tries to appeal to his readers' sense of ecclesiological principle in light of Scripture. He writes that even if they cannot agree with the Catholics on the facts concerning Caecilianus, they should notice how the Catholic Church's expansion throughout the world is a fulfillment of the prophecies, notably *Ps.* 2:

Let us, of course, not deal with old papers, nor with public archives, nor with judicial or ecclesiastical proceedings. Our book is greater—the world (*maior liber noster orbis terrarum est*); in it I read the fulfillment of the promise I read in the book of God. It says: *The Lord said to me, «You are my son; this day I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I shall give you the nations as your heritage and the ends of the earth as your possession» [Ps. 2,7-8].*<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Augustine tries to resolve the conflict by appealing to the observation of the world—the book of historical events, or more precisely, the fact of the presence of the Catholic Church in the entire world. He is seeking to counter the position of the Donatists, who sought to legitimate their schismatic church by invoking the infidelity of some Catholic bishops during the persecutions. In his response, Augustine uses a form of the word *traditor*, arguing, however, that the fundamental question is not the possession or handing over of books but the reception of the heritage that God has entrusted to the Church in his last will (*testamentum*). Therefore, those who fight against the Church are metaphorically handing over to the flames not physical books but the very will of God:

Let whoever does not share in this heritage, whatever books he may possess, know that he has been disinherited. Whoever fights against this heritage proves quite well that he is a stranger to the family of God. The question, of

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<sup>14</sup> *ep.* 43, 25 (CSEL 34/2, 107).

<sup>15</sup> For example, cf. Hübner, *Liber (libellus)*, 959.

<sup>16</sup> N. Lozovsky, “*The Earth Is Our Book*”: *Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West ca. 400-1000*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2000 (Recentiores: Later Latin Texts and Contexts), 142.

<sup>17</sup> *ep.* 43, 25 (CSEL 34/2, 107): *quae tunc acta sint, legistis; quae nunc agantur, uidetis. si de illis in aliquo dubitatis, ista iam cernite. certe non chartis ueteribus, non archiuis publicis, non gestis forensibus aut ecclesiasticis agamus. maior liber noster orbis terrarum est; in eo lego completum, quod in libro dei lego promissum: dominus, inquit, dixit ad me: filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te; postula a me et dabo tibi gentes hereditatem tuam et possessionem tuam terminos terrae [Ps. 2,7sq.].* English translation according to *Augustine, Letters 1–99*, translated by R. Teske, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 2001 (The Works of Saint Augustine II/1).

course, centers around the handing over of the books of God in which this heritage is promised. Let that person, then, be believed to have handed over God's will [*testamentum*] to the flames who brings suit against the will of the testator.<sup>18</sup>

[485] In summary, the biblical text promises the nations as Christ's heritage and the ends of the earth as his possession. This has come true in the Catholic Church, not in that of the Donatists. By the book of the world, Augustine refers to the existence of the wide-world Church and argues that this observable fact contradicts the Donatist claim to legitimacy.<sup>19</sup>

#### 1.4 The Book of the Heavenly Vault

There is one more text that must be scrutinized. It is probably the most frequently read passage related to the book of nature—famous, quite simply because it is found in the *Confessions*. It seems to present the heavens as an object of contemplation, teaching wisdom to the little ones and calling everyone to humility and silence:

Let us contemplate the heavens, the work of your fingers, O Lord; clear away that cloud you have spread beneath them, hiding them from our eyes. There is the witness you have borne to yourself, and to little ones it imparts wisdom. Out of the mouths of infants and sucklings evoke perfect praise, O my God. We know no other books with the like power to lay pride low and so surely to silence the obstinate contender who tries to thwart your reconciling work by defending his sins.<sup>20</sup>

This passage *seems* to say that the sky teaches knowledge of God (cf. *Ps.* 19,2, Hebrew and LXX versification). It turns out, however, that this specific text means something entirely different. This becomes clear when we look at the text preceding the passage we just read. What Augustine does is that he develops the biblical theme of the firmament as a scroll, [486] based on the book of Isaiah. He applies this metaphor to the heavens and the Scriptures with the symbolism of the book (*liber*) and the tent/skin (*pellis*). Reading together *Is.* 34,4 («The heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll») and *Ps.* 103 (104),2 («You spread out the heavens like a tent»), he pictures the Scriptures as a kind of vault and firmament, stretching above humanity like a tent and providing protection for mortal humanity like a form of clothing:

[Y]ou alone, our God, have made for us a vault overhead in giving us your divine scripture. The sky will one day be rolled up like a book, but for the present it is stretched out above us like the skin of a tent, for your divine scripture has attained an even nobler authority now that the mortal writers through whom you provided it for us have died. And you know, Lord, you know how you clothed human beings in skins when they became mortal in consequence of their sin. That is why you are said to have stretched the vault that is your book, stretched out like

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<sup>18</sup> *ep.* 43, 25 (CSEL 34/2, 107): *huic hereditati qui non communicat, quoslibet libros teneat, exheredatum se esse cognoscat: hanc hereditatem quisquis expugnat, alienum se esse a familia dei satis indicat. certe de traditione diuinorum librorum uertitur quaestio, ubi hereditas ista promissa est. ille ergo credatur testamentum tradidisse flammis, qui contra uoluntatem litigat testatoris.* (Teske's translation slightly emended.)

<sup>19</sup> Augustine returns to the argument in the concluding section of the letter: «No one wipes out from heaven the decree of God; no one wipes out from the earth the Church of God. He promised the whole world; she has filled the whole world. And she contains both evil and good, but on earth she loses only the evil, while in heaven she admits only the good.» *Aug., ep.* 43, 27.

<sup>20</sup> *conf.* 13, 15, 17 (CCSL 27, 251): *uideamus, domine, caelos, opera digitorum tuorum [Ps 8,4]: disserena oculis nostris nubilum, quo subtexisti eos. ibi est testimonium tuum sapientiam praestans paruulis [Ps 18,8]. perforce, deus meus, laudem tuam ex ore infantium et lactantium [Ps 8,3]. neque enim nouimus alios libros ita destruentes superbiam, ita destruentes inimicum et defensorem resistentem reconciliationi tuae defendendo peccata sua.* English translation according to *Augustine, The Confessions*, translated by M. Boulding, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 1997 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/1).

skin of a tent those words of yours so free from discord, which you have canopied over us through the ministry of mortal men.<sup>21</sup>

In this allegorical picture, Augustine uses the translation of the “tent” as “skin” (*pellis*), which may be understood as clothing for humanity. It is not that the visible heavens symbolize a book; it is that the Scriptures are presented under the metaphor of the heavenly firmament.

The apparent ease with which Augustine moves between different metaphors is evident in another passage that follows. There, praising the angels, he applies the book metaphor once more, imagining the angels of God reading the will of God without any mediation: «Their book is never closed, their scroll never rolled up, for you are their book...».<sup>22</sup> Augustine’s [487] statement here may be an allusion to, and modification of, various texts in the Book of Revelation. There we find a sealed scroll that only the Lamb can open (*Apoc.* 5,1-9), and the sky vanishes «like a scroll that is rolled up» (6,14). However, in the end, the saints see the face of God and need no created illumination, «for the Lord God will be their light» (*Apoc.* 22,5). One may also notice reflections here of the general Augustinian principle that the heart of all the Scriptures is the love of God, and those who love well do not need them except for instructing others.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. *Pars Construens*: Nature and Scripture as God’s Two Books

### 2.1. *Magnus Liber Ipsa Species Creaturae*

At least four of the relevant passages are originally unrelated to the idea that visible nature is a kind of book. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the idea itself is foreign to Augustine. There are two texts in which Augustine uses the book metaphor as expressing the parallelism of Scripture and nature. The clearest of them is contained in *Sermon* 68 on the New Testament, dated towards the end of Augustine’s life, between 425-430.

In this sermon, Augustine preaches on *Mt.* 11,25, which speaks about God’s hiding things from the wise and the understanding. The principal theme of the sermon is humility, but it also touches, among other things, on the culpability of those who fail to praise the Creator. In support of his argument, Augustine invites his listeners to imagine a learned person who skillfully describes a building, its pillars, roof, and walls, yet denies that it has been made by men. Thus, a distinction is established between different kinds of knowledge: that of the wise and understanding and that of the little ones to whom the mysteries have been revealed. Posing the question of how the invisible things of God have been revealed, Augustine answers with *Rom.* 1,20 that they

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<sup>21</sup> *conf.* 13, 15, 16 (CCSL 27, 250–251): *aut quis nisi tu, deus noster, fecisti nobis firmamentum [Gn 1,7] auctoritatis super nos in scriptura tua diuina? caelum enim plicabitur ut liber [Is 34,4] et nunc sicut pellis extenditur super nos. sublimioris enim auctoritatis est tua diuina scriptura, cum iam obierunt istam mortem illi mortales, per quos eam dispensasti nobis. et tu scis, domine, tu scis, quemadmodum pellibus indueris homines, cum peccato mortales fierent. unde sicut pellem [Ps 103,2] extendisti firmamentum libri tui, concordas utique sermones tuos, quos per mortalium ministerium superposuisti nobis.*

<sup>22</sup> *conf.* 13, 15, 18 (CCSL 27, 251–252): *sunt aliae aquae super hoc firmamentum [Gn 1,7], credo, immortales et a terrena corruptione secretae. laudent nomen [Ps 148,5] tuum, laudent te supercaelestes populi angelorum tuorum, qui non opus habent suspicere firmamentum hoc et legendo cognoscere uerbum tuum. uident enim faciem tuam semper [Mt 18,10] et ibi legunt sine syllabis temporum, quid uelit aeterna uoluntas tua. legunt, eligunt et diligunt; semper legunt et numquam praeterit quod legunt. eligendo enim et diligendo legunt ipsam incommutabilitatem consilii tui. non clauditur codex eorum nec plicatur liber eorum, quia tu ipse illis hoc es et es in aeternum [Ps 47,15], quia super hoc firmamentum ordinasti eos, quod firmasti super infirmitatem inferiorum populorum...*

<sup>23</sup> See for example *doc. chr.* 1, 39, 43: *homo itaque fide et spe et caritate subnixus eaque inconcusse retinens non indiget scripturis nisi ad alios instruendos.* On the love of God as the fulfilment of all the divine Scriptures, see *doc. chr.* 1, 35, 39.

are clearly perceived through the things that have been made. He illustrates this with the symbolism of the book:

Others, in order to find God, will read a book. Well, as a matter of fact there is a certain great big book, the book of created nature (*magnus liber ipsa spe[488]cies creaturae*). Look carefully at it top and bottom, observe it, read it. God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all these things he has made. Why look for a louder voice? Heaven and earth cries out to you, «God made me.»<sup>24</sup>

Augustine further notes that some have recognized this but are yet to blame because they have failed to glorify God by giving him thanks. Therefore, if the passage in the *Expositions on the Psalms* leaves any doubts concerning the revelatory purpose of the book of the universe, here the idea is clearly expressed.

Augustine also states immediately after the previous citation: «You can read what Moses wrote; in order to write it, what did Moses read, a man living in time? Observe heaven and earth in a religious spirit.»<sup>25</sup> Is Augustine implying something to the effect that Moses, so to speak, had been reading of the book of nature before he began to compose the scriptural account of creation? That idea is found in Basil the Great, who in his famous *Hexaemeron* (written around 370) argues that Moses prepared for the writing of the Genesis by spending forty years «in the contemplation of creation» (τῆ θεωρίᾳ τῶν ὄντων).<sup>26</sup> Such a connection between Basil and Augustine is, however, uncertain. Another interpretation of Augustine's statement is simply that the pious observation of heaven and earth is a substitute to the Bible for those who, like Moses in his time, have no Scriptures or cannot read them.<sup>27</sup>

[489] Quite surprisingly, this passage on the *magnus liber* that refers to the visible creation is not mentioned in most texts in which the patristic history of the book of nature is studied. The explanation seems to be that it was not included in Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (and translations based thereon) because only a fragmentary summary of this sermon was known to the Maurist editors (whose work Migne was based on), and that summary does not contain the passage above. The whole sermon was only published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and an English translation appeared only in 1991, so it naturally has received little attention.<sup>28</sup> It is an essential testimony to Augustine's idea of the book of nature because it incorporates the parallelism of Scripture and nature in the knowledge of God.

## 2.2. *Librum Naturae Rerum*: Reading Creation with Reverence

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<sup>24</sup> s. 68, 6 (MA 1, 360; PLS 2, 505): *alius, ut inueniat deum, librum legit. est quidam magnus liber ipsa species creaturae: superiorem et inferiorem contuere, attende, lege. non deus, unde eum cognosceres, de atramento litteras fecit: ante oculos tuos posuit haec ipsa quae fecit. quid quaeris maiorem uocem? clamat ad te caelum et terra: deus me fecit.* English translation according to *Augustine, Sermons, (51–94) on the New Testament*, translated by E. Hill, Brooklyn, NY: New City Press 1991 (The Works of Saint Augustine III/3).

<sup>25</sup> s. 68, 6 (MA 1, 360): *legis quod scripsit Moyses. quid legit, ut scriberet ipse Moyses, homo temporalis? adtende pie caelum et terram.*

<sup>26</sup> Bas., *hex.* 1, 1 (GCS NF 2, 2–3). English translation according to *Saint Basil the Great, Exegetic Homilies*, translated by A. C. Way, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press 1963 (Fathers of the Church 46). Augustine was familiar with Basil's *Homilies on the Hexaemeron*, which had been translated into Latin by Eustathius and were frequently used by Ambrose: see B. Altaner, *Augustinus und Basilius der Große*, in *Kleine patristische Schriften*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1967 (Texts und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 83), 270–72.

<sup>27</sup> Compare with the statement in *doc. chr.* 1, 39, 43 that «there are many who live by [faith, hope and charity] even in the desert without books» (*itaque multi per haec tria etiam in solitudine sine codicibus uiuunt*). English translation according to *Augustine, Teaching Christianity*, translated by E. Hill, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 1996 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/11).

<sup>28</sup> The full sermon was first published by Dom A. Mai (Mai 126) and then included in the supplement to Migne (PLS 2, 501–512).



The other passage in which Augustine uses the metaphor of the book of nature is that of the *librum naturae rerum* in the *Answer to Faustus*, which we must now examine carefully.<sup>29</sup> Written probably between 408 and 410, the work is an extensive reply to another work, entitled *The Chapters (Capitula)*, by Faustus, the Manichean bishop whom Augustine had encountered more than two decades earlier while he was looking for answers to his «anxious questionings».<sup>30</sup> Book 32 of the *Answer to Faustus* concerns some of Faustus' objections to the Christian use of the Old Testament and his defense of the Manichean practice of choosing in Scripture those texts only that conformed to their doctrine.

In his reply, Augustine takes up the issue of Mani's authority, on which Faustus' faith ultimately hangs. He mocks Faustus' incredulity in accepting on faith a wide range of beliefs, which cannot be known except by special revelation, and points out that Faustus has put his trust in Mani, because he supposedly showed him «the two natures, that is, of good and of evil, in this very world.»<sup>31</sup> Augustine argues that the Manichean idea of good and evil [490] is nothing but the reflection of what is, respectively, pleasant or unpleasant to the fleshly senses. This is not a reliable method for discerning good and evil or knowing whether things come from God and not:

[I]n order to attribute it to God as its author, you should first look at the whole of creation as if reading a certain great book about the nature of things (*si universam creaturam ita prius aspiceres, ut auctori Deo tribueres, quasi legens magnum quendam librum naturae rerum*).<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, he continues, if there happens to be something offending to the senses in this book of nature, Faustus should remember that he is but a man, prone to error and quite unable to correctly «criticize anything in the works of God.»<sup>33</sup>

The metaphor is not developed further, but an intriguing analogy suggests itself. Like the Scriptures, the works of creation should be read with an attitude of reverence. It is then that they open up correctly.<sup>34</sup> In the words of Drecoll, Augustine seems to think that «Faustus had followed the same approach in his observation of the world as he does in his observations of the biblical books, that is, he places himself above the respective sources of cognition. This, however, denies the true character of the world as a source of cognition, just as it does with Scripture.»<sup>35</sup>

Much of *Answer to Faustus* deals with Manichean accusations against the Old Testament, for example, that the patriarchs were not always morally exemplary. With patience and wit, Augustine tries to show that even apparently confusing or morally problematic passages can have a deeper meaning—for example, typological or spiritual—which concurs with divine teaching. Taking this is the broader context in which Augustine uses

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed analysis of the text in its context, see Drecoll, “*Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum*”, 35–45.

<sup>30</sup> *conf.* 5, 6, 11.

<sup>31</sup> *c. Faust* 32, 20. English translation according to *Augustine, Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, translated by R. Teske, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 2007 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/20).

<sup>32</sup> *c. Faust.* 32, 20 (CSEL 25/1, 782) (Teske's translation slightly emended).

<sup>33</sup> *c. Faust.* 32, 20: *atque ita si quid ibi te offenderet, causam te tamquam hominem latere posse tutius crederes quam in operibus dei quicquam reprehendere auderes, numquam incidisses in sacrilegas nugas et blasphema figmenta, quibus non intellegens, unde sit malum, deum implere conaris omnibus malis*. This also reminds us of the statements in *Teaching Christianity* that erroneous interpretations of the Scriptures are the fault of the reader and not of the text: see *doc. chr.* 1, 36, 41 – 37; 2, 6, 7.

<sup>34</sup> On the necessary interior attitude for reading the Scriptures—indeed, the need for the gifts of the Spirit (*Is.* 11,2-3)—see *doc. chr.* 2, 7, 9–11.

<sup>35</sup> Drecoll, “*Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum*”, 44–45.

the metaphor of the book of nature, we may find a suggestion that the apparent evil and confusion found in created nature has to be seen as part of a whole in which the divine intentions are only gradually made manifest. [491] One thinks, for example, of the relationship between physical evil and the problem of sin, or the Pauline teaching concerning the groaning of creation in labor pains in expectation of redemption (*Rom.* 8,19-23). Indeed, one of Augustine's consistent views of God's redemptive activity is to demonstrate his omnipotence by turning apparent evils into goods.

### 3. Beyond the Metaphor

Even though Augustine only uses the metaphor twice in this sense, its importance to his thinking becomes clear when we consider how it influenced his broader theology. There are at least two instances in which this may be observed, namely Augustine's interpretation of the biblical story of creation and his theology of the Trinity. The former illustrates how God's two books—nature and Scripture—should be read together, whereas the latter includes the idea that creation is a form of communication and revelation. Let us look at each of these more carefully to get a fuller sense of the Augustinian book of nature.

#### 3.1. *Literal Interpretation of Genesis: The Two Books in Dialogue*

A key illustration of Augustine's understanding of the method of God's two books is seen in his *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. It is an extensive work on which Augustine worked with painstaking effort and finally published in 416, being aware that the literal sense of Genesis was a complex question that called for clarification. By literal sense, Augustine did not refer to a "literalist" surface meaning but to everything that the text was meant to communicate in its richness and complexity. It is a delicate balance that takes into account the limits of human language and expression but still tries to «penetrate to the real intention of the biblical narrator, that is, God himself.»<sup>36</sup> In practice, what Augustine produced was something of a middle way between pronounced allegorism and narrow literalism.<sup>37</sup> It has also been described as a «metaphysical exegesis» because only such an exegesis can correctly describe God's creative activity.<sup>38</sup>

[492] The precise characterization of Augustine's hermeneutic method is beyond the present study, but the crucial point is that his method allows him to be quite flexible and creative while remaining within the primary meaning of Scripture. Sometimes this happens for reasons of internal consistency in the biblical text, such as when he interprets the two different accounts of creation as referring to a simultaneous creation of all things through the potential embedded in the seminal causes (*rationes seminales*) planted in creation.<sup>39</sup> Other times, however, Augustine's innovative interpretation of the text is due to non-biblical sources of knowledge. A case in point is his discussion of the notion of light at the beginning of the creation narrative (*Gn.* 1,3).<sup>40</sup> Since this light is described before the creation of the sun and the moon, and given that natural knowledge tells us there cannot be physical light without a source of such light, Augustine concludes that the notion of light in this passage cannot refer to material light.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> M. Fiedrowicz, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis: Introduction*, in *Augustine, On Genesis*, ed. J. E. Rotelle, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 2002 (The Works of Saint Augustine 1/13), 160.

<sup>37</sup> See Fiedrowicz, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 165.

<sup>38</sup> R. J. Teske, *Genesi ad litteram (De)*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 3, ed. C. Mayer, Basel: Schwabe 2004, 115.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Gen. litt.* 6, 11, 18-19 (CSEL 28/1, 183-185). See C. Mayer, *Creatio, creator, creatura*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 1, ed. C. Mayer, Basel: Schwabe 1996, 76.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Gen. litt.* 1, 19, 38-39 (CSEL 28/1, 27-29).

<sup>41</sup> There may also be an implicit reference to the idea in *Apoc.* 22,4-5 that God is the source of illumination in heaven.

The point may seem almost trivial, but it is precisely in this context that Augustine makes a more general exhortation concerning the matter: «There is knowledge to be had», he argues, about the various elements of the sensible world, and it is «quite disgraceful and disastrous» that non-Christians, who may be learned in these matters,

should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christian literature has to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter when they see them to be *toto caelo*, as the saying goes, wide of the mark.<sup>42</sup>

[493] The problem, Augustine continues, is not merely that these Christians will be laughed at, but that their ignorance will constitute a scandal that makes it difficult for the others to approach the Scriptures with trust and find salvation.

There is a degree of apologetic concern in Augustine's argument, and one feels that his concern was borne out of experience. However, we should not write this off as a rhetorical side note because the principle he defends flows quite logically from his hermeneutic principles. The biblical text is a privileged form of divine revelation, but its reading must be steered by reason and the other sources of cognition that God has provided to enable us to understand his actions. Therefore, the literal meaning of Scripture is also guided by the book of nature, that is, knowledge obtained by observing the works of creation. It is noteworthy that, in the previous quotation, Augustine lists several scientific subject matters ranging from astronomy to biology and geology.<sup>43</sup> In other words, he is stating a general principle, of which his analysis of the notion of light is only an instance. One might almost say that, for Augustine, the sure results of natural science function as a kind of veto against some readings of the Bible, not because they overrule Scripture but because they reveal that those interpretations cannot be the meaning intended by their divine author.

To be sure, the *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* is not principally concerned with the dialogue between the biblical text and natural sciences, nor did Augustine pretend to possess an in-depth knowledge of the latter. One should also bear in mind that the state of empirical science in Augustine's time was rudimentary and uncertain by modern standards. Nevertheless, according to Michael Fiedrowicz, we can discern two programmatic principles in Augustine's approach to the relationship between science and Christian revelation.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, sure arguments based on natural knowledge must be accepted so that they are found to be compatible with the meaning of the Scriptures. On the other hand, unambiguously revealed truths should guide our interpretation of the claims of science. These two principles do not address all the issues that might arise, yet they express a cooperative principle: one should read the book of Scriptures in light of the book of nature, and vice versa.

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<sup>42</sup> *Gen. litt.* 1, 19, 39 (CSEL 28/1, 28–29): *Plerumque enim accidit, ut aliquid de terra, de caelo, de ceteris mundi huius elementis, de motu et conuersione uel etiam magnitudine et interuallis siderum, de certis defectibus solis ac lunae, de circuitibus annorum et temporum, de naturis animalium, fructicum, lapidum atque huiusmodi ceteris etiam non christianus ita nouerit, ut certissima ratione uel experientia teneat. turpe est autem nimis et perniciosum ac maxime cauendum, ut christianum de his rebus quasi secundum christianas litteras loquentem ita delirare audiat, ut, quemadmodum dicitur, toto caelo errare conspiciens risum tenere uix possit. et non tam molestum est, quod errans homo deridetur, sed quod auctores nostri ab eis, qui foris sunt, talia sensisse creduntur et cum magno eorum exitio, de quorum salute satagimus, tamquam indocti reprehenduntur atque respuuntur.* English translation according to *Augustine, On Genesis*, translated by E. Hill, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 2002 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/13).

<sup>43</sup> On the role of the various human sciences in the interpretation of the Scriptures, see also *doc. chr.* 2, 16, 24 – 42, 63. Although Augustine was careful not to overstate the value of the various auxiliary sciences in biblical exegesis, his fundamental insight has been described as «a surprisingly modern one»: P. Grech, *Hermeneutical Principles of Saint Augustine in Teaching Christianity*, in *Augustine, Teaching Christianity*, ed. J. E. Rotelle, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 1996 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/11), 85.

<sup>44</sup> See Fiedrowicz, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 157. Cf. *Gen. litt.* 1, 21, 41.

### [494] 3.2. Vestiges of the Trinity

Another illustration of Augustine's way of reading the book of nature is found in his trinitarian theology. Given the density of the topic, the present discussion will be limited to the essential point. In a famous passage of *The Trinity*, Augustine makes a bold affirmation of the role of the external world in his speculative methodology:

I will not be idle in seeking out the substance of God, either through his scriptures or his creatures. For both these are offered us for our observation and scrutiny in order that in them he may be sought, he may be loved, who inspired the one and created the other.<sup>45</sup>

This is a daring formulation of the idea of God's two books. It is all the more significant as it appears in one of Augustine's most ambitious works and provides a methodological foundation for one of its principal themes. It was not an instance of isolated rhetoric, but Augustine saw, in the words of Ayres, «the created order as a reflection of its three-fold Creator.»<sup>46</sup>

In another major theological work, *The City of God*, Augustine again expresses his trinitarian vision of the act of creation, understood in terms of divine speech. This means that the entire visible creation might be akin to «a veiled mode of speech» that stimulates our reflection and enables us to advance in our knowledge of the mystery.<sup>47</sup> Augustine, to be sure, distinguished between the image (*imago*) of God in the rational soul and the traces or vestiges (*vestigia*) of the Creator in the corporeal and mutable creation. However, he did not disparage the latter, and there are passages in which the creatures are seen as “traces” or “tracks” that men may follow to advance towards their trinitarian Creator.<sup>48</sup> [495]

## 4. The Question of Foundations

### 4.1. Neoplatonic Harmony vs. the Creative Word

One might speculate extensively about the reasons for Augustine's confidence in the positive interplay between Scripture and nature. He was, to begin with, convinced of the harmony between faith and reason, and the Neoplatonic philosophy that he embraced extolled the idea that the order of the visible cosmos is a reflection of a higher world. In this sense, Drecoll correctly relates Augustine's *liber naturae* to his «recognition of an *ordo* in Creation».<sup>49</sup> Drecoll goes on to point out that Augustine's approach to the visible cosmos is also different from the Platonic philosophers because the latter know nothing of Christ.<sup>50</sup> This is true and crucial: although the idea of order and harmony is probably a prerequisite to Augustine's metaphor of the book, it is not the crux of the matter.

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<sup>45</sup> *Trin.* 2, proem. (CCSL 50, 80): *non ero segnīs ad inquirendam substantiam dei siue per scripturam eius siue per creaturam. quae utraque nobis ad hoc proponitur intuenda ut ipse quaeratur, ipse diligatur qui et illam inspirauit et istam creauit.* English translation according to *Augustine, The Trinity*, translated by E. Hill, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press 1991 (The Works of Saint Augustine I/5).

<sup>46</sup> L. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, 280.

<sup>47</sup> *civ. Dei* 11, 24 (CCSL 47, 343): *... ut in operibus Dei secreto quodam loquendi modo, quo nostra exerceatur intentio, eadem nobis insinuata intellegatur Trinitas.*

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *civ. Dei* 11, 28 (CCSL 47, 348): *In his quidem rebus, quae infra nos sunt, [...] currentes quasi quaedam eius alibi magis, alibi minus impressa uestigia colligamus.*

<sup>49</sup> Drecoll, “*Quasi Legens Magnum Quendam Librum Naturae Rerum*”, 45.

<sup>50</sup> See *ibid.*, 46–47.

There is, in fact, both continuity and discontinuity between great pagan Neoplatonic philosophers and Augustine when it comes to the metaphor. We do not find the exact expression “book of nature” in pagan Neoplatonists, but Plotinus does think of «the stars as letters perpetually being inscribed on the heavens.»<sup>51</sup> He refers to this also in the context of divination, writing that the stars:

furnish the incidental service of being letters (γράμματα) on which the augur, acquainted with that alphabet (γραμματική), may look and read the future from their pattern.<sup>52</sup>

Plotinus even affirms that «the art» of the augur is «the reading of the scriptures of Nature.»<sup>53</sup> The same idea is found in a fragment of Porphyry.<sup>54</sup>

The metaphor used by Plotinus is a development of the Stoic cosmology in which the entire cosmos is seen as a unified organism. Moreover, the [496] preeminent role of the stars in divination seems to follow from Plotinus’ idea of cosmic sympathy: everything has its origin in the One, so there must be a harmony between the earthly and the celestial worlds.<sup>55</sup> As Plotinus explicitly states, there will be «a reasonable basis for the divination» if there is some «comprehensive principle of co-ordination.»<sup>56</sup> Augustine may have encountered these ideas in his readings of Plotinus, but we find no traces of them in his thought, not even to rebut them. Augustine’s reasons for likening the visible world to a book were different.

Most probably, the reason why Augustine saw nature as a book was his theology of the Word. He does not specifically mention this in the passages we examined above, but the defining presence of the eternal Word in both creation and salvation history is so central to his mind that it is impossible to leave it out of the picture. For Augustine, as for everyone in the early Church, divine revelation was a question of divine self-communication which had its culmination in the incarnate Word, through whom all things were made (cf. *Joh.* 1,3.10; *Rom.* 11,36; *1 Cor.* 8,6; *Col.* 1,16.20). Like many other Church Fathers, Augustine frequently highlights and elaborates on this biblical idea that the work of creation takes place by means of the Word.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the *rationes seminales* that he depicts as containing the dynamic potential of material creatures are ultimately but a participation in the creative power of the eternal Logos.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4.2. Creation as the First Incarnation?

Carol Harrison has proposed a similar interpretation.<sup>59</sup> In her analysis of the notion of beauty in Augustine’s theology of creation, she argues both creation and Scripture point «towards their source» because «they are

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<sup>51</sup> Ἔστω τοίνυν ὡσπερ γράμματα ἐν οὐρανῷ γραφόμενα ἀεὶ ἢ γεγραμμένα καὶ κινούμενα. Plot., *Enn.* 2, 3, 7 (ed. Henry-Schwyzler, I, 169). English translation according to *Plotinus, The Six Enneads*, translated by S. MacKenna and B.S. Page, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1952.

<sup>52</sup> *Enn.* 3, 1, 6 (ed. Henry-Schwyzler, I, 263).

<sup>53</sup> ἡ τέχνη ἀνάγνωσις φυσικῶν γραμμάτων. *Enn.* 3, 3, 6 (ed. Henry-Schwyzler, I, 307).

<sup>54</sup> See Stobaeus II, 42, in C. Wachsmuth, ed., *Ioannis Stobaei Anthologium*, vol. 2 (Berlin 1884), 170.

<sup>55</sup> On the doctrine of cosmic sympathy, see G. M. Gurtler, *Sympathy: Stoic Materialism and the Platonic Soul*, in *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus’ Enneads*, ed. M. F. Wagner, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2002, 241–76.

<sup>56</sup> Plot., *Enn.* 2, 3, 7.

<sup>57</sup> See for example *Gen. litt.* 1, 4, 9 – 5, 10.

<sup>58</sup> On Augustine’s doctrine of the *rationales seminales* and its background in Platonic and Stoic philosophy, see for example G. P. Boersma, *The Rationes Seminales in Augustine’s Theology of Creation*, in *Nova et Vetera* 18 (2020), 413–41 (further sources cited at p. 428 note 52); G. Catapano, *Ratio*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 4, ed. R. Dodaro, C. Mayer and C. Müller, Basel: Schwabe 2012, 1078–81.

<sup>59</sup> See C. Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992, 112–22.

“words” whose source is the eternal Word», so that the work of creation [497] «might well be described as the “first incarnation” of the Word.»<sup>60</sup> Moreover, there are indications that Augustine saw this in terms of a revelation in nature. In a passage of the *Confessions*, while commenting on the sea creatures, he hints at the idea of a prelapsarian capacity to perceive God’s words in material and sensible beings.<sup>61</sup> Harrison interprets this in terms of the book metaphor:

Creation, therefore, like Scripture, assumes the nature of a book, witnessing to its author: like Scripture and the Incarnation of the Word of God, it contains and engenders symbols, allegories, and, indeed, sacraments, which enable its invisible, spiritual sense—its Creator—to be seen more clearly through and in the visible.<sup>62</sup>

Whether that was the original meaning of the passage in the *Confessions* may be disputed. It is, in any case, clear that this is how later generations thought of the book of nature they had found in Augustine. The analogy with the words of Scripture is especially relevant. The book of the Scriptures is not the end of the journey but a means, a helper, an instrument; in *Teaching Christianity*, Augustine calls it «a kind of scaffolding».<sup>63</sup> It points beyond itself, or rather, it refers back to him through whom and in view of whom it was written. The same would then be true of the works of creation.

## Conclusion

Augustine is the first known author to have combined the words *liber* and *naturae*, but he also gave rise to several celebrated expressions—like *liber orbis terrarum*—which only later became associated with the idea of [498] nature as a divine book. This article has first examined six passages that seem to, and have sometimes been claimed to, relate to the book of nature, and found that only two of them were meant in this sense. If one were to interpret this finding superficially, it could almost be said that Augustine became one of the originators of the metaphor of the book of nature by accident, through the creative reception of his texts by subsequent generations.

However, the rest of the article showed that it is right to associate Augustine with the book of nature and its corollary metaphor of God’s two books. Several texts revealed how Augustine used the book of nature as a source of cognition in scriptural exegesis and trinitarian theology. Upon reflection, we should not find this surprising. One of the overarching principles of Augustine’s theological vision is the centrality of the Word, eternal, creative, and incarnate. This theology of the Word seems to be the ultimate foundation of the metaphor of the book of nature.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>61</sup> *conf.* 13, 20, 28 (CCSL 27, 257): *et pulchra sunt omnia faciente te, et ecce tu inenarrabiliter pulchrior, qui fecisti omnia. a quo si non esset lapsus Adam, non diffunderetur ex utero eius salsugo maris, genus humanum profunde curiosum et procellose tumidum et instabiliter fluidum, atque ita non opus esset ut in aquis multis corporaliter et sensibiliter operarentur dispensatores tui mystica facta et dicta (sic enim mihi nunc occurrerunt reptilia et volatilia), quibus imbuti et initiati homines corporalibus sacramentis subditi non ultra proficerent, nisi spiritaliter viveret anima gradu alio et post initii verbum in consummationem respiceret.*

<sup>62</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 120.

<sup>63</sup> *doc. chr.* 1, 39, 43: *quibus tamen quasi machinis tanta fidei et spei et caritatis in eis surrexit instructio...*