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CANONICAL AND NON-CANONICAL BOOKS IN AUGUSTINE'S *DE DOCTRINA CHRISTIANA*

The Divine and Holy Scriptures

Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* (=DDC) is a book which deals with many other books. Actually, in this work Augustine not only sets out the rules and the techniques necessary for the interpretation of the Christian Scriptures, but, in order to accomplish this, he is also forced in some way to take into consideration a conspicuous quantity of writings, and to take a stand on their value and on their contribution to an understanding of the holy books. From this point of view, we can legitimately claim that *DDC* is a typical product of the literary and religious culture, not only of Augustine, but of his whole age, a culture which depended on books, based as it was on the use of written texts as the main tool for processing and transmitting any kind of knowledge.

"Divine literature", "divine scriptures", "holy books" or "holy scriptures" are the definitions used by Augustine throughout his immense literary production to indicate the Bible. However, what we are most interested in stressing here is that this terminology already appears to be clearly defined right from the start of *DDC*. The *scripturae*, whose *tractatio* is the specific object of the work (*Sunt praecepta quaedam tractandarum scripturarum*¹; *omnis tractatio scripturarum*²), are labelled in the preface either as *divinae litterae*³, *scripturae divinae*⁴, *divinae scripturae*⁵, or as *sancti libri*⁶, *scripturae sanctae*⁷. The attributes that normally qualify the special nature of the Scriptures are therefore "divine" and "holy". We could easily continue by recalling that we again meet the expression *divinae scripturae* in Book 1, at least three other

¹ *DDC* Prol. 1. The numbering is that of W.M. Green in CSEL 80, Vienna 1963, and of R.P.H. Green, *Augustine. De Doctrina Christiana* (OECT), Oxford 1995.

² *DDC* 1,1.

³ Prol. 1.

⁴ Prol. 3 and 8.

⁵ Prol. 4 and 6.

⁶ Prol. 4 and 7.

⁷ Prol. 9.

times⁸, and that in Book 2 Augustine uses the same expressions to indicate the Scriptures: *divini libri*⁹, *scripturae sanctae*¹⁰, *divinae scripturae*¹¹, *sancti libri*¹², *litterae sanctae*¹³. In Book 3 we again find a collection of definitions such as *sanctae scripturae*, *divina eloquia*, *scripturae divinae*, *litterae sanctae*¹⁴. It is because they are "holy" that the Scriptures are also "revered" (*venerabiles*)¹⁵. The interpreter and teacher of the "divine" Scriptures is the defender of the true faith and vanquisher of error, and must communicate what is good and eradicate what is bad¹⁶.

Book 2 is particularly important for the present discussion, because here for the first and only time Augustine explains his idea of the canon of the divine Scriptures.

The Biblical Canon

According to Augustine, the complete canon of the Scriptures (*totus autem canon scripturarum*) includes seventy-one books: forty-four books form the authoritative Old Testament, while the authoritative New Testament consists of another twenty-seven books¹⁷. Still in the sixth century, this passage of *DDC* was referred to by Cassiodorus¹⁸. Establishing the limits of the canon is necessary in the eyes of Augustine in order to define the area of investigation that he places at the third stage of the ascent to wisdom, that of knowledge or science (*tertium scientiae gradum*), in which every student of the divine Scriptures exerts himself in order to find the commandment of the double love for God and neighbour¹⁹. Actually, Augustine writes:

⁸ *DDC* 1,84; 1,89; 1,95.

⁹ *DDC* 2,13.

¹⁰ *DDC* 2,15.

¹¹ *DDC* 2,18.

¹² *DDC* 2,19.

¹³ *DDC* 2,117.

¹⁴ *DDC* 3, 84-87.

¹⁵ *DDC* 3,134: 'non solum admonendi sunt studiosi venerabilium litterarum ut in scripturis sanctis genera locutionum sciant...'.
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¹⁶ *DDC* 4,14: 'Debet igitur divinarum scripturarum tractator et doctor, defensor rectae fidei ac debellator erroris, et bona docere et mala dedocere...'.
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¹⁷ *DDC* 2,26-29.

¹⁸ CASSIODORUS, *Inst.* 1,13 (ed. R.A.B. MYNORS, *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones*, Oxford 1937, pp. 38 f.).

¹⁹ *DDC* 2,18: 'Post istos duos gradus timoris atque pietatis ad tertium venit scientiae gradum, de quo nunc agere institui. Nam in eo se exercet omnis divinarum scripturarum studiosus, nihil in eis aliud inventurus quam diligendum esse deum propter deum et proximum propter deum, et illum quidem ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente, proximum vero tamquam seipsum, id est ut tota proximi sicut etiam nostri dilectio referatur in deum'. On the notion of *scientia* in this context, see P.F. BEATRICE, "Doctrina sana id est Christiana. Augustine from the Liberal Arts to the Science of the Scriptures", in Th. K. KUHN and E. W. STEGEMANN (eds.), *"Was von Anfang an war" Neutestamentliche und kirchengeschichtliche Aufsätze Rudolf Brändle gewidmet (=Theologische Zeitschrift 62/2)*, Basel 2006, pp. 269-282.

"The most expert investigator of the divine Scriptures (*divinarum scripturarum*) will be the person who, firstly, has read them all and has a good knowledge of them – even though not yet with a complete understanding, at least by reading –, I obviously mean those Scriptures which are called canonical (*dumtaxat eas quae appellantur canonicae*)"²⁰

After the presentation of the complete list of the seventy-one canonical books, Augustine repeats the same concept, stating that those who fear God and are made docile by their piety seek God's will in all these books. That is why the first rule to be observed in this laborious task is to acquire at least a partial knowledge of these books, a reading knowledge, so as to commit them to memory, or so as not to remain wholly ignorant of them²¹ Of course, the wisdom of a Christian preacher is directly proportionate to his progress in learning the holy Scriptures, that is, not in their intensive reading or memorization, but in the real understanding and careful examination of their meaning²²

It is clear that, in this section of the treatise, Augustine simply identifies the *divinae scripturae* with the *canonicae scripturae*. In fact, he develops his speech by indicating the criteria by which the canonicity may be decided²³. His language corresponds to that of the Council of Carthage of 28th August 397²⁴ The Canon 47 of the *Breviarium Hipponense* has the following title: *Ut praeter scripturas canonicas nihil in ecclesia legatur sub nomine divinarum scripturarum*²⁵ This is the reason why it would be wrong to follow Charles Joseph Costello who thinks that in *DDC* 2, 24 a comma should be placed after *dumtaxat*, and that this adverb, in the meaning of "at least", does not qualify the Scriptures which are called canonical, but rather that knowledge which comes by simple reading²⁶ *Dumtaxat* is simply an equivalent of *scilicet* (namely, that is, I mean). However, this does not prevent Costello from rightly noting that for Augustine "canonical Scripture" is always a synonym of "divine, or holy, Scripture"²⁷ In a letter written to Jerome in 404 CE, Augustine claims that the

²⁰ *DDC* 2,24: 'Erit igitur divinarum scripturarum sollertissimus indagator qui primo totas legerit notasque habuerit, etsi nondum intellectu, iam tamen lectione, dumtaxat eas quae appellantur canonicae'.

²¹ *DDC* 2,30: 'In his omnibus libris timentes deum et pietate mansueti quaerunt voluntatem dei. Cuius operis et laboris prima observatio est, ut diximus, nosse istos libros, etsi nondum ad intellectum, legendo tamen vel mandare memoriae vel omnino incognitos non habere'.

²² *DDC* 4,19: 'Sapienter autem dicit homo tanto magis vel minus quanto in scripturis sanctis magis minusve proficit, non dico in eis multum legendis memoriaeque mandandis, sed bene intellegendis et diligenter earum sensibus indagandis'.

²³ *DDC* 2,24-25: 'In canonicis autem scripturis... Tenebit igitur hunc modum in scripturis canonicis...'

²⁴ For more details see O. WERMELINGER, "Le Canon des Latins au temps de Jérôme et d'Augustin", in J.-D. KAESTLI and O. WERMELINGER (eds.), *Le Canon de l'Ancien Testament. Sa formation et son histoire*, Genève 1984, pp. 153-210, esp. 170 ff., and A.-M. LA BONNARDIÈRE, "Le canon des divines Écritures", in *Saint Augustin et la Bible* (Bible de tous les temps 3), Paris 1986, pp. 287-301.

²⁵ See the edition by Ch. MUNIER, *Concilia Africae A. 345 - A. 525*, in CCL 149, Turnholt 1974, p. 340.

²⁶ See C. J. COSTELLO, *St. Augustine's Doctrine on the Inspiration and Canonicity of Scripture*, Washington 1930, pp. 91-95.

²⁷ See, among many other texts, *Epist.* 147,4: 'divinarum scripturarum, earum scilicet quae canonicae in ecclesia nominantur'; *Quaest. in Hept.* 1, proem.: 'scripturas sanctas, quae appellantur canonicae...'; *Civ.Dei* 11,3: '...scripturam condidit, quae canonica nominatur, eminentissimae auctoritatis...'; *Civ. Dei*

biblical books are called canonical²⁸, and that the divine Scriptures have been received as the authoritative canonical standard on account of their apostolic origin²⁹ It is therefore to be believed and maintained that all falsehood is absent from these holy and pre-eminently (*maxime*) canonical Scriptures³⁰ In a superlative sense, these are the very (*maxime*) holy canonical Scriptures³¹

Thus, it should be ruled out once and for all that in *DDC* 2, 24, as well as in other parts of his work, Augustine distinguishes between two categories of biblical books, those which are canonical and those which are non-canonical, since this interpretation would contradict his teaching about the inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible as a whole. In Augustine's mind, all the biblical books are at the same time divine, holy and canonical, without any distinction and exception.

The 'Other' Writings

On the basis of these observations, we can now try to shed some new light on the following words of the same chapter *DDC* 2, 24:

"He (i.e. the most expert investigator of the divine Scriptures who has a good knowledge of the canonical writings) will read the 'other writings' (*ceteras scripturas*) more confidently when equipped with the belief in the truth, so that they will be unable to take possession of his unprotected mind and, by deluding him through their 'dangerous falsehoods and fantasies' (*periculosus mendaciis atque phantasmatis*), to prejudice in any way his sound understanding"³²

It seems pretty clear that in this text for Augustine there are only two categories of books which must be kept rigorously separated: on the one hand, the seventy-one books which form the canon of the holy, divine Scriptures, characterized by inspiration and inerrancy, and on the other hand, the 'other', unnamed writings which are characterized by dangerous falsehoods and fantasies. The problem, now, is to understand what kind of books Augustine is referring to with the general formula 'other writings'.

According to a widely accepted interpretation, the other writings should be identified as the 'apocryphal' writings whose dangerous influence can be at least partially

15,23,2: 'Canonica scriptura sic loquitur...haec libri verba divini satis indicant...'; *Civ. Dei* 19,18: 'Credit etiam scripturis sanctis et veteribus et novis quas canonicas appellamus'.

²⁸ *Epist.* 82,1,3: 'Ego enim fateor Caritati tuae, solis eis scripturarum libris, qui iam canonici appellantur, didici hunc timorem honoremque deferre, ut nullum eorum auctorem scribendo aliquid errasse firmissime credam'.

²⁹ *Epist.* 82,2,7: 'ut veritas divinarum scripturarum ad nostram fidem aedificandam memoriae commendata, non a quibuslibet, sed ab ipsis apostolis, ac per hoc in canonicum auctoritatis culmen recepta, ex omni parte verax atque indubitata persistat'.

³⁰ *Epist.* 82,2,22: 'dum tamen a scribentibus auctoribus sanctarum scripturarum, et maxime canonicarum, inconcusse credatur, et defendatur omnino abesse mendacium'.

³¹ *De gratia Christi* 42,46: 'in scripturis maxime sanctis canonicis'.

³² *DDC* 2,24: 'Nam ceteras (*scil.* scripturas) securius leget fide veritatis instructus, ne praeoccupent imbecillum animum et, periculosus mendaciis atque phantasmatis (some editors wrongly read *phantasmatis*) eludentes, praeiudicent aliquid contra sanam intellegentiam'.

reduced by a full reading of the previously mentioned canonical writings³³. However, this interpretation is not easily acceptable: if we remember that for Augustine the only true, radical opposition is between biblical, i.e. canonical, and extra-biblical, i.e. non-canonical, books, the 'other writings' must be understood in a totally different way. The question remains open: what does Augustine really mean when speaking of other, dangerous non-canonical books? Are these non-canonical, or extra-canonical books necessarily the apocryphal books of biblical argument circulating among the heretics? Or should we consider the possibility that Augustine was referring to some other works?

Augustine identifies three categories of Christian writings. The divinely inspired writings (*scripta divinitus inspirata*) of the Christian authors have created the canon of the Scriptures³⁴, but there is no shortage of Christian literature (*ecclesiasticae litterae*), even outside the canon which has been raised to its position of authority for our benefit³⁵. The ecclesiastical writings, however, even though they may convey the same truth (*eadem veritas*) as the Bible, do not possess the excellence of the canonical authority (*longe impar auctoritas*) established in apostolic times³⁶. That is why those who read or hear them are free to judge, accept or refute their contents³⁷. The holy canonical books are absolutely superior (*praeponi*) to the subsequent writings of the bishops: neither doubt nor discussion is allowed about their truth and righteousness, whereas the writings of the bishops may fall under the judgment of colleagues and councils³⁸. Concerning the third category of the *scripturae apocryphae*³⁹, or *scripturae*

³³ See e.g. F. D. TAYLOR, *Augustine's of Hippo Notion and Use of the Apocrypha*, Diss. Notre Dame, Indiana 1978, pp. 76 f.; O. WERMELINGER (above n. 24), pp. 175 ff.; M. MOREAU, I. BOCHET and G. MADEC, *La doctrine chrétienne* (BA 11/2), Paris 1997, p.150, n. 47, and pp. 510 f.; K. POLLMANN, *Augustinus. Die christliche Bildung (De doctrina Christiana)*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 224, n.22.

³⁴ *DDC* 4,25: '...auctores nostri, quorum scripta divinitus inspirata canonem nobis saluberrima auctoritate fecerunt...'

³⁵ *DDC* 4,9: 'Nec desunt ecclesiasticae litterae etiam praeter canonem in auctoritatis arce salubriter collocatum...'

³⁶ *C. Faustum* 11,5: '...distincta est a posteriorum libris (*scil. libri qui non praecipendi auctoritate, sed proficiendi exercitatione scribuntur a nobis*) excellentia canonicae auctoritatis Veteris et Novi Testamenti, quae apostolorum confirmata temporibus per successiones episcoporum et propagationes ecclesiarum, tamquam in sede quadam sublimer constituta est, cui serviat omnis fidelis et pius intellectus...In opusculis autem posteriorum, qui libris innumerabilibus continentur, sed nullo modo illae sacratissimae canonicarum scripturarum excellentiae coaequantur, etiam in quibuscumque eorum invenitur eadem veritas, longe tamen est impar auctoritas.'

³⁷ *Ibidem*: 'Quod genus litterarum non cum credendi necessitate, sed cum iudicandi libertate legendum est...tamen liberum ibi habet lector auditorve iudicium...'

³⁸ *De baptismo* 2,3,4: 'Quis autem nesciat sanctam scripturam canonicam tam Veteris quam Novi Testamenti certis suis terminis contineri eamque omnibus posterioribus episcoporum litteris ita praeponi, ut de illa omnino dubitari et disczeptari non possit, utrum verum vel utrum rectum sit quidquid in ea scriptum esse constiterit, episcoporum autem litteras, quae post confirmatum canonem vel scriptae sunt vel scribuntur, et per sermonem forte sapientiore cuiuslibet in ea re peritioris et per aliorum episcoporum graviorem auctoritatem doctioremque prudentiam et per concilia licere reprehendi, si quid in eis forte a veritate deviatum est...'

³⁹ *C. Faustum* 22,79: '...scripturas apocryphas...illae scripturae quas canon ecclesiasticus respuit...'; *C. Felicem* 2,6: '...in scripturis apocryphis quas canon quidem catholicus non admittit...'

*quae apocryphae nuncupantur*⁴⁰, Augustine is willing to admit that they contain some truth (*aliqua veritas*), yet because of the many false statements (*multa falsa*), they have no canonical authority⁴¹

It is interesting to note that in his *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, written in the first years of the fifth century, also Rufinus of Aquileia identifies three categories of Christian writings, using a language strikingly similar to that of Augustine: the books which the Fathers included in the canon of the Old and New Testaments (*libri canonici*); certain other books, not strictly canonical, they designated as 'ecclesiastical' (*libri ecclesiastici*), and 'other writings' they called 'apocryphal' (*Ceteras vero scripturas apocryphas nominarunt*)⁴²

Augustine certainly considered the apocrypha non-canonical writings to be read with all due caution on account of their ambiguous content: they are so called, not because of any mysterious regard paid to them, but simply because they are mysterious in their origin⁴³ However, there is reason to surmise that, when talking in *DDC* 2,24 about other, extra-canonical writings, full of dangerous falsehoods and fantasies, Augustine does not, or not yet, refer to the apocrypha, which he begins to deal with only in the following years, in the course of his anti-Manichaean controversies.

The Canon as Criterion of Judgment of All Other Writings

In order to understand Augustine's conception of the relationship between the biblical canon and the other non-canonical writings, it is worth quoting a fundamental passage of his treatise against the Donatist Cresconius of the year 404 CE. There is a basic distinction to be made - Augustine says - between the writings of Cyprian and the canonical authority of the divine Scriptures:

"It is not without reason - he continues - that by such a salutary vigilance has been established the canon of the Church, to which belong the genuine books of the Prophets and the Apostles: upon these books we do not at all dare to pass judgment, but in accordance to them we will judge freely the other writings of both believers and unbelievers (*secundum quos de ceteris litteris vel fidelium vel infidelium libere iudicemus*)"⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Civ. Dei* 15, 23, 4: 'Omittamus igitur earum scripturarum fabulas, quae apocryphae nuncupantur, eo quod earum occulta origo non claruit patribus, a quibus usque ad nos auctoritas veracium scripturarum certissima et notissima successione pervenit'.

⁴¹ *Civ. Dei* 15,23,4: 'In his autem apocryphis etsi invenitur aliqua veritas, tamen propter multa falsa nulla est canonica auctoritas'.

⁴² RUFINUS, *Exp. Symb.* 35-36 (CCL 20, pp. 170 f.). English translation and detailed commentary by J.N.D. Kelly, *Rufinus, Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (ACW 20), New York NY /Ramsey NJ 1954, pp. 20-26 and 138 ff.

⁴³ *C. Faustum* 11,2: 'de iis (scil. libris) qui appellantur apocryphi non quod habendi sint in aliqua auctoritate secreta, sed quia nulla testificationis luce declarati, de nescio quo secreto, nescio quorum praesumptione prolati sunt'; *Civ. Dei* 15,23,4 (see above n. 40).

⁴⁴ *C. Cresconium* 2,31: 'Nos enim nullam Cypriano facimus iniuriam, cum eius quaslibet litteras a canonica divinarum scripturarum auctoritate distinguimus. Neque enim sine causa tam salubri vigilantia est canon ecclesiasticus constitutus, ad quem certi prophetarum et apostolorum libri pertineant, quos omnino iudicare non audeamus et secundum quos de ceteris litteris vel fidelium vel infidelium libere iudicemus'.

We find the same concept expressed again many years later in the *City of God*:

"Scripture is above all the writings of all nations (*super omnes omnium gentium litteras*)"⁴⁵; "We put the authority of the Scriptures of our religion above all other writings (*ceteris omnibus litteris*)"⁴⁶

Summarizing Augustine's thought on this topic, one could say that the collection of the divine, or holy Scriptures, comprised in the limits of the biblical canon, works as the only absolute criterion of truth by which it is possible to judge freely all the other writings that are outside the canon, that is, not only the Christian writings, both ecclesiastical and apocryphal, but also, why not, the books of the pagans.

It is time to consider this special category of extra-canonical books, the writings of the pagans, which until now have always been ignored in the interpretation of *DDC* 2,24. Given the general context and the main interest of Book 2 of *DDC*, characterized by the discussion about the value of the pagan *doctrinae*, the identification of the 'other' extra-canonical books with the books of the pagans seems highly recommendable. The 'other' writings of *DDC* 2,24, full of dangerous falsehoods and fantasies, might indeed be the books of the "unbelievers" that can be safely read only by those who can judge them in light of the truth conveyed by the canon of the biblical books. These clarifications are very important because they also help us understand another obscure passage of Book 2 of *DDC*, which up till now has been seriously misunderstood.

Augustine remarks that both number and music are mentioned with great respect in several places in the "holy" Scriptures (*in sanctis scripturis*)⁴⁷ Christians must not pay heed to the errors of the pagan superstitions (*errores gentilium superstitionum*), which have represented the nine Muses as the daughters of Jupiter and Memory. Varro had already refuted this mythological tradition, explaining that the nine Muses were in fact only three sets of three statues each, carved by three sculptors, which were all bought by a Greek town for veneration in Apollo's temple⁴⁸ However, whether Varro's story is true or not, Augustine says, we the Christians should not flee music because of the associated superstition of the pagans (*non propter superstitionem profanorum debemus musicam fugere*), if we can glean from it something useful for understanding the "holy" Scriptures (*si quid inde utile ad intellegendas sanctas scripturas rapere potuerimus*)⁴⁹ The same applies to the vanities of the theatre by which Christians must not let themselves be captivated, if they are discussing something to do with lyres and other musical instruments that may help them appreciate spiritual truths⁵⁰ Likewise, Christians were not wrong to learn the alphabet just

⁴⁵ *Civ. Dei* 11,1: 'Civitatem dei dicimus, cuius ea scriptura testis est, quae non fortuitis motibus animorum, sed plane summae dispositione providentiae super omnes omnium gentium litteras omnia sibi genera ingeniorum humanorum divina excellens auctoritate subiecit'.

⁴⁶ *Civ. Dei* 14,7,2: 'Sed scripturas religionis nostrae, quarum auctoritatem ceteris omnibus litteris anteponimus...'

⁴⁷ *DDC* 2, 67.

⁴⁸ The details of the story in *DDC* 2,68-69.

⁴⁹ *DDC* 2,71.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

because the pagans claim that the god Mercury is its patron, nor should they avoid justice and virtue just because the pagans dedicated temples to justice and virtue and preferred to honour them not in their minds but in the form of stones⁵¹ In substance, Augustine wishes to propose a clear distinction between the intrinsic value of human activities, which as such are good and deserve the attention of Christians, and their mythological and idolatrous perversion current among the pagans. At this point, as a general conclusion to his argument, Augustine makes the following solemn statement:

"A person who is a good and a true Christian should understand that the truth, wherever he may have found it (*ubicumque invenerit veritatem*), belongs to his Lord, and that, when he gathers and acknowledges it 'also in sacred literature' (*etiam in sacris litteris*), he should reject superstitious fantasies (*superstitiosa figmenta repudiet*) and deplore and avoid those who 'though they knew God, did not honour Him as God, nor did they thank Him, but became enfeebled in their own thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man, and of birds, and animals, and reptiles' (*Romans 1: 21-23*)"⁵²

Christian Holy Scriptures or Sacred Pagan Writings?

The central problem raised by this text consists in knowing what Augustine means when speaking of "sacred literature" (*sacrae litterae*). Commentators normally claim that Augustine refers here to the Christian "holy Scriptures" For example, Hermann Joseph Sieben translates the sentence in the following way: "Als einer der eben diese Wahrheit auch in den Heiligen Schriften bekennt und anerkennt, soll er den Aberglauben zurückweisen..."⁵³ Paradoxically enough, the French translation printed in the *Bibliothèque augustinienne*: "Mais, bien au contraire, tout bon et vrai chrétien doit comprendre que la vérité, partout où il la trouve, est la propriété du Seigneur, et, en la recueillant et en la reconnaissant, répudier les fictions superstitieuses jusque dans les saintes Lettres", takes for granted that, along with the truth, Augustine also places superstitious fantasies in the Bible⁵⁴ The following translation has been proposed in the revised edition: "Bien au contraire: que tout bon et vrai Chrétien comprènne que la vérité, où qu'il la trouve, appartient à son Seigneur, et que, la recueillant et la reconnaissant aussi dans les saintes Lettres, il rejette les fictions superstitieuses..."⁵⁵

⁵¹ DDC 2,72.

⁵² *Ibidem*: 'Immo vero quisquis bonus verusque Christianus est domini sui esse intellegat ubicumque invenerit veritatem, quam conferens et agnoscens etiam in litteris sacris, superstitiosa figmenta repudiet, doleatque homines atque caveat qui cognoscentes deum non ut deum glorificaverunt aut gratias egerunt, sed evanuerunt in cogitationibus suis et obscuratum est insipientes cor eorum; dicentes enim se esse sapientes stulti facti sunt et inmutaverunt gloriam incorruptibilis dei in similitudinem imaginis corruptibilis hominis et volucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium'.

⁵³ H.J. SIEBEN, "Die 'res' der Bibel. Eine Analyse von Augustinus, De doctr. christ. I-III", *REAug* 21(1975) 72-90, 84 n.54.

⁵⁴ G. Combès and M. l'abbé Farges in BA 11, Paris 1949, p. 285.

⁵⁵ M. MOREAU-I. BOCHET-G MADEC in BA 11/2, Paris 1997, p. 181 and p. 542.

On the other hand, Peter Prestel argues that for Augustine the Christian recognizes the "pagan truth" in the "holy Scriptures", in the sense that Scripture acts as the criterion of selection of the pagan doctrines. He establishes a direct connection between *DDC 2,72* and *DDC 2,151*: "For what a person learns independently (*extra*) of the divine Scriptures is condemned there if it is harmful, but found there if it is useful (*si utile est ibi inventur*)"⁵⁶ In the light of our previous remarks, it seems however that these two passages cannot be compared. In the first Augustine states that the divine truth can even be found, that is to say, not normally, but surprisingly, in the *sacrae litterae*. The second refers instead to the fact that all the useful science that can be collected from pagan books (*cuncta scientia quae quidem est utilis collecta de libris gentilium*) is insignificant when compared with the science of the divine Scriptures (*si divinarum scripturarum scientiae comparetur*). The reason is that in the Bible one can find not only all the useful science that can be learnt elsewhere, but also, and in much greater abundance, things which are learnt absolutely nowhere else, but solely in the admirable sublimity and humility of the Scriptures.

Now, it can hardly be denied that by *sacrae litterae* Augustine usually means the Bible, and that this expression is therefore for him practically synonymous with *divinae* or *sanctae scripturae* (or *litterae*). The first unambiguous identification of the *sacrae litterae* contained in the divine manuscripts, with the canonical books, is found in his treatise against the Manichaean bishop Faustus of Milevis (ca. 400 CE)⁵⁷. In the same years Augustine writes in the *Confessions* that through Moses, the one God has tempered the sacred books (*sacras litteras*) to the interpretation of many who could come to see a diversity of truths⁵⁸ This is not surprising, if we remember that around the same time Augustine's friend and correspondent Paulinus of Nola defines the Bible not only as *scriptura divina*⁵⁹, *sancta scriptura*⁶⁰, *sanctae litterae*⁶¹, *sancta volumina*⁶², but also as *sacri libri*⁶³, or *libri sacri*⁶⁴, *libri sacrati*⁶⁵, *sacratae litterae*⁶⁶, and, more than once, *sacrae litterae*⁶⁷ In the *Speculum* Augustine refers to the holy Scrip-

⁵⁶ P. PRESTEL, *Die Rezeption der ciceronischen Rhetorik durch Augustinus in 'De doctrina Christiana'* (Studien zur klassischen Philologie 69), Frankfurt a.M. 1992, pp. 80 f.

⁵⁷ *C. Faustum* 11,2: '...de divinis codicibus...sacrarum litterarum studiosis notissimae sententiarum varietates...'; 11,5: '...illae sacratissimae canonicarum scripturarum excellentiae... In illa vero canonica eminentia sacrarum litterarum...librorum canonicorum saluberrima auctoritas...'

⁵⁸ *Conf.* 12,31,42.

⁵⁹ See PAULINUS OF NOLA, *Epist.* 1,2; 13,4.

⁶⁰ *Epist.* 1,1.

⁶¹ *Epist.* 40,6.

⁶² *C.* 22,153.

⁶³ *Epist.* 32,16; *C.* 31,405.

⁶⁴ *C.* 24,830.

⁶⁵ *C.* 25,91; 26,114 f.

⁶⁶ *C.* 24, 837.

⁶⁷ *Epist.* 1,2: '...instructi per sacras litteras...'; *Epist.* 4,3 to Augustine: 'Fove igitur et corrobora me in sacris litteris et spiritalibus studiis...'; *Epist.* 16,6 to Jovius: '...sacris litteris...in sacris litteris...'

tures (*scripturae sanctae*) which have canonical authority as *litterae sacrae*⁶⁸, and in a treatise on the Gospel of John he says that the *litterae sacrae* clearly testify that the number seven refers to the Holy Spirit⁶⁹. But it is especially in the *City of God* that we find the Bible designated several times as *sacrae litterae*. It is for the polemical purpose of contrasting the truthfulness and authority of the divine Books (*divini libri*) to the writings considered sacred by the pagans, but in reality full of fabulous antiquities, that Augustine emphasizes in the *City of God* that only the Christian Scriptures are truly "sacred" (*vere sacrae sunt*)⁷⁰. At a certain point, Augustine calls the Scriptures indifferently *scripturae sanctae* and *sacrae litterae*⁷¹, and consequently, he cites the canon of the "sacred" writings at least three times⁷². What is still more remarkable is that in Book 4 of the same *DDC*, composed thirty years after *DDC* 2,72, in 427 CE, Augustine identifies the divinely inspired writings of the Christian authors (*scripta divinitus inspirata*), which have created the canon of Scripture, with the sacred literature (*litterae sacrae*) of the writers that divine providence has supplied to educate the Christians and lead them from this wicked world into the world of true happiness⁷³.

All these texts, however, also show that a clear definition of the Bible as *sacrae litterae* does not appear before the treatise *Against Faustus* (ca. 400 CE), where, as we have seen, also mention of the apocrypha is made for the first time. This remark makes it highly plausible that in Book 2 of *DDC* (ca. 396-7 CE) Augustine does not yet talk about the apocrypha and does not yet apply the expression *sacrae litterae* to the canonical writings. However, what matters even more is to explain why in *DDC* 2,72 Augustine would have said that the truth can be recognized 'also' or 'even' (auch, aussi) in the Bible: one would have expected that for Augustine the truth would be found primarily in the Bible, which works as the universal criterion of judgment of all the remaining extra-canonical writings, both Christian and pagan, and only secondarily 'also' in other unidentified, mysterious writings, here designated as *sacrae litterae*. So, the *sacrae litterae* mentioned in this passage cannot be taken as the holy and divine Scriptures of the Christians. The immediate context clearly requires that by these words Augustine can only be referring in general to the sacred writings of the pagans. In *DDC* 2,72, Augustine simply wishes to say that the truth belongs to the Lord, wherever it is, first of all the truth of the Bible, of course, but also the truth that can be "gathered", "recognized" or "collected", that is, "read" or "found", in "pagan literature" or, to be more precise, in the "religious writings of the pagans". To my knowl-

⁶⁸ *Speculum* (CSEL 12, pp. 3 ff.): 'Quis ignorat, in scripturis sanctis, id est legitimis, prophetis, et evangelicis, et apostolicis, auctoritate canonica praeditis...de his igitur quae ita sunt posita in litteris sacris...ut quantum me deus adiuvat, omnia talia de canonicis libris colligam...'

⁶⁹ *Tract. Io.* 122,8: 'Isto quippe numero id est septenario significari Spiritum sanctum advertenda litterarum sacrarum documenta testantur'.

⁷⁰ *Civ. Dei* 11,6: '...litterae sacrae maximeque veraces...'; 12,11: 'ex litteris sacris...litteris nostris quae vere sacrae sunt...quanto minus credendum est illis litteris, quas plenas fabulosis velut antiquitatis proferre voluerunt contra auctoritatem notissimorum divinarumque librorum...'

⁷¹ *Civ. Dei* 14, 7: '...in scripturis sanctis...secundum easdem sacras litteras...'

⁷² *Civ. Dei* 18,41,1: '...sacrarum litterarum...canon...'; 20,3: '...in sacrarum canone litterarum...'; 22,8,1: 'Canon quippe sacrarum litterarum...'. See also 20,1,1; 20,24,1; 20,30,5.

⁷³ *DDC* 4, 25-28.

edge, this translation, which I consider the only acceptable one in this particular context, has been hitherto put forward only by R.P.H. Green ("even in pagan literature")⁷⁴, and Karla Pollmann ("auch in den religiösen Schriften der Heiden")⁷⁵

'*Sacrae Litterae*' and '*Libri Platoniorum*'

This interpretation finds further support in the final chapters of Book 2 of *DDC*, which are explicitly devoted to the explanation of the fundamental concept of the right or correct use (*usus iustus*) of pagan wisdom. Augustine's words enable us to specify that the *sacrae litterae* are in particular the "pagan books of religious philosophy" Regarding this, we cannot help noting that, according to *DDC* 2,72, in these sacred books there are "superstitious fantasies" the Christian must reject (*superstitiosa figmenta repudiet*), while, according to *DDC* 2,144-145, the doctrines of the pagan philosophers, especially the Platonists (*Philosophi autem qui vocantur... maxime Platonici*), and in general all the doctrines of the Gentiles contain, along with true and acceptable statements, those "false and superstitious fantasies" which the Christians must loathe and avoid (*Sic doctrinae omnes gentilium non solum simulata et superstitiosa figmenta gravesque sarcinas supervacanei laboris habent, quae unusquisque nostrum duce Christo de societate gentilium exiens debet abominari atque devitare...*), in order to make better use of the truths that even these pagan doctrines in some way imply. These false and superstitious fantasies, contained both in the sacred books (*DDC* 2,72: *superstitiosa figmenta*) and in the doctrines of the pagans (*DDC* 2,145: *simulata et superstitiosa figmenta*) are evidently the same "dangerous falsehoods and fantasies" (*periculosa mendacia atque phantasmata*) contained in the 'other' writings mentioned in *DDC* 2,24. So these three texts deal with the same subject matter.

Moreover, there is another striking verbal and conceptual parallelism between our passage, concerning the truth gathered and recognized also in the "sacred books" (*veritatem, quam conferens et agnoscens etiam in litteris sacris*), and the similar expression found in *DDC* 2,151, where the knowledge gathered in the "books of the pagans" (*scientia quae quidem est utilis collecta de libris gentium*), is compared with, and contrasted to, the science contained in the divine Scriptures (*divinarum scripturarum scientia*). Clearly, sacred books (*litterae sacrae*) and books of the pagans (*libri gentium*) are one and the same thing, and consequently the science they offer cannot be confused with the science contained in the divine Scriptures (*divinae scripturae*).

Last but not least, the quotation of *Romans* 1:21-23 in *DDC* 2,72 gives us the definitive evidence that here Augustine is thinking of the idolatrous distortions of the vain wisdom contained in the religious books of the pagans. It is this Pauline text - which so far has never been noted - that enables us to make decisive progress in the identification of these *litterae sacrae*, their true nature and contents. At this point it is important to assess the thematic and lexical similarities between this passage and the famous chapter of the *Confessions* 7,9,13-15, where this same quotation from Paul's

⁷⁴ R.P.H. GREEN, *Augustine*, p.91.

⁷⁵ K. POLLMANN, *Augustinus*, p.71.

epistle to the Romans plays a crucial role. In this chapter Augustine gives a detailed description of the contents of certain books of the Platonists he had read in Milan before his conversion (*quosdam Platoniorum libros*), and explains how he had succeeded in drawing from them good philosophical and theological truths by rejecting the associated superstitions relating to idolatry and zoolatry. The quotation of *Romans* 1:21-23 is the bridge, which directly relates *DDC* 2,72 and *Confessions* 7,9,13-15 the link which suddenly sheds new light on this issue. At a distance of a few years from Book 2 of *DDC*, Augustine explains in the *Confessions*, but this time in autobiographical terms, what the "sacred books of the pagans" were, what the truths and the superstitious fantasies he had read (or found) in them were, and what influence they had exerted on his personal experience of conversion to Christianity. Suffice it to quote the following introductory formulae to understand the method followed by Augustine in his reading of these books, that is, his theological selection of their contents: "There I read (*et ibi legi*)... that I did not read there (*non ibi legi*). Again, I read there (*Item legi ibi*)...I did not read there (*non ibi legi*). In reading those books I found expressed in different words and in a variety of ways that (*Indagavi quippe in illis litteris varie dictum et multis modis*)...that these books do not have (*non habent illi libri*). These books say that (*est ibi*)...But they do not contain that (*non est ibi*)...But those who, like actors, wear the high boots of a supposedly more sublime teaching do not hear him when he says (*non audiunt dicentem*)...Even if 'they know God, they do not glorify him as God or give thanks, but are lost in their own thoughts and their foolish heart is obscured; professing themselves wise, they have become fools' (*Romans* 1:21-22). So, I also read there (*Et ideo legebam ibi*) of 'the glory of your incorruption changed into idols and various images in the likeness of corruptible man and birds and beasts and reptiles' (*Romans* 1:23), that is the Egyptian food (lentils) for which Esau lost his birthright...I found this in those books (*inveni haec ibi*) and did not feed on it"

Despite everything, Augustine certainly obtained some benefit from these pagan books, gathering there at least part of the truth and the knowledge that he made use of, when preaching the Gospel: the truth he had found there was like the spoils of the Egyptians that the Hebrews took away in their flight, by God's order, to build their precious Ark. The gold of the Egyptians in fact belonged to God, wherever it was (*intendi in aurum, quod ab Aegypto voluisti ut auferret populus tuus, quoniam tuum erat, ubicumque erat*)⁷⁶ The repeated observation that the truth belongs to God "wherever the Christian may have found it" (*DDC* 2,72: *domini sui esse ubicumque invenerit veritatem*) or "wherever it was" (*Conf.* 7,9,15: *aurum...tuum erat ubicumque erat*), confirms once again the substantial identity of the sacred writings of *DDC* 2,72 with the books of the Platonists of *Confessions* 7,9,13-15, in which Augustine found (*inveni*) the Egyptian lentils along with the Egyptian gold. In these books, which came from Athens, that is to say, from the symbolic home of pagan philosophy, Augustine fixed his attention on the gold of the Egyptians which in reality belonged to God, but

⁷⁶ For further details on Augustine's place in the history of the interpretation of the spoils of the Egyptians, see P.F. BEATRICE, "The Treasures of the Egyptians. A Chapter in the History of Patristic Exegesis and Late Antique Culture", in *Studia Patristica* 39, Leuven 2006, pp. 159-183.

not on the Egyptian idols which were served with God's gold by "those who changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator (*Romans* 1:25)"

Concluding remarks

Thus, everything leads us to suppose that in *DDC* 2,72, when writing about the truth also contained in the *litterae sacrae*, Augustine was in reality thinking of the complex personal experience he had had ten years before in Milan with the books of the Platonists. It seems therefore legitimate to draw the conclusion that it is always the same sacred books of the pagans with which Augustine deals in at least four places of his work between 396 and 402, that is to say, in chronological order, *DDC* 2,24, *DDC* 2,72, *DDC* 2,144-145 and *Confessions* 7,9,13-15. These are the mysterious and controversial books that Augustine came to know in Milan in the Latin version of Marius Victorinus on the eve of his conversion. By reading them, Augustine found dazzling metaphysical truths, dangerously marred by superstitious falsehoods and fantasies he did not hesitate to reject as inconsistent with the Christian faith contained in the canonical books of the Bible. Elsewhere I have argued that these *libri Platoniorum* are nothing other than Porphyry's *Philosophy according to the Oracles*, the work in which neo-Platonic philosophical doctrines were programmatically worked out in harmony with the oracles of the pagan gods and traditional pagan superstitions⁷⁷ If this explanation is accepted, then it must be admitted that the shadow of Porphyry assumes definite outlines already in *DDC* as the unnamed author of the 'other' dangerous writings (*DDC* 2,24), that is, the *sacrae litterae* (*DDC* 2,72), and of the Platonic doctrines discussed in *DDC* 2,144-145.

KSIĘGI KANONICZNE I NIEKANONICZNE W *DE DOCTRINA CHRISTIANA* ŚW. AUGUSTYNA *Streszczenie*

Dzieło św. Augustyna *De doctrina Christiana* stanowi przykład środowiska intelektualnego, które miało wpływ na twórczość biskupa Hippony. Autor wychodzi z założenia, że *De doctrina Christiana* jest typowym produktem literatury i kultury religijnej, nie tylko św. Augustyna, lecz także epoki, w której on żył i tworzył. W pierwszym rzędzie są to tzw. Księgi święte, do których zostaje zaliczona kanoniczne księgi biblijne. Ponadto św. Augustyn nawiązuje do wiele ksiąg z literatury chrześcijańskiej. Interesujący jest w tym fakt, że stosunek do kanononu ksiąg bilijnych stanowi kryterium oceny wszystkich innych pism starożytności chrześcijańskiej. Na uwagę zasługuje także odniesienie świętych ksiąg chrześcijatwa do świętych ksiąg pogańskich i (neo)platońskich (np. Mariusza Wiktoryna lub Porfiriusza).

⁷⁷ P.F. BEATRICE, "Quosdam Platoniorum libros. The Platonic Readings of Augustine in Milan", *VigChr* 43(1989) 248-281.