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# AUGUSTINE ON ELECTION: THE BIRTH OF AN ARTICLE OF FAITH<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The doctrine of divine election is part of the heritage of Western Christianity. Discussions in the reformed tradition point to the older Augustine as the one who developed the doctrine of double predestination in the controversy with the semi-Pelagians. The thesis of this study is that the birth of this doctrine can be found in the writings of the young Augustine in the early years of his episcopacy. Personal explorations into St. Paul's letter to the Romans and written questions from Simplician of Milan prompted him to write on Chapter 9. Augustine's reading of Romans 9 is compared with the preceding works of Marius Victorinus and Ambrosiaster. The account of Augustine's conversion in his *Confessiones* document indicates his involvement in Romans. Especially his *Ad Simplicianum* documents "a veritable revolution in his theology" towards a fully developed doctrine of grace. The concept of God's foreknowledge of human acts no longer sufficed to understand the diverse fates of the twins Esau and Jacob.

There is a book titled *Augustine the Algerian*. The place where he was born in 354, Thagaste, is now called Souk Ahras and is part of modern Algeria. The fact that Aurelius Augustine, the famous church father, was born in Africa and worked in North Africa all his life appeals to me. The more recent book title, *Augustine the African*, is less anachronistic but still somewhat romantic. Augustine never went so far south that he crossed the Sahara on a camel, let alone rounding the Cape of Good Hope on a ship. It speaks to the heart of the present author, a Dutchman who is honoured to be invited to teach patristics in South Africa, that the Gospel

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1 The main line of this article was presented as an inaugural lecture of the chair for patristics in the Faculty of Theology, Department of Ecclesiology at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein on 4 May 2011.

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of Jesus Christ reached the north of this beautiful and terrible continent as early as the second century A.D. I hope to share with my students and colleagues my encounters with Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Arnobius and Lactantius – to name but the Latin “big five”.

Currently, in the Netherlands, many people take an interest in the church fathers. The steady stream of new translations of their works suggests that there is a market. The Center for Patristic Studies (CPO), a joint venture of the Amsterdam Free University and the Tilburg Catholic University, draws quite a number of scholars together and is training a new generation. Where does this renewed focus on the fathers come from? First, the realisation that the Christian church is a minority in society directs our attention to the early centuries when Christianity had to find its way in a non-friendly environment. Second, the fragmentation of the Church into many denominations, factions and groups fosters a longing for catholicity when the Christian church could rightfully be called one.

The chair for patristic studies at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein has been inspired by a more academic motive: Theology should be grounded in the knowledge of its source texts. When theology is true to its vocation, it can help the academic community to react to the vivid interest in the early Church.

## 1. A DIFFICULT DOCTRINE

When there is such a keen interest in the catholicity of the early Church on the one hand and a sharp realisation of our minority status on the other, why then did I choose the topic of predestination? It may seem the very worst choice. The idea that God from eternity has decided the fate of every man and woman without consulting us first repels many. He should have given us a free choice and should have restored this freedom by passing over our wrongdoing. Moreover, God is held accountable for the sad situation of the world. If he predestined our fate, he could easily have prevented our fall.

The doctrine of predestination is part of the reformed tradition. Article 16 of the Belgic confession, published 400 years ago in 1561, says God is

merciful, since he delivers and preserves from this perdition [of Adam's fall] all, whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable counsel, of mere goodness hath elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works.

God is “just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves”.<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of election is described as predestination at greater length in the Canons of Dort, the other confession of the family of reformed churches, in which the entire first chapter is dedicated to the right way of teaching this doctrine. In 2018-19, the 400th anniversary of the Synod and Canons of Dort will surely be commemorated.

It is my passion to try to understand how God’s revelation in the Scriptures has been received in earlier times and what we hear in listening to the same Word today. We are not the same people as the Christians when the Church was young, yet we share the same gospel. How can we explain the differences in accents, wording and concepts? The early Church formulated its faith in the *regula fidei* and creeds, in dogmatic teaching and confessional formulas. Is there another form in which the core of the catholic faith should be communicated in our day and age? It is my passion to keep relating the present to the past, understand the transformation of our knowledge and to be held honestly accountable by the Church in this regard.

For some time, I have been trying to do so in particular for the doctrine of election. Karl Barth’s focus on Jesus Christ as both the elected and rejected One marks a theological-historical boundary. The question is inescapable ever since: What is the place of “Jesus Christ in the Decree” (to use the title from Richard Muller’s book)? The doctrine of predestination, as expressed in the Canons of Dort and the scholastic reformed tradition, has been challenged and (I believe) misrepresented. Today, we feel that man has to have a free choice in order to be held accountable. Our feelings are guided by the following:

- God must take care of what is wrong with the world. He should not complain about us small people. The idea that collective guilt and actual sin make me responsible is unacceptable.
- Man is mostly inclined to the good. We have inalienable rights, and even God should stick to that. No total “depravity” exists.
- The question is not if God chooses to love us, but if we choose to serve Him. The thought of any pre-destination puts too much pressure on us.

Personally, I feel the need to investigate, understand and, if necessary, reformulate (in ecclesiastical fellowship) the doctrine of divine election as formulated by the fathers in their contexts. It is too easy to leave this

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<sup>2</sup> *Translation from The Doctrinal Standard and the Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America (New York), 29.*

difficult doctrine aside and go with the flow of modernity. As a theologian, I feel responsible for clarifying our doctrinal confessions and tradition. As a historian of dogma, I have published works on the doctrine of election as it was taught and defended in Geneva (E.A. de Boer 2004, 2009a, 2009b). Recently, I also wrote on Canon I, head 17, of Dordt, on the question of salvation of the children of believers, when they die at a tender age (E.A. de Boer, 2011). I maintain that the doctrine of predestination is not an invention of John Calvin in the 16th century. In this respect, all the reformers were Augustinians.

However, I wanted to go to the roots. If Augustine – with St. Paul – can be called the founding father of this specific doctrine of free grace (Pranger 2002:273), grounded in God eternally electing sinners to salvation in Christ, where was this doctrine first thought through? During the Arminian controversy, the claim was made that the old Augustine taught the doctrine of (double) predestination, but that the young Augustine's doctrine of grace was to be preferred. The old Augustine is best known for the diptych *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae* of his old age (428). When John Calvin defended this doctrine described in the *Institutio* of 1539 against Albert Pighius and Jerome Bolsec, he quoted extensively from these two treatises. When the *Congrégation sur l'élection éternelle de Dieu* of 1551, addressed to the public and therefore written in the vernacular, was published, the editor filled the remaining pages at the end of the book with long quotes from these treatises in French. If they represent the mature theologian, when did this African father begin to teach a doctrine of predestination in the early years of his development as an expositor of Scripture? This, then, is the question with which my research for this lecture began. In which constellation of ideas in Augustine's development was the concept of predestination born and formulated?

## 2. FROM SECONDARY TO PRIMARY SOURCES

How does one approach the research to find an answer to this question? Where does a theological student in South Africa go when he/she wants to know Augustine's position on the doctrine of predestination? The Afrikaans-speaking student may be advised to read Willie Jonker's work *Uit vrye guns alleen. Oor uitverkiesing en verbond* (Jonker 1988). The advice is sound, because Jonker provides an excellent overview of the history of this doctrine up to the various contributions from the 20th century. On pp. 20-23, the student will read about Augustine and the decisive moments in his writing. As a secondary work in Afrikaans, Jonker's book is invaluable.

There is nothing wrong in trusting his authority and integrity as a scholar. However, it remains a secondary work and is no primary source.

Where do you go if you want to verify his presentation and go deeper into the matter than the three pages of Jonker's book? What are his sources, and where do they lead the diligent student who wants to know more about Augustine's thinking on predestination? Jonker's best source is A.D.R. Polman's thesis of 1936, written in Dutch (Polman 1936). This learned work gives a detailed analysis of the development of Augustine's thinking on predestination ("historisch-genetisch"). For the special phase on which I hope to focus, the student will turn to part 1, chapter 3 on "the provisional closing [of Augustine's development] in his writing to Simplician". How does the author present Augustine? He does so with a clear analysis of *Ad Simplicianum* in eight pages, following the numbering of paragraphs, interspersed with quotations in untranslated Latin. The author permits himself only one page of commentary. Jonker seems not to have used any primary work of Augustine. Polman provided him with an entrance to our African father. Yet, Polman also remains a secondary source. A student should (be able to) check if his overview of Augustine's work does him justice. Alas, even Polman fails to point his students to either an edition or translation where this vital work, *Ad Simplicianum*, can be found. Jonker states, "The writing *Ad Simplicianum* (395) shows that Augustine had already gained clarity on election before the Pelagian controversy."<sup>3</sup> We now turn to this source<sup>4</sup>. O'Donnell writes, "The most important and least-read book Augustine ever wrote was the *Diverse Questions for Simplicianus* of about 396" (O'Donnell 2005:301).

Augustine's works include numerous editions. The Patrologiae Series Latina by J.P. Migne can be accessed through the internet. Most libraries subscribe to [www.brepolis.net](http://www.brepolis.net), which gives us access to the Library of Latin Texts, Series A, which contains the famous edition of the *Corpus Christianorum*. It is a great help in trying to follow Augustine's Latin in the series *The work of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New City Press, New York). For the *Confessiones*, you might want to consult the edition with annotations in three volumes by James J. O'Donnell, also accessible in electronic edition (see below in the bibliography).

While reading the less-known *Ad Simplicianum*, it struck me that its composition fell in the same year in which Augustine started to write his

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3 Jonker 1988, 22 (with reference to the chapter by E. Mühlenberg in C. Andresen ed., *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 406-496).

4 Apart from Polman (1936), the following secondary works also analyse the development of Augustine's doctrine of election: Ring (1996); Lössl (2002).

*Confessiones*, in 397 (and possibly completed it, as O'Donnell suggests). Augustine describes this first work written in his episcopacy as the turning point in his doctrine of grace. In the latter work, he tries to understand the development of his faith. While reading both works *in tandem*, several points of contact struck me, apart from the year of writing and their scope, describing transformation. To mention a few, in both works, the name of Simplician of Milan (et sim) features, and both works testify to his study of the codex of St. Paul. Romans 7 plays a great role. Romans 9 is present in the diverse destinies of the twins, Esau and Jacob. These points of contact made me wonder what a comparison of both works could yield.

### 3. EARLY READINGS IN ROMANS

All early preachers and expositors of the letters of St. Paul have encountered the passages, written in Greek, on election. The Latin verb *praedestinare* was chosen to translate the Greek *pro'ōrizō* (to determine beforehand) of telling passages such as Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:5. The term is already found in the commentaries of Marius Victorinus (281/91- c. 365) and the so-called Ambrosiaster.

Marius Victorinus Afer ("the African") was the first to write Latin commentaries on some of Paul's letters. The first commentary was the one on Ephesians, followed by Galatians and Philippians, written after 363 (Döpp-Geerlings 2002, s.v.; Meijer 2001; Souter 1927). In Ephesians 1, verses 4-5, the essence is expressed as follows:

For God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will (Eph. 1:4-5, *New International Version*).

The Greek verbs *eklegomai* and *pro'ōrizō* have been rendered consistently as *eligere* and *praedestinare*. However, Marius Victorinus digresses into a lengthy and rather Platonic discourse on Christ and the souls before the creation of the world and spiritual salvation (CSEL 83:12). On God's calling as mentioned in Galatians 5:8 ("Your persuasion is from God who called you") he comments:

what you have been persuaded is by God, just as was said above: whom God called, God also predestined, and the other things which have been stated in order (Cooper 2005:331).

Galatians 5:8 has been rendered in a positive sense, apparently in the *Vetus Latina*. The clause "just as was said above" may refer to Paul's letter

to the Romans in the same codex from which Victorinus read. However, it can also point to his commentary on Galatians 4:9 in which he hinted at Romans 8, namely that God preserves the integrity of his own precept: that those who come to Christ are those whom God sends, those whom God calls; and that those who know God are those whom God has known, or to his (lost) commentary on Romans (Cooper 2005:313).

The first commentary on all thirteen letters of St. Paul, transmitted under the name of Ambrosius, has since Erasmus been regarded as written by an anonymous author during the episcopate of Damasus I of Rome (366-384). Ambrosiaster followed the translation, maybe found in the old Latin Bible translation and adopted by Jerome in the Vulgate, of Romans 8:29: “quos praescivit et praedestinavit” (“For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son”). In the exposition, God’s foreknowledge is stressed:

Those whom God foreknew would believe in him, he also chose to receive the promises. Those who appear to believe but do not persevere in the faith are not chosen by God, because whomever God chooses will persevere (Ambrosiaster, CSEL 81/1:291).

God knew before what man does or does not do in life: believing and persevering. Ambrosiaster adds, “Some people were chosen only for a time, like Saul and Judas, not on the basis of foreknowledge but on that of temporary righteousness.” The destination, which is preordained, is “in the future age that they will be like the Son of God”.<sup>5</sup> The verb *praedestinare* seems to be taken literally, with the accent on the final goal and still without full stress on the preposition *prae*.

Commenting on Romans 9, Ambrosiaster takes Jacob and Esau “as types of two peoples, believers and unbelievers, who come from the same source but are nevertheless very different”. However, not all Jacob’s descendants are believers, nor all children of Esau unbelievers. That there are good and faithful children of Esau is proved by the example of Job, who was a descendant of Esau, five generations from Abraham, and therefore Esau’s grandson<sup>6</sup>. All this is grounded in God’s foreknowledge of human acts, “because nothing can happen in the future other than what God already knows”. Thus, God is not unjust, because he knows our actions before. The commentaries of Marius Victorinus and Ambrosiaster

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5 Conformes fieri imaginis filii sui, hoc dicit, quia ideao praedestinantur in futurum saeculum, ut similes fiant filio dei, sicut supra memoravi (CSEL 81/1, 291).

6 Ambrosiaster on Rom. 9:10 in: CSEL 81/1, 312. Cf. Gen. 36:28.

thus provided Augustine with doctrinal and exegetical material from which he could profit.<sup>7</sup>

Having left Italy and having reached the African shore, Augustine visited Hippo Regius in 391. Soon, he was made priest and received the task of preaching at Easter 392. Having written a running commentary on Galatians afterwards, Augustine undertook his *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* in the same year of his priesthood in Carthage.<sup>8</sup> He explained the prologue, Romans 1:1-7, and then focussed on the question of sin against the Holy Spirit, but did not proceed with his intended exposition.

In 394, he wrote the *Explanation of Some Themes from the Apostle's Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>9</sup> As *propositiones*, he takes key phrases from Romans in consecutive order, giving not a full running commentary but still an exposition of the main thoughts. On Romans 8:28-30, he raises the following question:

When he says, 'Those he called, he also justified', the question can be raised whether all who are called, will be justified. But elsewhere we read, 'Many are called, but few are chosen' [Mat. 22:14]. Still, because they who are also chosen are anyhow called, it is clear that no one is justified unless he is called, although not all are called but they 'who according to his purpose [*propositum*] have been called', as he said above. The purpose of God then must be accepted, not their own. He even explains what is according to his purpose, when he says, 'For those God knew before he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son'. Therefore, not all who are called are chosen according to his purpose, for this purpose pertains to God's foreknowledge and predestination. And he has not pre-ordained anyone, but whom he foreknew would believe and follow his calling, whom he also calls the elect. For many do not come when they have been called, but no one comes who has not been called (CSEL 84:30).

The concept of God's foreknowledge of man's future acts is Augustine's key to understand how election, (effectual) calling and justification are linked. This passage shows not a trace of any discomfort but is a straightforward exposition of the proposition, "Those he called, he also justified" (Rom. 8:30).

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7 On the former's influence on later commentators, including Augustine, cf. Cooper 2005:182-246.

8 CSEL 84, 145-181.

9 *Expositio quarundum propositionum ex epistula apostoli ad Romanos*, CSEL 84, 3-52. Cf. *Retract. I/23* (CCSL 57:66-70).

In his *Retractations* (426-7), Augustine, looking back at the *Exposition*, focusses on what he wrote on Romans 9:10-13: “When I was discussing what God chose in a man not yet born, whom he said his elder son would serve, and what he rejected in this elder son, likewise not yet born.” He wanted to revise especially the following line:

God then, in his foreknowledge, has not chosen the works of any man which he himself would give, but in his foreknowledge, he has chosen faith as he has chosen him whom he foreknew would believe in him and to whom he would give the Holy Spirit so that, by performing good works, he would obtain eternal life.<sup>10</sup>

He had not yet understood what “the election of grace” means. In retrospect, he judges, “This certainly is not grace if any merits precede it.”

Looking back at this first commentary on Romans, Augustine also observes,

I said little about the call itself which is given according to the purpose of God. For this is not true of all who are called, but only of the elect.<sup>11</sup>

Even the merit of faith itself is a gift of God. Present hardness of heart, however, does not come from God (as the preceding gift of faith does), but from the preceding impiety of man himself. The doctrine of grace for sinners was the base line. On Romans 9:15 (“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion”), Augustine comments, “First, therefore, God is merciful for us, because we were sinners, so that he might call us.”<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. EXCURSUS: ON TWINS

When we speak of Augustine’s “conversion”, we must ask what he means. He describes his beliefs before that deepest inner change, addressing God as follows:

I believed that you exist and that your essence is unchangeable, your care and judgement over all men, and in Christ, your son, our Lord, and in the holy Scriptures, which the authority of your holy Church laid upon me. I believed that you pointed the path of man’s salvation to eternal life, which will come after death (*Confessiones* VII 7.11).

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10 *Retract.* 22.2 (CCSL 57, 68) and *Exp. ad Rom.* 52.11 (CSEL 84, 34 l. 24 – 35, l. 4).

11 *Retract.* 22.3 (CCSL 57, 70).

12 *Exp. ad Rom.* 53.2 (CSEL 84, 35 l. 26 – 36, l. 1).

If he held this belief, what conversion did he yearn for? It finally came when he surrendered his thinking and understanding to Christ and found the path of humility.

In his struggle with the question of the origin of evil, for example, he broke with astrology. The stars cannot account for the diverse life and destiny of men. Firminus told him the story of his father who had observed the passage of time and the constellation of the stars during the pregnancy of his wife. A friend of Firminus's father had a female slave, pregnant too, and he also charted the passage of the time. The two men sent messengers to each other when both women's labour set in and when each child was born. The stunning result was that the messengers met exactly in the middle of the distance between the two houses, which meant that the two new-born boys were born in the same constellation of the zodiac. However, what a difference between the two children: the one being the son of a wealthy man, the other destined to be a slave as his mother was. Augustine concludes that astrology cannot say anything on the destiny of man, be it blessed or adverse.

This is important in a study of Augustine's early doctrine of predestination because, in the struggle that led to his conversion, he was deeply impressed by the way in which Paul tells the story of the twins, Esau and Jacob. The astrologer cannot foretell the truth because, with identical data, he would have said the same thing of Esau and Jacob, who do not have the same destiny (*Confessiones* VII 6.10).

This passage has an interesting parallel in *Ad Simplicianum*, since the Milanese bishop had asked him about Romans 9. Explaining verse 10 on the conception of the twins of Rebecca, Augustine emphasises that Paul "says with great precision, from a single act of intercourse" (*ex uno concubitu*; Greek: *eks henos koitèn echousa*). No merit of either father or mother can be mirrored in a child. "For he sowed both at the same time and she conceived both at the same time."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, astrologers cannot make any conjecture about their destiny based on their birthday, "and yet there is a great difference between them".

In the *Confessiones*, the doctrine of election as such does not surface. Yet, the realisation that we have to be humbled and that no merit of ours is an incentive to God paved the way for Augustine's conversion

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13 *Ad Simplicianum* I 2.3. Another example of twins, unexplainable to astrologers, is of a boy and a girl and their very different way of living. "For what is more part of the body than sex? And yet under the same position of the stars twins of unlike sex can be conceived" (Augustine, *De civitate Dei* V 6; transl. William M. Green, Loeb edition, vol. 2 (1963), 157f).

as subjection to God. Esau lost his birthright in his bargain for “Egyptian food” (as he calls it).

These things I have found there [in the Scriptures], but I have not eaten them. But it pleased you, Lord, to take away the shame of belittling from Jacob, so that the elder would serve the younger, and you have called the nations in your inheritance (*Confessiones* VII 9.15).

Augustine regarded himself as called from the Gentiles to belong to Jacob.

## 5. FINAL FACTORS IN CONVERSION (CONFESSIONES)

The conversion of the famous Roman rhetor Marius Victorinus, who was related to Simplician, had a most profound impact on Augustine (Victorinus CSEL 83:12). We meet him as an expositor of Paul’s letters. *Confessiones* VIII, the chapter on Augustine’s conversion, mentions that Simplician brought up the name of Victorinus in a conversation with Ambrosius, telling how he read certain Platonic works translated into Latin by Victorinus. Then Ambrosius, says Augustine, “in order to exhort me to the humility of Christ”, told him of the old man’s conversion (c. 356) (*Confessiones* VIII 2.3; CCSL 27:114). Victorinus’s public fame as a rhetor was so great that he had been awarded a statue on the Forum of Trajanus in Rome. Augustine was deeply impressed by the simple words with which Victorinus made his change of mind public: “Let us go to church: I want to become a Christian”. In this way, he became a catechumen and enrolled for the preparation for baptism. Was the fact that Marius Victorinus was known as Afer – from Africa – another factor inviting Augustine to follow the example of his countryman on the *via humiliationis*?

This was the turning point.

But when that man of you, Simplicianus, told me this of Victorinus, I was on fire to imitate him; for this very end had he related it (*Confessiones* VIII 5.10).

Then followed the battle between the two wills, to which Romans 7 forms the background. “So the two wills of mine, one old and the other new; one carnal, the other spiritual, struggled with each other and by their discord, undid my soul.” In addition, refer to Romans 7:22:

In vain I delighted in Thy law according to the inner man, when another law in my members rebelled against the law of my mind, and

led me captive under the law of sin which was in my members. For the law of sin is the violence of custom, whereby the mind is drawn and holden, even against its will; but deservedly, for that it willingly fell into it. Who then should deliver me thus wretched from the body of this death, but Thy grace only, through Jesus Christ our Lord? (*Confessiones* VIII 5.12)

Augustine tells specifically what the problem of his old will was: the longing for sexual intercourse (*desiderium concubitus*).

The next and final stage in his conversion is the example of Ponticianus, “a countryman of ours”, as Augustine notes. While visiting him, Ponticianus came upon a book (*codex*): “He took it, opened it and found that it was the apostle Paul, totally unexpected.” Augustine points out that he occupied himself intensely with these writings (*me scripturis curam maximam impendere*) (*Conf.* VIII 6.14). It seems that Romans 7 made clear to him how wretched he was, both willing and unwilling to let go of all earthly hope and commit himself wholly to God. He kept hesitating “to die of death and to live for life” (*Conf.* VIII 11.25). When at last his resistance broke, he wept and heard the words, spoken in a child’s voice: *tolle lege, tolle lege* (“take it and read, take and read it”). Taking these words as a command from God, Augustine took the book, which again is the *codex* of St. Paul, mentioned before in his tale of Ponticianus’s visit. He opened the book and read the first passage he saw: “Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissention and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:13-14). “You have converted me to you,” Augustine confessed at the end of *Confessiones* VIII.

Simplician’s first written question to Augustine relates to Romans 7.

In this text it seems to me clear that the apostle has put himself in the place of someone who is under the law (*Ad. Simpl.*, I 1.1).

The description of the struggle between willing and (not) doing is a mirror of Augustine’s inner conflict. Does no freedom of choice thus remain? That we lack the power to do the good we wish is

thanks to the domination of covetousness, which is strengthened not only by the bond of mortality but also by the millstone of habit (*Ad. Simpl.*, I 1.11).

This last clause seems to reflect Augustine’s self-analysis from the *Confessiones* (O’Donnell 2005:78).

## 6. ANSWER TO SIMPLICIAN I/2

We encounter Simplician as the person who told Augustine of the rhetor Marius Victorinus's conversion and public stand. Although he was older than Ambrose, who considered him his teacher, Simplician would succeed him as bishop of Milan in 397. Simplician then already was an old man († 401). When Augustine had left for Africa, Simplician was still a presbyter in Milan. While Ambrose was Augustine's mentor who held his distance, Simplician was the older friend who may have been more influential at a deeper level.

His original letter with questions to the young bishop Augustine had not survived. Was the tone of his letter inquisitive or critical? O'Donnell suggests that Simplician sent him "leading questions, doubtless designed to provoke a reaction". At the end of the fifth century, Gennadius of Marseilles had access to the original contents. In the footsteps of Jerome, he wrote his *De viris illustribus* (c. 475), a kind of "Who is Who in the Catholic Church", and wrote:

Simplician, bishop of Milan,<sup>14</sup> by many letters stimulated Augustin (until then presbyter), to occupy his talent(s) and to spill it by expositions of the Scriptures, so that he even seemed to be a kind of new Ambrose [of Alexandria, † c. 250], the taskmaster of Origen. That is how he [Augustine] solved many questions on Scripture, answering the man personally.

Gennadius describes Simplician's letter as follows: "There even exists a letter from him with suggestions, in which he teaches the teacher by questioning him as if to be taught."<sup>15</sup> And: "For those interested in understanding Augustine on grace, there is no detour around this part of *Ad Simplicianum*." Mind, this is not for those interested in understanding Augustine's doctrine of predestination, but for those interested in his doctrine on grace!

Simplician may have read Augustine's *Explanation of Some Themes from the Apostle's Epistle to the Romans* and sent him his questions on

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14 Augustine mentioned in chapter 8 of his *Confessiones* that he went to see Simplicianus, who was Ambrose's spiritual guide in his preparation for baptism and a friend of Marius Victorinus (*Confessiones* 8.1-10). Cf. *Augustine through the Ages*, 799f.

15 Gennadius, *De viris illustribus* 37 in: PL 58, 1079 («Est et ejus epistola propositionum, in qua interrogando quasi disciturus docet docturum; Ms Corbei: interrogandum docet doctorem»). Cf. Döpp-Geerlings 2002:283; ed. C.A. Berthoulli, Fr 1895.

the latter's ascension as bishop of Carthage. In the introduction to his response, Augustine refers to his earlier work and says the following:

The things that you proposed should be answered with regard to the apostle Paul, had already been discussed by us to some degree or other and had been committed to writing. But still I am not satisfied with my previous research and explanation, since I may have negligently overlooked something pertinent, and I have gone through the Apostle's words and the sense of his statements more carefully and attentively (*Ad Simpl.* 1.1; CCSL 44:23).

James Wetzel describes the part of *Ad Simplicianum* in which we are interested as follows: "In striking contrast to the rest of the work, the second part of book 1, on Romans 9:10-29, sets off a veritable revolution in his theology" (Fitzgerald 1999:798, s.v. *Simplicianum*, *Ad*). An intriguing aspect of the book is that the reader is witness to Augustine's struggle between his earlier thinking and the force of the biblical text. It is not a change taking place at some point in time in the author's mind, causing a different tone or reasoning in his next book, leaving the reader to fathom how and when the author changed his mind so dramatically. In *Ad Simplicianum*, Augustine struggled while trying to answer the questions of a friend, wrote while struggling and finally yielded to a fresh understanding and acceptance.

Like many similar works, *Ad Simplicianum* contains theological answers to questions evoked by the text of Scripture. In the second part of book one, Augustine explains Romans 9, verses 10-29, taken as an exegetical or rhetorical unity, providing grounds for St. Paul's statement that Rebecca was pregnant [with twins] "by one man". Although Augustine seems to give a verse-by-verse explanation, I would call this work a biblical-theological essay. He reads Romans 9 from the perspective of the apostle's main thought: "This is that no one should boast of the merits of works" (1 2.2). Grace precedes works, "not in order to do away with works, but in order to show that works do not precede but follow upon faith". To emphasize faith as God's gift, the apostle provides proof "by referring to those who had not yet been born", Esau and Jacob, "conceived from a single act of intercourse". Paul states the obvious, namely that the unborn twins had not yet done anything right or wrong. Thus, it was not because of their works that God called them, saying, "The older would serve the younger."

The usual explanation of predestination is that God foreknows the future actions of man, either good or evil. In his *praescientia*, God reacts to faithfulness by election and to faithlessness by rejection. In his *Answer to Simplician*, we see Augustine struggling with the question of how to explain the adverse fate of Esau and Jacob without recourse to the concept

of foreknowledge of the twins' future acts. If God let Jacob's future faith count, his love was based on Jacob's merit – which St. Paul denies. The early expositors of St. Paul realise that the saying "I loved Jacob but I hated Esau" (Rom. 9:13) was not spoken to Rebecca but actually written in Malachi 1 with respect to the two peoples Edom and Israel against the background of a history of animosity.<sup>16</sup> However, that harsh saying is taken as the fulfilment of the divine oracle, which says that "the older would serve the younger".

Augustine asks, how Jacob could be chosen in any sense of the word when there was no difference between him and his (older) brother. He takes the verb *eligere* as it was defined in colloquial Latin: the action of choosing by distinguishing which part to choose from a plurality (*actio elegendi, distinguendi, qua ex pluribus pars eligitur*) (Ring 1996:741). This strict definition of *eligere* is proof that Augustine did not consider the possible exclusively jubilating use of Ephesians 1. The question remains: What is the criterion of this divine choice between two seemingly equal human beings, when it is not God's foreknowledge of our future actions? Augustine finds an answer in the very last words of Romans 9, verse 11. "It was because of him who, by calling the wicked to faith, makes him righteous by grace" (I 2.6). The choice results from the purpose of God (*ex proposito electio*). In my opinion, Augustine finds an answer, not the answer. He sees a distinction between the *propositum Dei* and *electio*. The grounds for this "purpose" remain hidden in God. Augustine resorts to St. Paul's indignation at anyone questioning God's justice (Rom. 9:14). The important change is from the perspective of God's foregoing knowledge of man's future acts to (what he would call later) God's foreknowledge of his own future acts (*De praedestinatione sanctorum* 10.19). In *Ad Simplicium*, he finds a way to understand and express how the harsh sayings of Romans 9 can be read: God's eternal purpose is expressed as election unto salvation of sinners.

What then of Esau? "On the basis of what merit was Esau hated before he was born?" Quoting Sapiaentia 11:25, Augustine maintains that God cannot hate what he himself created, and "it is unjust that he would have hated Esau when there was no unrighteousness to merit it" (I 2.8). When the merit of future faith cannot be the ground for election, God's foreknowledge of Esau's future unbelief and godless lifestyle cannot be taken as the "merit" or ground for his rejection. Quoting Romans 9:15 ("For Moses says, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy ...'"), Augustine states dialectically, "With these words he solves the problem – or rather, complicates it further" (I 2.9). Even if his answer may not satisfy our

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16 Cf. Ambrosiaster on Rom. 9:10 (CSEL 81/1, p. 291).

thinking, there is no denying that Augustine's reasoning is brutally honest. Considering Esau, he takes the same starting point: whether or not God calls someone to salvation, that is, calls him effectively.<sup>17</sup> God "compels no one to sin but only does not bestow on certain sinners the mercy of being made righteous by him, and for that reason it is said that he hardens certain sinners because he does not have mercy on them, not because he forces them to sin" (I 2.16). The supposition is that all men are "a kind of single mass of sin". Why God does not grant mercy to every individual is beyond our understanding and remains hidden in God's most secret judgement.

When it is said "I hated Esau", God does not hate the human being as he created him, but the sin in him and hence Esau the sinner. God does not hate "what he does in creation (*creando*) nor what he does in them by his decree (*ordinando*)" (I 2.18). Augustine compares this with a judge who hates theft in the thief, but does not "hate" the sentence in sending him to the mines. In this way, he distinguishes between God's (hidden) decision not to graciously give faith to some and the actual faithlessness with which some react to the call of the Gospel. To us, this does not help in understanding God's decision, but it is meant to speak with respect of God. Augustine notes one positive point: the fact that God's abhorrence of sin is a "beneficial fear to which others must be exposed and to the making known of the riches of his glory to the vessels of his mercy, which he has prepared for glory", quoting Romans 9:23 (I 2.18).

In *Ad Simplicianum*, Augustine explains predestination as God's *propositum* of graciously calling some sinners and effectively granting them faith, which together is election. He finds it expressed in Romans 11:5 as "a remnant that was chosen by grace". The deepest ground "is so very hidden that it can by no means be discerned by us who are in the same lump" (I 2.22). Augustine ends his answer to his old friend Simplician by inviting him to "say 'Alleluia' and join in a canticle", as St. Paul ended Romans 9-11 in doxology.

## 7. IN RETROSPECT

Was Augustine aware of a difference between the theology of his old age and the writing of his younger years? He pinpoints the turning point in his understanding of God's grace in his answers to Simplician. Twice he underlines in retrospect the importance of this rather small work. Pointedly,

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17 Central is the "question of redemptive efficacy, new to him as of *Ad Simplicianum*" (Wetzel in *Augustine through the Ages*, 798). It is "the mechanism of effectual calling", that is "in a suitable manner" (*congruenter*).

he dates this work as “the first two books that I worked on as a bishop” and “at the beginning of my episcopate, before the Pelagian heresy came upon the scene” (*De dono perseverantiae* 21.55). The first time he evaluated *Ad Simplicianum* was in the second book of his *Retractationes* near the end of his life: “In resolving the question, I really worked for the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God won out” (*Retractationes* II, in: CCL 57:89-91). It is as if Augustine tries to maintain the idea of free choice on our side, but he has to yield to the pressure of free grace from God’s side as set forth in Romans 9.

The second time Augustine referred to *Ad Simplicianum* was c. 428 in *Predestination of the saints*. He simply quoted what he had already written in the *Retractationes* and added, “God revealed this to me in the answer to the question that, as I said, I was writing to Simplician” (*De praedestinatione sanctorum* 4.8). When his final position is based upon God’s revelation, it is beyond questioning. In the sequel, *De dono perseverantiae*, Augustine again refers to *Ad Simplicianum*, but this time only summarizes the essence “that even the beginning of faith is God’s gift” (21.55). In this sequel, he explains that also the end of our faith, having persevered until the end of our life, is a gift of God and not the fruit of our lifelong devotion as the monks of overseas Provence in France would have it.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Why an inaugural lecture on predestination? Because this angle of thought highlights the doctrine of grace as primarily and ultimately God’s free gift (however contrary it seems to our feelings). An example was given of what can be harvested from a fresh reading of a less known text by Augustine. The following conclusions may be drawn:

1. The origin of Augustine’s doctrine of predestination lies in his early years, the first year as an *episkopos*. Even though not all elements are as developed as in his final writings of 428 (an important development being the election of Christ in his humanity and of us as his body), the basis was there. In Romans 9, he finds himself confronted with the radical denial of the relevance of the merit of human work and thus the radical accent on God’s decision of graciously calling some and effectively giving them faith.
2. We have found important connections between *Ad Simplicianum* and the *Confessiones* in the repeated reference to his study of the letters of St. Paul, in Marius Victorinus as an example of conversion and as a preceding expositor of the Pauline corpus, and the featuring of Simplician who may have been a teacher to the young Augustine by

following his development and probing him with questions. Another aspect, skipped in this article, is his thinking on the great difference between the twins, Esau and Jacob, however identical in their beginning.

3. We may have learned that Romans 9(-11) is not so much a *locus de praedestinatione*, but the gospel of God's unbroken election of Israel against the background of the rejection of the Messiah by many. Still, these Pauline chapters confront us again with apostolic teaching that should be analysed in biblical theology and considered with regard to its implications in systematic theology.

It is a privilege to provide patristic material for ongoing studies from the lively context of Africans and Europeans meeting then and now.

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*Keywords*

*Trefwoorde*

Augustine

Augustinus

Predestination

Predestinasie

Election

Uitverkiesing