

THE THIRD PLACE: AUGUSTINE, PELAGIUS, AND THE THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE IDEA OF LIMBO

Many of Augustine's ideas about the nature of the afterlife occur as a result of his differences with Pelagius and Pelagian thought. A careful consideration of both yields great insights into Augustinian conceptions of place in the afterlife, which would in turn prove influential for the medieval development of the idea of limbo. To begin with, let us consider the ideas of Pelagius and Celestius, and then the ideas of Julian of Eclanum. What was it about Pelagius and Pelagian thought that engendered such controversy in the Mediterranean world of the early fifth century? Pelagian thought represents one solution to the problem of the massive influx of unregenerate sinners into the church that the late fourth and early fifth century faced. Pelagius had a boundless faith in human nature. Augustine describes him as

a man on fire with a burning zeal against those who should in their sins blame the human will and instead, blaming the nature of man, try to find an excuse for themselves in this.¹

Pelagius believed that man was essentially good, and capable of greatness. In his view, as G. Dyer² notes, man "stood at the pinnacle of creation, capable of ruling both himself and the world."³ Since he proceeded from this starting point, it is easy to understand the enormous stress that he placed on free will. In his estimation, we are free to choose good or evil. Furthermore, we are fully capable of choosing good by our own powers; nothing hampers us in our choice of goodness. He notes, "that we really do a good thing, or speak a good word, or think a good thought, proceeds

¹ Augustine, *De Natura et gratia*, i, "hominem zelo ardentissimo accensum adversus eos, qui cum in suis peccatis humanam voluntatem debeant accusare, naturam potius accusantes hominum, per illam se excusare conantur." (*P.L.* 44, 247).

² For my treatment of these matters, I am exceedingly grateful for the path-breaking work of George Dyer, in his studies *The Denial of Limbo and the Jansenist Controversy* (Mundelein, IL, 1955) and *Limbo, Unsettled Question* (New York, 1964). In particular, I shall rely heavily on the analyses of the former work.

³ G. Dyer, *The Denial of Limbo*, p.11.

from our own selves."⁴ Pelagius also believed that we could freely choose evil, and that there was nothing in us which inherently directed us towards good or evil. In the phraseology of Augustine's indictment:

Everything good, and everything evil, on account of which we are either laudable or blameworthy, is not born with us but done by us, for we are born not fully developed, but with a capacity for either conduct; and we are procreated as without virtue, so also without vice; and previous to the action of our own proper will, that alone is in man which God has formed.⁵

Thus because we are capable of doing good, it is our duty to do so; in the same vein, because we are capable of doing good, we are capable of *not* doing evil. The church requires that we be sinless, maintained Pelagius, and it held up for us the example of men such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Melchizedek whom Scripture tells us were without sin.⁶

Concurrent with this belief in the supremacy of the human will was a disbelief in the idea of original sin. His *Expositio in Romanos* manages to cover all of St. Paul's critical epistle on this theme without even once advancing his own support for the idea of original sin. Men die, he supposed, because they follow the "example or form"⁷ of Adam, not because of any spiritual inheritance. However, where Pelagius was somewhat muted and vague on this point, his disciple Celestius was explicit. He noted that the entire question of original sin was, theologically speaking, "a matter for inquiry."⁸ Augustine notes how he stated that "original sin binds no single infant."⁹ It is this lack of belief in original sin which made possible the belief in the goodness of man, and in the ability of the unaided will to attain salvation, and it is this belief which first put Pelagius and his followers at loggerheads with Augustine. The issue came to a head around the question of infant baptism, and it is here that a compromise solution was worked out which was critical for our understanding of the development of limbo.

Although we have examples of individuals such as Augustine

⁴ Augustine, *De Gratia Christi, et de peccato originali*, i.18, "Si quod bene agimus, loquimur, cogitamus, ideo est et nostrum et Dei". (P.L. 44, 369).

⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.14, "Omne bonum ac malum, quo vel laudabiles vel vituperabiles sumus, non nobiscum oritur, sed agitur a nobis: capaces enim utriusque rei, non pleni nascimur, et ut sine virtute, ita et sine vitio procreamur: atque ante actionem propriae voluntatis, id solum in homine est, quod Deus condidit." (P.L. 44, 391).

⁶ Pelagius, *Epistola ad Demetriadem*, v. (P.L. 33, 1102).

⁷ Pelagius, *Expositio in Romanos*, v.12. "exemplo uel forma" (P.L. suppl. 1, 1136).

⁸ Augustine, *De Gratia Christi, et de peccato originali*, ii.3, "licet quaestionis res sit ista", (P.L. 44, 387).

⁹ *Ibid.*, ii.2, "quod parvulorum neminem obstringat originale peccatum", (P.L. 44, 386).

himself who delayed their own baptism until late in life, it is clear that infant baptism was an accepted and common practice of the time, as we can in part tell from Augustine's own words on the subject.¹⁰ This practice was what caused problems for Pelagius and his followers. If there were no such thing as original sin, there was no necessity for the practice of infant baptism. However, if there was a necessity for infant baptism, then there could not be any truth to the idea of innate human goodness. In any case, the tradition existed, and they had to face it. They could not deny it, for, as Bernard Leeming puts it, "They were anxious to make converts and anxious to be regarded as orthodox."¹¹ What were they to do? Augustine indicates that Pelagius himself took refuge on the question by equivocating to some extent: "As for infants who die unbaptized, I know indeed where they do not go, yet where they do go, I do not know."¹² But in reality, the Pelagians proposed an interesting solution to their own problem. They created a radical interpretation of the Gospel passage Jn.iii.5, "unless a man be born again of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." This passage clearly admits the necessity of baptism for entry into heaven, but the Pelagians, believing as they did in natural goodness and disbelieving in original sin and the idea that we have inherited anything evil from Adam, noted that the passage said nothing about Eternal Life. What the Pelagians did was to create two different meanings for two previously synonymous terms. The kingdom of heaven could be reached by baptism alone, but Eternal Life could be reached by human will alone, without baptism. Indeed, even the will was not, strictly speaking, necessary, as they believed that a child dying unbaptized would attain to Eternal Life without any application of will in its part, by virtue of its innate goodness.¹³ Eternal Life was a good state, but the kingdom of heaven was a more perfect good which required sacramental initiation. Infants required baptism not to cleanse any inherent evil but rather to render them more perfect in the eyes of God and worthy to enter his Kingdom. This was an elegant solution to the problem, but at the same time it is a very human solution; it is, according to B. Piault,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ii.1. (P.L. 44, 385) and elsewhere.

¹¹ B. Leeming, "Is Their Baptism Really Necessary?", *The Clergy Review* xxxix (1954), 66-85, p.74.

¹² Augustine, *De Gratia Christi, et de peccato originali*, ii.23, "Sine Baptismo parvuli morientes, quo non eant, scio; quo eant, nescio." (P.L. 44, 395-6).

¹³ For the origins of these ideas, see B. Piault, "Autour de la controverse pélagienne. 'Le troisième lieu'", *Recherches de science religieuse* xlv (1956), 481-514, p.491, who attributes them to Ambrosiaster, and G. Dyer, *The Denial of Limbo*, p.15, no.104, who considers several sources.

"more moral than metaphysical, more attentive to the forces of nature than divine activity."¹⁴

These basic ideas were given more cogency and direction by Julian of Eclanum. He continued in the vein of his predecessors by stressing the primacy of the human will in matters of morals. However, unlike Pelagius, who was mainly concerned with the power of the will to make moral choices, Julian maintained that the will had greater effects, as he spells out in his definition of the term: "Free will, by which man is set free by God, consists in the possibility of admitting sins and the abstaining from sins."¹⁵ According to Julian, free will is a gift of God. It did not only render man capable of moral choice but also place him in a state of absolute moral equilibrium, totally free to choose. It thus comes as no surprise, given this, that Julian also denied the existence of original sin, because this would mean an external threat to freedom. The entire idea was distasteful to him; he considered all in man to be entirely good because that is the only way a good God could have created him. "All that [God] made is entirely good. And through this no one is naturally evil,"¹⁶ he said.

Thus there could have been nothing passed on from a first man who was inherently good, or, conversely, if he had been created in sin, there could have been no hope for a change for the better in him. Julian viewed Augustine's ideas on the transmission of original sin as an attack on the sanctity of marriage, since he asked why God would have solemnised marriage if all it did was result in the procreation of those who were damned.¹⁷ Thus infants were born neither good nor evil, but rather in a state of equilibrium that he termed "innocence" (*innocentia*)¹⁸, something entirely free from sin. This, of course, begs the question of the necessity of infant baptism, and Julian answered it in a slightly different fashion than did his predecessors Pelagius and Celestius. In Julian's

¹⁴ B. Piault, *op.cit.*, p.482.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Opus Imperfectum contra Julianum*, i.78, "Libertas arbitrii, qua a Deo emancipatus homo est, in admittendi peccati et abstinendi a peccato possibilitate consistit." (P.L. 45, 1102). In other texts where Julian uses "emancipatus" with regard to the free will, he declares explicitly that it is a gift of God. See Ph. L. Barclift, "In Controversy with Saint Augustine: Julian of Eclanum on the Nature of Sin", *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* lviii (1991) 5-20, p. 19, n. 39. M. Lamberigts, "Julian of Aclanum: a Plea for a Good Creator", *Augustiniana* xxxviii (1988) 5-24.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Opus Imperfectum contra Julianum*, iii.159, "Malum quippe non exstantis invenitur naturae: sed sicut omnis creatura, in quantum conditur, bona est", (P.L. 45, 1312).

¹⁷ Augustine, *Contra Julianum*, iii.36. (P.L. 44, 721).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, iii.10. (P.L. 44, 707); vi.30. (839); vi.32. (840), *Opus Imperfectum contra Julianum*, i.49. (P.L. 45, 1072).

estimation, baptism served two functions: it eliminated sin and added holiness. A person with sin on his soul would be cleansed of it by baptism; a person with no sin on his soul would be made holier. Infants fall into the latter category, and they are baptized according to Julian, "that the sanctity, justice, adoption, inheritance, and fellowship of Christ might be added to them, that they might be members of him."¹⁹ Baptism wrought no essential change in infants, although Julian admitted its importance. He did not stress the idea of Eternal Life as did his predecessors, although it had some bearing on his ideas, since he insisted on the necessity of baptism to enter the kingdom of heaven, and denied that a child dying unbaptized had done anything to merit hell.

AUGUSTINE'S RESPONSES

Augustine's responses to his Pelagian opponents centre almost exclusively around the question of infant baptism, presenting the early church with a great source of authoritative opinion on the subject, and providing later authors with an important authority whom it was necessary to refute or to whom they could appeal for support for their arguments. Furthermore, Augustine's arguments critically shaped the development of limbo. First, let us examine the arguments he used to answer the objections of his opponents, and then we shall move on to present a more general statement of his arguments as a whole.

Against Pelagius and Celestius

Augustine rejected out of hand the notion of an "Eternal Life" available to the unbaptized. He set about a defence of the church's traditional practice of infant baptism in so doing; he was attempting to prove the existence of damnation for children. If children *could* be damned, it had to be for a reason, and discovering that reason would prove the existence of original sin. His arguments on this subject are lengthy, recondite, and complex, and as such impossible to summarize adequately in a short space. Instead, I shall concentrate on two of his specific arguments against the Pelagian concept of Eternal Life. Augustine reckoned that this concept of Eternal Life could be seen in two ways, either as a kind of halfway state between heaven and hell, or else as a

¹⁹ Augustine, *Opus Imperfectum contra Julianum*, i.53, "Hanc igitur gratiam, per quam reis venia, illuminatio spiritualis, adoptio filiorum Dei, municipatus Jerusalem coelestis, sanctificatio, atque in Christi membra translatio", (P.L. 45, 1076).

superior kind of human life. In the first case, Augustine was at great pains to deny the existence of a middle category of salvation by presenting the portrait of the Last Judgement from Matt.xxv.33ff in which Christ separates the good from the wicked by placing the good on his right and the wicked on his left. Already in earlier texts, Augustine considers this figure and notes that it precludes any middle ground:

This is an absolutely new fable, never before heard in the church, that one could have an Eternal Life which is not the kingdom of heaven, and that one could obtain salvation outside of the kingdom of God. For whosoever will not go to the kingdom of God without doubt will go to damnation. The Lord, announcing that he would come to judge the living and the dead, spoke only of his right and left, therefore of heaven and hell.²⁰

Augustine's analysis is very strict and very legal; Christ is a judge who passes a very simple sentence:

But certainly it is useless to question on the merits of one who has not merited anything. Because it does not do to believe that it is possible to have a middle life (*vita media*) between vice and virtue, not, on the part of the judge, that he can have a middle decision (*sententia media*) between chastisement and recompense.²¹

Simple questions such as right and left, salvation and damnation, preclude any subtleties of place in Augustine's view. Merit is what matters. And since unbaptized infants have not merited anything, Augustine consigns them to hell:

Behold I have explained to you what the kingdom is and what eternal fire is so that when you profess that a child is not in the kingdom, you may acknowledge that he is in eternal fire.²²

There are no alternatives; for Augustine, the very notion of a third place was a nonsense.²³

²⁰ Augustine, *Sermo 294*, iii.3, "Hoc novum in Ecclesia, prius inauditum est, esse vitam aeternam praeter regnum coelorum, esse salutem aeternam praeter regnum Dei. Primo vide, frater, ne forte hinc consentire nobis debeas, quisquis ad regnum Dei non pertinet, eum ad damnationem sine dubio pertinere. Venturus Dominus, et iudicaturus de vivis et mortuis, sicut Evangelium loquitur, duas partes facturus est, dextram et sinistram." (P.L. 38, 1337).

²¹ Augustine, *De Libero arbitrio*, iii.66, "sed sane superfluo quaeri de meritis ejus qui nihil meruerit. Non enim metuendum est ne vita esse potuerit media quaedam inter recte factum atque peccatum, et sententia iudicis media esse non possit inter praemium atque supplicium." (P.L. 32, 1303-4).

²² Augustine, *Sermo 294*, iii.4, "Ecce exposuit tibi quid sit regnum, et quid sit ignis aeternus; ut quando confiteris parvulum non futurum in regno, fatearis futurum in igne aeterno." (P.L. 38, 1337).

²³ B. Pailt, *op.cit.*, p.504.

Augustine dealt with the second possibility, that Eternal Life might be some form of enhanced life, with another example from Scripture and with some logic. He presents the words of Christ from John iv, 54, "Amen, amen I say to you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you." Augustine utilised this passage to indicate that one must have the Eucharist to be able to have eternal life. Since the church only allowed baptized individuals to partake of the Eucharist, an unbaptized child was *ipso facto* barred from it and thus from eternal life.²⁴ This simple argument was vulnerable to the Pelagian query about the fate of an infant who died baptized but who had never partaken of the Eucharist; would it still be lost? But what Augustine meant was that partaking of the body of Christ was synonymous with living in the body of Christ:

Would you live by the spirit of Christ? Be in the body of Christ... Thence it is that the Apostle Paul, explaining to us the nature of this bread, says, "One bread, one body are we, being many." O sacrament of piety! O sign of unity! O bond of charity!²⁵

Augustine interpreted Paul's use of the Eucharist as meaning membership in the church, and was attempting to show in this that there was no such thing as a natural Eternal Life available to anyone. Such a thing came only through life in the Eucharist which meant a life in the church. One did not need necessarily to have the Eucharist to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but one did have to have a life in the church, which could only be gained by baptism; the faith of the church would extend to assist the salvation of its tiniest members, who did not have personal faith or the experience of the Eucharist themselves.²⁶ With these thoughts in mind, Augustine turned on the Pelagians. Since an unbaptized infant was thus excluded from both the kingdom of heaven and from Eternal Life, it followed that he was capable of being damned. There had to be a reason why this could happen, and Augustine pressed the Pelagians to give him the reasons why. Either God was somehow cruel and arbitrary, or else there was something innate in infants to warrant damnation. Augustine was thus attempting to press them into admitting the existence of original sin, and with that established, he thus established the necessity of infant baptism.

²⁴ Augustine, *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum*, i.22. (P.L. 44, 570).

²⁵ Augustine, *In Ioannis evangelium*, xxvi.13, "Vis ergo et tu vivere de Spiritu Christi? In corpore esto Christi...Inde est quod exponens nobis apostolus Paulus hunc panem, 'Unus panis,' inquit, 'unum corpus multi sumus (1Cor.x,17). O Sacramentum pietatis! O signum unitatis! O vinculum charitatis! (P.L. 35, 1613).

²⁶ See J. Lécuyer, "L'enfant est baptisé dans la foi de l'Église", *La Maison-Dieu* lxxxix (1967), 21-37.

Against Julian

Augustine extended many of the arguments he had used against Pelagius and Celestius against Julian of Eclanum as well, and, as before, the nature of the argument came to centre around the question of baptism; Augustine concerned himself with this rather than with Julian's notions about the primary power of the human will. Julian believed that baptism served two functions, that of conferring holiness and that of abolishing sin. Such a schema was absurd to Augustine, who questioned what good baptism did according to Julian's estimation:

Go on, then, go on and say that they are baptized in the sacrament of the Saviour, but not saved; they are redeemed, but not delivered; they are bathed, but not washed; they are exorcised and exsufflated, but not freed from the power of the Devil. Declare likewise, that the blood is also shed for them in forgiveness of sins, but they are not cleansed by forgiveness of any sin. Wondrous are the things you say. New are the things you say. False are the things you say.²⁷

What purpose did baptism then serve, asked Augustine? He was attempting to prove that Julian actually did not believe in original sin, but would not come directly out and say it. Why was this sacramental grace necessary if there was no sin or evil to require it? Why should the rite of baptism include an exorcism if humanity were not in some way in the power of the Devil? What did baptism do if not deliver us from the power of the Devil? And how did the Devil hold us except by sin? This was all certainly true of the Old Law, where baptism was prefigured by circumcision, without which the child would perish; Augustine badgers Julian through the mouth of a child of the Old Law:

My soul shall be destroyed out of my people if I am not circumcised on the eighth day; you who deny original sin and confess a just God, tell me how I have sinned.²⁸

If under the Old Law a child could perish without circumcision, why should he not be able to perish under the New without baptism? As he did

²⁷ Augustine, *Contra Julianum*, iii.9, "Pergite adhuc, pergite, et sicut dicitis, In Sacramento Salvatoris baptizantur, sed non salvantur; redimuntur, sed non liberantur; lavantur, sed non abluuntur; exorcizantur et exsufflantur, sed a potestate diaboli non eruuntur: sic etiam dicite, Funditur pro eis sanguis in remissionem peccatorum, sed nullius peccati remissione mundantur. Mira sunt quae dicitis, nova sunt quae dicitis, falsa sunt quae dicitis", (P.L. 44, 707).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vi.21, "Peritura est anima mea de populo meo, si non fuero circumcisis octavo die: qui ergo et originale malum diffitemini, et justum Deum fatemini, quid peccaverim dicite." (P.L. 44, 835).

before, Augustine rejected out of hand the existence of a state of Eternal Life such as Julian advocated. He badgered Julian again, this time about the torment such an Eternal Life might provide for unbaptized children:

But you, also, who contend that they are, as it were, free from all condemnation, do not wish to think about the condemnation by which you punish them by estranging them from the life of God, and from the kingdom of God so many images of God, and by separating them from the pious parents you so eloquently urge to procreate them. They suffer these separations unjustly, if they have no sin at all, or if justly, then they have original sin.²⁹

Augustine returns to the attempt to make the Pelagians admit original sin, but he adds a new idea here: how can there be happiness if there is a separation from God? This idea would be developed by later writers as the theme of the deprivation of the beatific vision and is exceedingly important to the development of ideas about limbo and the condition of the souls within it. Augustine's addition of the sorrowing parents is merely a twisting of the knife.

THEMES IN AUGUSTINE'S RESPONSES

Now that we have considered some of Augustine's specific replies, let us provide a few summaries of some of his specific themes. In the first place, Augustine rejects the Pelagian idea of Eternal Life in any form:

Let no one promise unbaptized infants some middle place of rest and happiness between damnation and the kingdom of heaven such as he pleases and where he pleases.³⁰

Augustine was exceptionally severe towards the ideas of Vincentius Victor, who, though he was not a Pelagian, held somewhat more generous views, believing that unbaptized infants went first to the earthly paradise, and then after the resurrection went to heaven. Augustine, by contrast, thought in only two categories: salvation and damnation, and was unwilling to accept a third alternative. He was a brutal realist when it came to these matters. Eternal Life is a very compassionate, merciful idea - in short, a

²⁹ *Ibid.*, v.44, "Verum vos quoque, qui eos velut liberos ab omni damnatione esse contenditis, cogitare non vultis qua illos damnatione puniatis, alienando a vita Dei et a regno Dei tot imagines Dei, postremo separando a parentibus piis, quos ad eos procreandos tam disertus hortaris. Haec autem injuste patiuntur, si nullum habent omnino peccatum: aut si juste, ergo habent originale peccatum." (*P.L.* 44, 809).

³⁰ Augustine, *De Anima et eius origine*, i.11, "et non baptizatis parvulis nemo promittat inter damnationem regnumque coelorum, quietis vel felicitatis cujuslibet atque ubilibet quasi medium locum." (*P.L.* 44, 481).

very human idea, but Augustine did not think in human or sometimes even merciful terms. Rather, he looked at things as they were and pondered the mystery of God's judgements. Nowhere is this more clear than in the attention he paid to the sufferings of little children. This sad fact mystified and fascinated him for a long time; he had considered it long before the Pelagian controversy in his *De Libero arbitrio* (395) and especially in his Letter 166 to Jerome:

[Babies] are liable to wasting disease, to racking pain, to the agonies of thirst and hunger, to feebleness of limb, to privation of bodily senses, and to vexing assaults of unclean spirits. Surely it is incumbent on us to show how it is compatible with justice that infants suffer all these things without any evil of their own as the producing cause.³¹

In a merciful, human world, babies would not suffer. Yet they do, and Augustine realised this fact. Pondering this sad situation, among other things, led him to some answers which constitute our second theme, grace.

Augustine's theology depended on the idea of divine grace. For Augustine, ultimate salvation depended not on innate goodness or on merit of any kind, but rather was totally dependent on the mystery of God's grace. Man has absolutely no claim on it whatsoever; Augustine notes, "we maintain that the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord is truly grace, that is, it is not given according to our merits."³² The sufferings of children provided Augustine with an occasion to consider the entire disordered condition of man.³³ The solution came not from man's own efforts, but through God's grace. Unbaptized infants were not saved, baptized infants were; this was the result of God's grace, according to Augustine. One child dies baptized and saved, another dies unbaptized and is lost. Time and again Augustine employs this example as an illustration of his points.³⁴ But illustrations were all that Augustine could provide; he could not come up with an answer to this problem any more than we can. The mystery of the salvation of infants remained just that to him, a mystery.

Fortunately, for Augustine there was at least a partial solution to the problem; his third major theme, baptism. Baptism was capable of

³¹ Augustine, *Epistola 166*, vi.16, "Languescunt aegritudinibus, torquentur doloribus, fame et siti cruciantur, debilitantur membris, privantur sensibus, vexantur ab immundis spiritibus. Demonstrandum est utique, quomodo ista sine illa sua mala causa juste patiuntur." (P.L. 33, 727).

³² Augustine, *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, xxiii, "qua defendimus gratiam Dei per Jesum Christum Dominum nostrum, vere esse gratiam, id est, non secundum merita nostra dari", (P.L. 44, 978).

³³ F. Cayré, "Une rétractation de saint Augustin. Les enfants morts sans baptême", *L'Année théologique augustinienne*, xii (1952), 131-143, pp.136-137.

³⁴ B. Leeming, *op.cit.*, p.80, no.2.

saving the infant, and should be applied as soon as possible. For infants, the salvation comes from the faith of the church, not through their own abilities, and that faith is conferred through baptism.³⁵ Baptism is what truly provides eternal life. Baptism is what makes an individual able to receive Christ in the Eucharist, and so become one with the church and so with him, since he and the church are one. Similarly, the church is also the bride of Christ, and one can only be a child of God if one is the child of the church. Augustine makes many references to scriptural passages dealing with baptism, noting that it is like Noah's ark, which was the sole means of salvation for a few (1Ptr.iii.20-21), or that it is a bath of regeneration and renewal (Titus iii.5).³⁶ Indeed, for Augustine baptism was such an important thing that he cited examples from the supernatural regarding it. He presents the story of a boy who died as a catechumen before receiving baptism whose mother brought him to the shrine of St. Stephen, whereupon the boy came back to life, requested and was given baptism, and thereupon died a second time.³⁷ He also cites the example of Dinocrates, brother of St. Perpetua, who died at age seven and was seen by her in a purgatory-like place. She prayed for him and he was delivered; Augustine is careful to remind readers that he was saved not just by his sister's faith, since "there is no record...that the boy who died at the age of seven died without baptism."³⁸ His sin no doubt consisted of a relapse to paganism prompted by his father; nevertheless according to Augustine it is his original baptism as well as his sister's intercessions, which saved him. In both of these examples, baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation, even a *post mortem* one.

Finally, we come to the fourth theme in Augustine's works, the fate of unbaptized infants. What happens to them? They are damned. As Augustine had rejected the idea of Eternal Life in preference to a strict schema of salvation and damnation, he could find no place for any kind of salvation without baptism of water or desire, leaving only hell as their fate. As one example, he notes:

But what can be plainer than the many weighty testimonies of the divine declarations which afford to us the clearest possible proof that without union with Christ there is no man who can attain to Eternal Life and salvation; and that no man can unjustly be damned--that is, separated from that life and

³⁵ See J. Lécuyer, *op.cit.*

³⁶ See the index of vol. 60 of the *CSEL* for extensive citations of passages where Augustine treats these scriptural examples.

³⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 323, iii. (*P.L.* 38, 1446) and *Sermo* 324. (*P.L.* 38, 1446-7).

³⁸ Augustine, *De Anima et eius origine*, i.12, "nec illa sic scripsit...ut illum puerum qui septennis mortuus fuerat, sine Baptismo diceret fuisse defunctum", (*P.L.* 44, 481).

salvation? The inevitable conclusion from these truths is this, that, as nothing else is effected when infants are baptized except that they are incorporated into the church, in other words, they are united with the body and members of Christ, unless this benefit has been bestowed upon them, they are manifestly in danger of damnation.³⁹

Augustine often returns to this point, that unbaptized infants would suffer eternal death and undergo damnation.⁴⁰ Augustine recognised two deaths, one of the separation of soul and body, the other of damnation of both soul and body. This is the end result of original sin, which all humans merit if they are not redeemed by baptism. The Pelagians attempted to modify this harshness by asserting that God rewarded or punished unbaptized infants by salvation or damnation according to the good or evil that they were *likely* to do in the future; Augustine rejected this out of hand as "absurd".⁴¹ Why, he wondered, could contingent grace not be extended to cover these contingent sins, and have everyone saved? No, the distribution of grace was a mystery, but those infants who died without it were surely subject to a "most grievous damnation."⁴² Unbaptized infants were to him, "vessels of contumely, vessels of wrath, and the wrath of God is upon them."⁴³ They were in the power of the Devil, and left alone they would return to him.

VIGOUR AND VACILLATION

We must note, however, that Augustine's views on the fate of unbaptized infants, while seemingly absolute, admit substantial nuance. George Dyer comments upon the "paradox of vigour and vacillation"⁴⁴

³⁹ Augustine, *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum*, iii.7, "Quid autem apertius tot tantisque testimoniis divinorum eloquiorum, quibus dilucidissime apparet, nec praeter Christi societatem ad vitam salutemque aeternam posse quemquam hominum pervenire, nec divino iudicio injuste posse aliquem damnari, hoc est, ab illa vita et salute separari? Unde fit consequens ut quoniam nihil agitur aliud, cum parvuli baptizantur, nisi ut incorporentur Ecclesiae, id est, Christi corpori membrisque socientur; manifestum sit eos ad damnationem, nisi hoc eis collatum fuerit, pertinere." (P.L. 44, 189).

⁴⁰ An extensive list of citations may be found in G. Dyer, *The Denial of Limbo*, pp.24-5, n.164.

⁴¹ Augustine, *De Praedestinatione sanctorum*, xii.24, "Quod si absurdum est", (P.L. 44, 978).

⁴² Augustine, *Opus Imperfectum contra Julianum*, v.64, "damnatione gravissima", (P.L. 45, 1505).

⁴³ G. Dyer, *The Denial of Limbo*, pp.25-26.

⁴⁴ G. Dyer, *Limbo, Unsettled Question*, p.15.

which marks Augustine's thought in this area. Augustine would have no part in the development of limbo if his ideas were as "open and shut" as they have been presented above; however, they are not. Augustine seems to have recoiled as instinctively as we do from the notion that unbaptized infants were punished in the same fashion as obdurate sinners. It is quite clear that he was considerably less severe than posterity has credited him as being.⁴⁵ Regarding the actual sufferings of these unbaptized infants, he noted: "And of course, the mildest punishment of all will fall upon those who added no actual sin to the original sin they brought with them."⁴⁶ And elsewhere:

It may therefore be correctly affirmed that such infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in the mildest condemnation of all (*damnatione omnium mitissima*).⁴⁷

Unbaptized infants thus suffer a lesser punishment in Augustine's estimation. For example, when pressed by Julian of Eclanum to declare that unbaptized infants and demons were punished in the same way, he categorically denied it.⁴⁸ There was, unfortunately, no way to change the state of these infants, since he held that suffrages offered by the living on behalf of the dead have no effect on those who lived without the faith.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the sufferings of these infants are preferable to their not existing at all:

But I do not say that children who die without the baptism of Christ will undergo such grievous punishment that it were better for them never to have been born...who can doubt that unbaptized infants, having only original sin and no burden of personal sin will suffer the lightest condemnation of all (*damnatione omnium levissima*)? I cannot determine amount and kind of their punishment, but I dare not say it were better for them never to have existed than to exist there.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ E. Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine* (London, 1960), p.212.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, xciii, "Mitissima sane omnium poena erit eorum qui praeter peccatum quod originale traxerunt, nullum insuper addiderunt", (*P.L.* 40, 275).

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum*, i.21, "Potest proinde recte dici, parvulos sine Baptismo de corpore exeuntes in damnatione omnium mitissima futuros." (*P.L.* 44, 120).

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Opus Imperfectum contra Julianum*, iv.122. (*P.L.* 45, 1417-8).

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Sermo 172*, (*P.L.* 38, 937).

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Contra Julianum*, v.44, "Ego autem non dico parvulos sine Christi Baptismate morientes tanta poena esse plectendos, ut eis non nasci potius expediret...quis dubitaverit parvulos non baptizatos, qui solum habent originale peccatum, nec ullis propriis aggravantur, in damnatione omnium levissima futuros? Quae qualis et quanta erit, quamvis definire non possim, non tamen audeo dicere quod eis ut nulli essent quam ut ibi essent, potius expediret." (*P.L.* 44, 809).

In addition to expressing his position on this particular subject, the above passage also shows us something characteristic of Augustine's thought on these matters as a whole - it shows us something of his doubt. He is not sure of the punishment of unbaptized infants, just that it is preferable to not existing at all. It is here that Augustine displays his vacillation on the subject. He is sure, but he is not sure. In a letter to St. Jerome written in 415, he states his belief in the damnation of unbaptized infants, but adds:

But when we come to the penal sufferings of infants, I am embarrassed, believe me, by great difficulties, and am wholly at a loss to find an answer by which they are solved.⁵¹

Elsewhere in the letter he begs St. Jerome, "Teach me therefore, I beseech you, what I may teach to others, teach me what I ought to hold as to my own opinion."⁵²

Similar sentiments are expressed in a letter of 418 to Bishop Opatus.⁵³ Augustine knows, but he does not know. He states a position firmly, but does not understand all the implications of it. He falls back on the idea that "God's judgements are unsearchable, and his ways past finding out."⁵⁴ Augustine perhaps realised that the actual answer to this problem surpassed human understanding. It is important to remember that he entered into the question to combat the Pelagian heresy, and the positions they adopted conditioned the responses he made. Some elements of his teachings were simply the result of his being anti-Pelagian.⁵⁵ He was sure that unbaptized infants were damned. But as to the nature and effects of that damnation, he would only say that they were mild. He could understand no more, nor could Jerome and Opatus give him a clear answer either. It is entirely possible that, but for the Pelagians, he never would have considered the question.⁵⁶ But he did consider it, and he was unable to come up with an ultimate answer.

⁵¹ Augustine, *Epistola 166*, xvi, "Sed cum ad poenas ventum est parvulorum, magnis mihi crede, coarctor angustiis, nec quid respondeam prorsus invenio", (P.L. 33, 727).

⁵² *Ibid.* x, "Doce ergo, quaeso, quod doceam, doce quod teneam", (P.L. 33, 725).

⁵³ Augustine, *Epistola 190*. (P.L. 33, 857-867).

⁵⁴ Augustine, *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum*, i.30, "nisi quia inscrutabilia sunt judicia ejus, et investigabiles viae ejus", (P.L. 44, 126).

⁵⁵ See W. Van Roo, "Infants dying without baptism. A survey of recent literature and determination of the state of the question", *Gregorianum* xxxv (1954), 405-473, p.466; F. Cayré, *Une rétractation*, p.134.

⁵⁶ W. Stockums, *Das Los der ohne die Taufe sterbenden Kinder* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1923), p.146.

A THIRD PLACE IN AUGUSTINE?

It is the above-mentioned ambiguity in Augustine's writings that leads to his place in the development of the medieval idea of limbo, at least according to the interpretation put on him by theologians in the middle ages. As we have noted, Augustine believed very strongly in rooting his ideas in Scripture. However, his task in this particular area was not helped by the fact that, as Jacques Le Goff points out, "the Bible was imprecise, not to say contradictory, on the subject of the hereafter."⁵⁷ This did not make his task any easier, and despite the firmness we have seen him display in condemning the Pelagian Eternal Life in favour of a strict dichotomy of salvation and damnation, the fact remains that Augustine *did* at times describe the afterlife in more than binary terms. For example, in his *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, written in 421, he notes:

during the time which intervenes between a man's death and resurrection at the last, men's souls are reserved in secret receptacles (*abditis receptaculis*), at rest or in tribulation according to each soul's deserts, according to its lot in the flesh during life.⁵⁸

This seems to indicate the existence of more than one place in the afterlife, although they are still divided here by the qualities of reward and punishment. The schema grows more complicated as the *Enchiridion* proceeds to consider the effect of suffrages on the dead. We have seen before that Augustine considered them ineffective for the unbaptized, but he did indicate that they were effective for the following groups:

When, therefore, the sacrifices of the altar or of any kind of alms are offered on behalf of all the dead baptized, they are, for the entirely good [*valde boni*] thanksgivings; in the case of the not entirely bad [*non valde mali*] they are propitiatory; in the case of the entirely evil [*valde mali*], whilst of no profit to them, they do at least console the living.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Cambridge, 1984), p.63.

⁵⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, cix, "Tempus autem quod inter hominis mortem et ultimam resurrectionem interpositum est, animas abditis receptaculis continet, sicut unaquaeque digna est vel requie vel aerumna, pro eo quod sortita est in carne cum viveret." (*P.L.* 40, 283).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, cx, "Cum ergo sacrificia sive altaris sive quarumcumque eleemosynarum pro baptizatis defunctis omnibus offeruntur, pro valde bonis gratiarum actiones sunt; pro non valde malis propitiationes sunt; pro valde malis etiamsi nulla sunt adjumenta mortuorum; qualescumque vivorum consolationes sunt." See p. 639 of G. Edwards' review article of J. Le Goff's *Birth of Purgatory* "Purgatory: 'Birth' or Evolution", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* xxxvi (1985), 634-646, for an analysis of this passage; Edwards correctly identifies that the passage speaks of only three categories of individuals, and that Le Goff is mistaken in his interpretation of a fourth category of the *non valde boni*.

Here we have a description of *three* classes of individuals in the afterlife, only one of which, the *non valde mali*, can be aided by suffrages on their behalf. This adds a confusing note to the right/left saved/damned dichotomy presented in his writings against the Pelagians; suddenly, we are confronted with a third category. This is by no means an isolated example, since in his earlier work, the *De Libero arbitrio*, he states

Do not worry, there is, assuredly, a life of some quality intermediate between the life of doing right and the life of sin, and a sentence of the judge intermediate between reward and punishment.⁶⁰

What are we to make of all this, particularly the latter note? In that particular case, it is possible to assert that since the work in question was written between 388 and 395, it represents an early idea of Augustine's, later rejected. However, it must be pointed out that he never issues one of his *Retractationes* to withdraw this idea, as he did other ideas. Furthermore, the *Enchiridion* is from comparatively late in his life, and again we find evidence of a third class of person at least, if not a third place in the afterlife. The truth of these matters divides scholars even today. Some have interpreted this section to mean that Augustine was voicing support for Purgatory;⁶¹ others have denied that he even conceived of such a place.⁶² Even if it should be judged impossible to come to any exact conclusions about truth of the matter, one certain message emerges from these passages. By touching on the possibility of a third, indeterminate state with or without any final conclusion of his own, Augustine generated controversy, a controversy that still continues today. The idea of a limbo of children, as later ages understood it, did not exist in the minds of Augustine and his contemporaries;⁶³ such a concept is more probably a later enlargement of his original ideas.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Augustine is, equally without question, one of the major sources for that later enlargement, because he begins the process of assigning a different punishment, a milder one, to the unbaptized infants in hell; and if the environment of hell is one of the things that provides the punishment of damnation, then the existence of a milder punishment for one class of the

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De Libero arbitrio*, iii.66, "Non enim metuendum est ne vita esse potuerit media quaedam inter recte factum atque peccatum, et sententia iudicis media esse non possit inter praemium atque supplicium." (P.L. 32, 1304).

⁶¹ See J. Ntekeda, *L'évolution de la doctrine du purgatoire chez saint Augustin* (Paris, 1966).

⁶² See J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Cambridge, 1984), p.62.

⁶³ B. Piault, *op.cit.*, p.514.

⁶⁴ F. Cayré, *op.cit.*, p.138.

damned begs the question of a different place in which this milder punishment was meted out. Such a place would later be called the limbo of children, and Augustine can rightly be seen as having played a critical role in its founding. But the credit - if it is that - cannot lie with Augustine alone, since many of the features of the later limbo of children bear some similarities to the Eternal Life of the Pelagian heretics. The limbo of children thus depends paradoxically as much on the Pelagian heresy as it does Augustine's orthodoxy.

Using a later theological vocabulary, we can now construct a chart of the different views of each, as follows:

THE LIMBO OF CHILDREN

(after Dyer⁶⁵)

PELAGIANS	AUGUSTINE	MEDIEVAL LIMBO
Unbaptized children are born in a	Unbaptized children are born in a	Unbaptized children are born in a
State of Innocence	State of Original Sin	State of Original Sin
And sentenced to	And attain	And sentenced to
Neither heaven nor hell	Not to heaven nor any middle ground	Neither heaven nor hell
But rather	But rather are sentenced to	But rather
A middle ground (Eternal Life) which is	Damnation, in which they suffer	A middle ground (limbo) which is
A state of innocence involving		A state of damnation involving
Neither the pain of sense nor the pain of loss		Neither the pain of sense nor the pain of loss
But a measure of happiness	The pain of sense and the pain of loss	But a measure of happiness

Essentially, then, the medieval authors continued the verdict of Augustine, but mitigated the penalty. And all of these elements stems not from

⁶⁵ G. Dyer, *Limbo, Unsettled Question*, p.18.

Augustine's firm ideas, but rather from his weakness, as George Dyer points out:

there appear to be elements of hesitation in an otherwise vigorous point of view. These factors of severity, hesitation, and apparent vacillation will all contribute to the controversy of a later century.⁶⁶

Dyer is here speaking about the Jansenist controversy of the seventeenth century regarding the salvation of unbaptized children, but his point is equally valid for the development of the limbo of children in the Middle Ages as well.

MORE VIGOUR AND VACILLATION: AUGUSTINE AND THE BOSOM OF ABRAHAM

Augustine's views on infant baptism influenced the later idea of the limbo of children. But Augustine's thought also influenced another idea, that of the limbo of the Fathers, though his influence here was less. The roots of this particular question lie in the explanations Augustine gave to two different but related things: the figure of the bosom of Abraham in Lk.xvi.22-23, and the question of Christ's descent into the underworld. Both of these, and, indeed, the question of the salvation of unbaptized children, all tie into a larger question, that of the fate of the soul after death. In examining Augustine's positions on these matters, Eugène Portalié notes that, "this is one of the questions where it is most difficult to pinpoint the thought of Augustine,"⁶⁷ and he goes on to point out the conflicting opinions of several modern scholars. As with the question of the salvation of unbaptized infants, there is thus considerable room for argument among scholars even to the present day regarding just exactly what Augustine meant. Nevertheless, we will be able to draw some conclusions, below.

In the preceding section, we considered the important sections from Augustine's *Enchiridion* regarding his admission of the possibilities of more than just the two places of heaven and hell in the afterlife. If Augustine believed this was so, there was room for later critics to indicate that he had expressed the possibility of a limbo of children, or a limbo of the Fathers. Since we have examined Augustine's views on "space" in the afterlife, let us look briefly at his views of the "body" which will occupy that space, the soul. Souls do not have a "body" *per se*, he reckoned; rather, they have the "likeness" of a body. In the case of the damned, they

⁶⁶ G. Dyer, *The Denial of Limbo*, pp.29-30.

⁶⁷ E. Portalié, *op.cit.*, p.290.

are "afflicted" with this likeness, and "are subjected to the same experience as the dead flesh itself buried under the earth,"⁶⁸ indicating that they undergo some form of suffering and decay. "The soul is able to have in the likeness of its body and all its bodily members,"⁶⁹ he notes, and maintains that forces can act upon it in some fashion; "either in rest or in sadness."⁷⁰ After the resurrection, the joy and vexation will be more intense, since the sensations will be felt with the body as well as the soul⁷¹, but in the afterlife they are no less real.

Augustine may have viewed these sensations as somewhat metaphorical, however, as we can see in one of his positions on the bosom of Abraham, defined in his controversy with Vincentius Victor. Victor maintained that there was a literal corporality to the soul - there must have been, otherwise how could the rich man in hell have recognised Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham? He further maintained that there must thus have been a corporality to the bosom of Abraham as well. Augustine chided him on these views as he pithily pointed out the salient fact that one human bosom could not actually contain so many souls. For his part, he defined the bosom of Abraham in this fashion: as "that remote and separate abode of rest and peace in which Abraham now is."⁷² This sets the initial tone for Augustine's view of this place; it is paradisiacal, a place of happiness, to be used synonymously with paradise.⁷³ Indeed, he could even wish a friend there. Meditating on a long-dead friend from his days at Carthage, Augustine notes in his *Confessions*:

Whatever that may be which is signified by that bosom, there lives my Nebridiu, my sweet friend...there he lives concerning which he used to ask me so much - me, an inexperienced feeble one! Now he puts not his ear unto my mouth, but his spiritual mouth unto your fountain, and drinks as much as he is able, wisdom according to his desire, happy without end. Nor do I believe he is so intoxicated with it as to forget me, seeing you, O Lord, whom

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, xii.66, "per illas corporalium similitudines exhibeatur, quod ipsi carni mortuae solet, ut sub terram recondatur." (P.L. 34, 482).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xii.62, "tamen habere posse similitudinem corporis et corporalium omnino membrorum", (P.L. 34, 481).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, "sive in requie, sive in doloribus". It is possible that these opinions are a reaction to the neo-Platonism of Porphyry, who maintained (*Sententiae* xxxii, 29) that there was an astral body or *pneuma* which accompanied the body at death. Augustine consistently used the word *spiritus* to indicate something which was immaterial, though real.

⁷¹ Augustine, *In Ioannis evangelium*, xlix.10. (P.L. 35, 1751).

⁷² Augustine, *De Anima et eius origine*, iv.24, "remotam sedem quietis atque secretam, ubi est Abraham." (P.L. 44, 538).

⁷³ See also *Sermo* 106, iv.4. (P.L. 38, 638).

he drinks, are mindful of us.⁷⁴

Here Augustine expands on the imagery presented in Lk.xvi.22ff. The cooling water the rich man desires becomes Christ, the living water. Furthermore, the souls in this realm are capable of interceding for the living, as Nebridius may do for Augustine. Finally, observe the note of indecision with which he begins this passage, "*Whatever* that may be," etc. The *Confessions* marks one of his earliest uses of this figure, and even from the outset, he is not entirely sure of its exact meaning.

Augustine manifests similar caution when considering the question of where Christ descended when he descended into hell, and what he did there. Let us not forget his penchant for grounding his arguments definitively in Scripture, and the weaknesses inherent in so doing. He, too, was aware of them; as he notes, "I have not found any passage in Scripture, at least in the canonical books, where the term 'hell' is to be taken in a good sense."⁷⁵ This observation runs like a theme through many of his works, for example, it appears with almost exactly the same wording in a 414 letter to bishop Evodius⁷⁶ and a 417 letter to Dardanus.⁷⁷ The "lower" world is not a positive place;⁷⁸ Augustine makes use of the word *inferi* in both a physical and a metaphysical sense, i.e., hell is a place under the earth, and just as heavier material bodies occupy a lower place if left to their own tendencies,⁷⁹ so, too in the spiritual order, "the gloomier realm is in a lower position."⁸⁰ He goes on, following an apparently popular contemporary etymology, he links the similar Greek words "hades" and "I delight"; the realm is called hades because there is no delight there. Hell is the place that the rich man went; the place Jacob feared to go when he said to his son, "You will drag down my old age with sorrow unto hell." (Gen.xliv, 29). Abraham and Lazarus "were not in the midst of that pain."⁸¹ Here again Augustine describes

⁷⁴ Augustine, *Confessiones*, ix.6, "Quidquid illud est quo illo significatur sinu, ibi Nebridius meus vivit...Ibi vivit, unde me multa interrogabat homuncionem inexpertum. Jam non ponit aurem ad os meum, sed spirituale os ad fontem tuum; et bibit, quantum potest, sapientiam pro aviditate sua, sine fine felix. Nec sic eum arbitror inebriari ex ea, ut obliviscatur mei, cum tu, Domine, quem potat ille, nostri sis memor." (P.L. 32, 765-6).

⁷⁵ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, xii.64, "nondum inveni, et adhuc quaero, nec mihi occurrit inferos alicubi in bono posuisse Scripturam duntaxat canonicam." (P.L. 34, 482).

⁷⁶ Augustine, *Epistola* 164,iii. (P.L. 33, 711).

⁷⁷ Augustine, *Epistola* 187, ii.6. (P.L. 33, 834).

⁷⁸ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, xii.66. (P.L. 34, 482).

⁷⁹ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, xii.66. (P.L. 34, 483).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, "inferiora sunt omnia tristiora".

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xii.63, "Neque enim Abraham, vel ille pauper in sinu ejus, hoc est in secreto

their location with the word "paradise", not equivocating about its nature, but describing it as a place where there is no temptation and where there is a marvellous rest after the sufferings of this life. He is quick to point out the gulf between Abraham in repose and the rich man in torment; to him it is the gulf between heaven and hell, two different realms.

But this heaven-and-hell dichotomy, especially as considered in an explication of the figure of the bosom of Abraham, begs the question of Christ's descent into hell. If only the wicked like the rich man are there, then to whom did he descend, and whom did he rescue? Augustine considers this issue in response to two questions, one which asks what the promise to the thief on the cross, "today you shall be with me in paradise" (Lk.xxiii.43) meant, and another which asks who the "souls in prison" to whom Christ preached were (1Ptr.iii.18-21). To some degree both questions presuppose the existence of a limbo of the Fathers, or at least the fact that there were holy people in hell who required redemption. Augustine, continuing in his treatise *De Genesi ad litteram*, speaks of hell in its most pejorative sense, and notes that Christ

did not deign to visit this part of the world. He could not have been ignorant of the fact that some were to be delivered from there in accordance with the mysteries of God's justice, and there he went to deliver them.⁸²

Lacking complete understanding, Augustine here falls back on the idea of mystery, making an exact answer beyond human comprehension. He goes on to note that the good thief was brought with Christ into paradise, which he identifies as either the bosom of Abraham or St. Paul's third heaven, "if the abode of the souls of the blessed is not one and the same thing called by different names."⁸³

Augustine's letter to Evodius, on the other hand, although written in the same year that the above work was completed (414), nevertheless provides a very involved treatment of Christ's descent into hell as it deals with the question of his preaching to the spirits in prison. Part of the problem is the fact that the passage mentions that these souls were the ones who had been "disobedient when the patience of God waited in the days of Noah when the ark was being built."⁸⁴ Why should Christ preach

quietis ejus, in doloribus erat", (P.L. 34, 482).

⁸² *Ibid.*, xii.66, "Nec ipsam tamen rerum partem noster Salvator mortuus pro nobis visitare contempsit, ut inde solveret quos esse solvendo secundum divinam secretamque justitiam ignorare non potuit." (P.L. 34, 483).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, "si tamen non aliquid unum est diversis nominibus appellatum, ubi sunt animae beatarum."

⁸⁴ Augustine, *Epistola 164*, i.2, "qui fuerunt aliquando, quando exspectabat Dei patientia in diebus Noe, cum fabricaretur arca (1Ptr.iii.20)", (P.L. 33, 709).

only to these souls? In this letter Augustine deals with the very thorny question of the salvation of non-Christians. Given his love for Latin letters, he would have no doubt been comforted by sure knowledge that the illustrious figures from the Roman past were in paradise. But Augustine is not sure exactly to whom Christ's salvation extends, and concludes that it is "presumptuous" for us to try and decide. He is very severe on those who had achieved great things in the past:

All these things, indeed, when they are practised with a view not to the great end of right and true piety, but the empty praise of human glory, become in a sense worthless and unprofitable; nevertheless, as indicators of a certain disposition of mind they please us so much that we would desire those in whom they exist, either by special preference or along with the others, to be freed from the pains of hell, were not the verdict of human feeling different from that of the justice of the creator.⁸⁵

Here as before Augustine differentiates between human desires and divine justice; divine justice is what ultimately wins out, and it need not correspond with what we want. This rejection of the glories of the Roman past as things done merely for human glory would become a major theme in his *De Civitate Dei*, but it is enough to note here that Augustine firmly rejected the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians. He also rejected the possibility that Christ during his descent into hell may have emptied it of all the souls that were there, since what is applied to some need not be applied to all. This may be seen elsewhere in a sermon composed in 412. Augustine here declares that Christ only saved *some* of the souls in hell:

Christ in heaven; Christ on earth; Christ simultaneously both in heaven and on earth...Christ with the Father; Christ in the virgin's womb; Christ on the cross; Christ in the underworld rescuing some of the dead, on that very day Christ in paradise with the thief who confessed.⁸⁶

This passage also gives Augustine's view of the unimportance of chronological time in divine matters; note here the immediacy of Christ, as Augustine describes all of the events of his life happening simultaneously. In the letter to Evodius, he expresses great confusion over the bosom of Abraham; why should Christ have descended into it, since if it is some

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.4, "Quae quidem omnia quando non referuntur ad finem rectae veraeque pietatis, sed ad fastum inanem humanae laudis et gloriae, etiam ipsa inanescunt quodammodo, steriliaque redduntur: verumtamen quadam indole animi ita delectant, ut eos in quibus haec fuerunt, vellemus vel praecipue, vel cum caeteris ab inferni cruciatibus liberari, nisi aliter se haberet sensus humanus, aliter iustitia Creatoris." (P.L. 33, 710).

⁸⁶ Augustine, *Sermo* 67, iv.7, "Christus in coelo, Christus in terra: simul Christus et in coelo et in terra...Christus apud Patrem, Christus in utero virginis: Christus in cruce, Christus apud inferos subveniens quibusdam: et autem ipsa die Christus in paradiso cum latrone confitente." (P.L. 38, 436).

synonym for paradise, Christ would never have been separate from it. Augustine here continues in the interpretation we have seen earlier by saying that the bosom of Abraham "was not any integral part of hell,"⁸⁷ and wonders

if sacred Scripture had said, without naming hell and its pains, that Christ when he died went to that bosom of Abraham, I wonder if anyone would have dared to say that he descended into hell?⁸⁸

That Christ descended into hell Augustine does not doubt, what confuses him is the question of whom he saved by doing so. He rejects out of hand the notion that hell was emptied of souls because all of those who were there had not had the opportunity to hear Christ's gospel; were this true, anyone who died on earth without hearing the gospel would be entitled to similar treatment. Furthermore, he also rejects the idea that the Name of Christ may linger in hell, just as it lingers on earth in the form of the church, offering salvation; this would be to create a kind of "church in hell", and would mean paradoxically that one should *not* preach the Gospel to people on earth, relieving them of the guilt of hearing it and not obeying it - far better to avoid the problem and let them hear the Gospel in hell. Unfortunately Augustine does not know what the actual truth of the matter is; he is merely content to reject ideas which he considers patently wrong. He exhorts Evodius to stick to the basics: Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and descent into hell, "from which also he is believed with good ground to have loosed and delivered whom he would."⁸⁹ In other matters, Augustine is the voice of caution itself. "Who can be otherwise than perplexed by words so profound as these?"⁹⁰ he cries, objecting from the outset that he does not know the exact truth, that Evodius should seek elsewhere for an answer and share it with him, and that we ought to keep investigating St. Peter's confusing statement. His tentative answer is an analogy, that the passage is meant to represent his own time, that his contemporaries were the spirits in prison, and that the salvation represented by the ark from the water of the flood is representative of the salvation offered by the church through the water of baptism. But he concludes as he started, on a note of uncertainty,

⁸⁷ Augustine, *Epistola 167*, iii.7, "non utique sinus ille Abrahæ...aliqua pars inferorum esse credenda est." (P.L. 33, 711).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, "Quapropter si in illum Abrahæ sinum Christum mortuum venisse sancta Scriptura dixisset, non nominato inferno ejusque doloribus, minor si quisquam ad inferos eum descendisse asserere auderet."

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* v.14, "a quibus etiam recte intelligitur solvisse et liberasse quos voluit", (P.L. 33, 715).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* iv.11, "Quem non moveat ista profunditas?" (P.L. 33, 713).

implores assistance, although he seems fond of his analogy and thinks it will stand alongside the real answer whatever it may be.

Augustine thus vacillates considerably on the question of the bosom of Abraham and Christ's descent into hell, just as he did on the question of the salvation of unbaptized infants, as we have seen above. However, unlike the latter question, on which Augustine remained outwardly firm but inwardly unsure, the former question shows some signs of Augustine's reaching more definite conclusions later in his life. In a letter of 417 to Dardanus, Augustine considers the question of the meaning of Lk.xxiii.43, which he had considered earlier, but here comes to a different conclusion. In effect, he reverses his earlier position about the meaning of the bosom of Abraham:

But I would find it hard to say whether the bosom of Abraham where the wicked rich man, from the torments of hell in which he was, saw the poor man reposing, is to be considered under the term paradise or considered as belonging to hell.⁹¹

Here Augustine begins to go back on his earlier position, and his doubt colours the tone of the rest of his reply. If by the bosom of Abraham we might *not* mean paradise, and if by hell we certainly mean an entirely evil place, then what does the descent of Christ mean? Augustine responds to himself by saying that "a good answer to this is that he descended there to rescue those who were to be rescued."⁹² He does not specify who these might be, but rather goes on to reverse his earlier position by presenting a new view of the geography of hell:

Besides, if we are to believe there are two regions in hell, one of the suffering and one of the souls at rest, that is, both a place where the rich man was tormented and one where the poor man was comforted, who would dare to say that the Lord Jesus came to the penal parts of hell instead of only among those who rest in Abraham's bosom?⁹³

Unfortunately, Augustine does not develop this idea any further, preferring to concentrate upon the meaning of paradise; he wonders if it might mean a "state of being in happiness"⁹⁴, and concludes that it means being with

⁹¹ Augustine, *Epistola* 187, ii.6, "Utrum autem sinus ille Abrahae, ubi dives impius cum in tormentis esset inferni, requiescentem pauperem vidit, vel paradisi censendus vocabulo, vel ad inferos pertinere existimandus sit, non facile dixerim." (*P.L.* 33, 834).

⁹² *Ibid.*, "Sed bene respondetur ideo descendisse, ut quibus oportuit subveniret."

⁹³ *Ibid.*, "Porro si utraque regio et dolentium et requiescentium, id est, et ubi dives ille torquebatur, et ubi pauper ille laetabatur, in inferno esse credenda est; quis audeat dicere Dominum Jesum ad poenales inferni partes venisse tantummodo, nec fuisse apud eos qui in Abrahae sinu requiescunt?"

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, "Quae si ita sunt, generale paradisi nomen est, ubi feliciter vivitur."

Christ, wherever he is.

The firmest answer, however, comes from the twentieth book of his magnum opus, *De Civitate dei*, where, meditating upon the meaning of Rev.xx.13, he presents the following idea:

It seems reasonable now, to believe that the ancient saints, who believed in Christ who was to come, stayed in the regions of hell - far off, of course, from the tormented areas of the ungodly until such time as Christ's blood and his descent thither rescued them, we consequently must believe that the virtuous faithful who followed the payment of that redemptive price have absolutely no relationship to hell; indeed, that their bodies, as well as their souls, after the resurrection shall reap their deserved reward.⁹⁵

In this, Augustine has come full-circle. From refusing to believe that the Fathers were in hell, he now comes to accept that the solution to his confusions on these matters is to accept the idea of a subdivision of hell into regions, which explains why Christ had to descend into hell, but avoids the troublesome notion that the ancient just underwent penal torments. This is the substance of the idea of a limbo of the Fathers. Although Augustine did not use the term as such, it is clear that as his writings developed, he came to accept the idea behind it.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Augustine thus plays a curious part in the development of limbo. It is certain that he had no concept of limbo *per se*, at least as later ages understood the term. Augustine's importance comes not from what he knew and set down firmly, but rather from what he did not know, yet set down anyway. While he held a view of the afterlife split into a strict dichotomy of heaven and hell, nevertheless he considered the possibility that there might be subdivisions within that framework. The doubts and uncertainties of an authoritative figure can be enlarged into positive points and certainties by later writers, and this proved true for the way Augustine was treated by posterity. This would not be the only example. A number of the Augustine's quotations on the subject were expounded and fought over by later writers for centuries. In the final analysis, Augustine's contribution to the development of limbo must be sought, ultimately, in his

⁹⁵ Augustine, *De Civitate dei*, xx.15, "Si enim non absurde credi videtur, antiquos etiam sanctos, qui venturi Christi tenuerunt fidem, locis quidem a tormentis impiorum remotissimis, sed apud inferos fuisse, donec eos inde sanguis Christi et ad ea loca descensus erueret, profecto deinceps boni fideles effuso illo pretio jam redempti, prorsus inferos nesciunt, donec etiam receptis corporibus, bona recipiant quae merentur." (*P.L.* 41, 681).

formulation of two ideas. Firstly, the notion that unbaptized infants suffered only the mildest form of punishment in hell would be critically important for the development of the limbo of children. Secondly, his questions regarding the figure of the bosom of Abraham and Christ's descent into hell, and his eventual adoption of the idea of a subdivided hell, proved to be important for the development of the limbo of the Fathers, although less so, as the idea was entertained and championed by other patristic authors. Ultimately, Augustine (in conjunction with his Pelagian opponents) has more to do with the development of the limbo of children than of the limbo of the Fathers. What we see in Augustine is a kind of opening up and subdivision of hell, since it is clear that towards the end of his life he considered the Fathers to have been in their own special portion of hell, and it is equally clear that his final decision on the fate of unbaptized children was that they underwent a milder punishment than anyone else in hell. Augustine recognised only heaven and hell, that is clear, but it is also clear that his hell was an increasingly varied place.

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