

“The Influence of the LXX Proverbs 3:34 Tradition upon Augustine”*

THOMAS B. SLATER**

Augustine, one of the major figures of western civilization, has had a widespread and a lasting influence on the western culture in the fine arts, the social sciences, philosophy and theology. What was at the core of his thought? What was the theological foundation upon which he built? A brief study of this type cannot begin to answer these questions thoroughly. However, it can make some rudimentary statements, which may in turn lead to more detailed statements in the future. This essay will argue (1) that for Augustine humility was the most important Christian virtue in many of his writings and (2) that he, at least, partially based his concept of humility as a Christian virtue upon a poor translation tradition of Prov. 3:34, first into Greek and later into Latin.¹ His goal was to contrast excessive pride, denounced by Graeco-Roman society as a major human vice, with humility, Augustine’s foundational Christian virtue. In this way, he employed the major vice of Graeco-Roman society against it and argued for its opposite, humility.

Dihle has written an informative essay on the historical development of humility as a virtue in early Christianity. Concerning Augustine, he states that humility defined the nature of God while pride defined the nature of humanity. Christ provided the divine model for humanity to emulate.² Dihle’s conclusions are accurate and this essay will substantiate his findings; however, it also will add that Augustine developed this concept, at least partially, upon a less accurate translation

**For Ms. Cheryl Annetta Bowie.*

***Dr. Thomas B. Slater is an Assistant Professor of Religion and African American Studies, University of Georgia, USA.*

tradition of Prov. 3:34. This translation tradition is found in 1 Pet. 5:5, Jas. 4:6, and I Clem. 30:2-8.

Proverbs 3:34 in Early Christianity

Prov. 3:34 in the Hebrew Bible (HB) reads, "He (God) scoffs at the scoffers but shows favour to the humble." However, Prov. 3:34 in the Septuagint (LXX), a Hellenistic Greek translation of Hebrew religious writings deemed authoritative by many second temple Diaspora Jewish communities, reads, "The Lord resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." The LXX intensifies the antithetical parallel in Prov. 3:34 between God's reaction towards scoffers and God's compassion for the humble. The Hebrew originally meant that God merely shows disdain for the haughty but looks approvingly upon the modest. In the LXX, however, the passage states that God actively opposes arrogant persons while showing favour to the lowly. The LXX became the Bible for many early Christians. Indeed, most second, third and fourth century Latin translations were based upon it and not the HB. Indeed, Augustine himself in letter 71, encouraged Jerome to use the LXX as his primary text, instead of the HB, for the Latin Vulgate.

As stated previously, 1 Peter, James and *1 Clement*, all quote Prov. 3:34 from the Septuagintal tradition. 1 Pet. 5:5, in exhorting its audience to the highest standard of Christian morality, states that humility is the foundation of the Christian community. Jas. 4:6 exhorts its audience to reject worldly standards and accept God's standards. *1 Clem.* 30:2-8, written from Rome, late in the first Christian century, admonishes its readers to possess the virtues of humility, meekness and gentleness and contrasts those virtues with the vices of insolence, stubbornness and boldness. Augustine made similar distinctions to those made in 1 Peter, James and *1 Clement* in his own writings.

Augustine's Latin quotations of the LXX Prov. 3:34 tradition do not reflect a knowledge of the Hebrew passage, but the Old Latin Bible which was a translation of the LXX. Most early Christians did not read Hebrew. Few Hebrew or Aramaic

Christian writings from the second to the fourth Christian centuries have survived. By the beginning of the third Christian century, the Church was almost totally non-Jewish. The LXX played a major role in Christian theology, evangelism, catechizes and liturgy. Augustine did not read Hebrew and his Greek was merely adequate. His native language was Latin. Indeed, in *Christian Doctrine* 3, 23, Augustine writes that practically every page of the Bible asserts "that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." In two specific cases, in *Confessions* and *City of God*, Augustine begins by stating, "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." In both works, the quotations come at the beginning of the work. This is very significant because Hellenistic apologists, the models for Augustine, began their works by identifying a chief virtue around which the subject would revolve, or through which history would be interpreted by the author.³

Humility: Augustine's Primary Virtue

As stated previously, Augustine begins *City of God* contrasting humility and pride/arrogance and thereby, establishing humility as his chief virtue. "For I know how great an effort is needed to persuade the proud (*Superbis*) of the virtue of humility (*virtues humilitas*), that quality which raises it above all summits of this earth which shake in their temporal mobility, not raised by human pride, but given by the lofty transcendence of divine grace. For the king and founder of this city...has revealed in the Scripture of his people..., 'God resists the proud (*superbis*), but He gives grace to the humble (*humilibus*).' Indeed, because this is natural to God, humanity's arrogant spirit, in its inflated pride (*superbae quoque animae spiritus inflatus*), delights to hear this verse quoted in its own praise: "To spare the conquered and beat down the proud (*superbes*)" ([Virgil, *Aen.*, 6,853] Preface, Book 1).

In other writings which overlap the writing of *City of God*, Augustine repeatedly makes the same distinction between

humility as a Christian virtue, and pride as a Graeco-Roman vice. In *Confessions*, Augustine begins by stating that humankind instinctively wants to praise God but is naturally sinful: "He (humanity) bears upon himself the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you (God) 'resist the proud'" (1,1). In *The Enchiridion* humility and pride are contrasted with each other. Christ reconciles humanity and God "in order that the pride of humanity might be exposed and cured through the humility of God..." (Book 108; cf. *City of God* 10, 24). Likewise, in *Christian Doctrine* 2, 41-42 where Augustine states the need for humility in studying Scriptures; similarly in *The Trinity* 4, 2 where he states that the proud are cleansed by "the blood of the Righteous One, and the humbling of God." Augustine makes the same contrast in his letter to Dioscorus and, in this twenty-fifth sermon on John's Gospel.

Augustine was not employing hyperbole, when he said a great effort would be needed to persuade his adversaries of the virtue of humility. For non-Christian Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman thinkers, humility (*tapeino* in Greek, *humilitas* in Latin) and virtue were mutually exclusive. Greek writers such as Plato, Euripides, Aristotle and Josephus could write negatively of humility. Latin writers continued in this same vein.⁴ Augustine conveys to those readers that his concept of the superiority of humility to pride comes from the Christian Scripture by specifically quoting the LXX translation tradition of Prov. 3:34 in his introductory statements in *Confessions* and *City of God*, and reiterating his point throughout his writings. In this way, he argues that the true antithesis of pride, denounced by Graeco-Roman culture itself as a vice, is humility, the crown jewel of Christian virtues. In this manner, he appeals to Graeco-Roman standards, but he centres his work on a Christian ideal.

References

1. This does not mean that Augustine quoted either Prov. 3:34, or 1 Pet. 5:5, or Jas. 4:6. Ultimately, what is of most importance is that a mistranslation tradition which began in LXX Prov. 3:34 was continued in 1 Pet. 5:5, Jas. 4:6, 1 *Clem* 30:2-8, and subsequently, in the Latin

Bibles which Augustine read. Moreover, this brief study is not concerned with the degree to which Augustine exemplified humility in his own life, but to analyze this aspect of his thought.

2. A. Dihle, "Demut," *Reallexicon fur Antike und Christentum*, vol. 3. Ed. by F.J. Dolger, T. Klausner, H. Kruse, H. Leitzmann, J.H. Waszink (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersmann, 1957), pp. 771-73.
3. E.g., Polybius, *Histories* 1, 1-2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1, 1-4; Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1, 1-23.
4. E.g., Plato, *Laws* 6, 77; Euripedes, *Andromache* 164; Cicero, *On the Orator* 1, 228 and Tacitus, *Dialogue on the Orator* 39, 1.