

Augustine's Early Thought on the Redemptive Function of Divine Judgement, by Bart Van Egmond. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford University Press, 2018. 304pp., Hb. \$110. ISBN-13: 9780198834922. Also available as an Ebook and online.

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Bart Van Egmond is to be congratulated on this ambitious treatment of a difficult topic. Few contemporary scholars are attracted to questions of divine law and judgment, (original) sin and radically fallen humanity—deterred by modern challenges like the optimistic anthropology of Enlightenment rationalism, or postmodern subjectivity as it explains suffering through (social) forces external to the person. There is a wide chasm between these approaches and that of fourth century Augustine. Van Egmond promises a “historical reading” of Augustine’s early thought on the matter. Aside from the Introduction and Conclusion, three substantive chapters follow a chronology of Augustine’s treatment of the central question of divine judgment in three early periods, first that of retreat at Cassiciacum; second, from baptism to retreat in Thagaste and ordination as priest in Hippo (387–391); and third, the period before ordination as bishop (391–397). A fifth chapter approaches the matter differently, examining the *Confessions* on the role of judgement and grace in Augustine’s own life for these early years.

Van Egmond ends the introductory chapter with a clear statement of the central question on the relationship between divine judgment (defined here as the revelation of God’s law and its sanctions) and the process of salvation. His engagement with the secondary literature quickly reveals the peripheral issues that will shape that discussion, from the tenacious older question of Stoicism/Neoplatonism influencing early dialogues; Van Egmond defends an explicitly Christian character, citing deference to the authority of Christ (*Acad.* 3.42 [23]). Another, the much-debated question of consistency in Augustine’s views on freedom of the will and divine grace; Van Egmond recognizes the polarization of scholars from Peter Brown to Carol Harrison on the issue. Did Augustine truly leave Manichean dualism and determinism behind? Obliquely recognizing views of outstanding Augustinian scholars like Johannes van Oort, Van

Keywords: grace, pedagogy, conversion, sin, Manichaeism, law, discipline, free will

Egmond provides a suggestive citation from Julian of Eclanum (c. *Iul. imp.* 4.42 [261]). But the book appears to take its stride from the issue which comes to a head in Augustine's later work, his approval of state-initiated repression of Donatists. Repeated reference to this issue indicates a major motivation in examining the early writings.

As context for more positive understanding of Augustine's position, Van Egmond cites background factors, beginning with the (constructive) role of corporal punishment in Augustine's own pedagogical thinking and methodology (18). Early work also features Alexandrian anti-gnostic pedagogical theology, presenting Christ as teacher of righteousness and love. Van Egmond realizes that this approach, rooted in a progressive view of history (88, 126), accented human merit and freedom of the will. He also realizes that Augustine did change his emphasis on the binding of the will as the result of sin—when not engaged in anti-Manichean polemic—and he recognizes a gradual shift away from the exemplary understanding of the work of Christ toward the redemptive nature of his death on the cross (146). The move is accompanied by new recognition of grace not based on divine foreknowledge of acceptance of faith. "God's *misericordia* is no longer based upon the good will but does itself call the good will into existence through a *vocatio congrua*, which works as *effectrix bonae voluntatis*" (130). Still, Van Egmond maintains an inner consistency on issues of sin, guilt and collective penal debt (*concupiscentia carnalis/ massa peccati*, as in *Ad Simplicianum* 1.2.16–20), but his argument is rather tight, and would have benefited from more explicit analysis of the passages at issue.

While Manichees accented a radical divide, Van Egmond notes Augustine's emphasis on continuity between what is "hidden" in the OT and "revealed" in the NT (95); the law is recognized for convicting of sin and guilt, thereby preparing for grace through faith (136, 192). For the NT church, composed of a mixed society (100), love must be combined with severity, eloquently illustrated from Augustine's rebuke of drunken revelry in *laetitiae* celebrating the martyrs (186).

The nature of sources and evidence adduced in the central chapters varies considerably, ranging from examples of discipline in educational settings or monastic communities (extended to ecclesiastical discipline), personal struggle with temptation to pride and desire (*Soliloquies*, *Confessions*), or God's sovereign use of rulers (Nebuchadnezzar, Theodosius) to punish or favour. Although Van Egmond presents his basic contention on redemptive judgement clearly enough, one wonders whether repetitive discussion could have been mitigated through thematic treatment

of supportive issues like discipline and coercive/external punishment; the nature of conversion; flesh and spirit/law and grace; anti-Manichean polemic; or Christ as Teacher and Redeemer. Even so, this work is important for inviting another look at the Augustinian legacy on sin and its consequences for humankind. It will certainly stimulate scholarly discussion on these contentious issues.