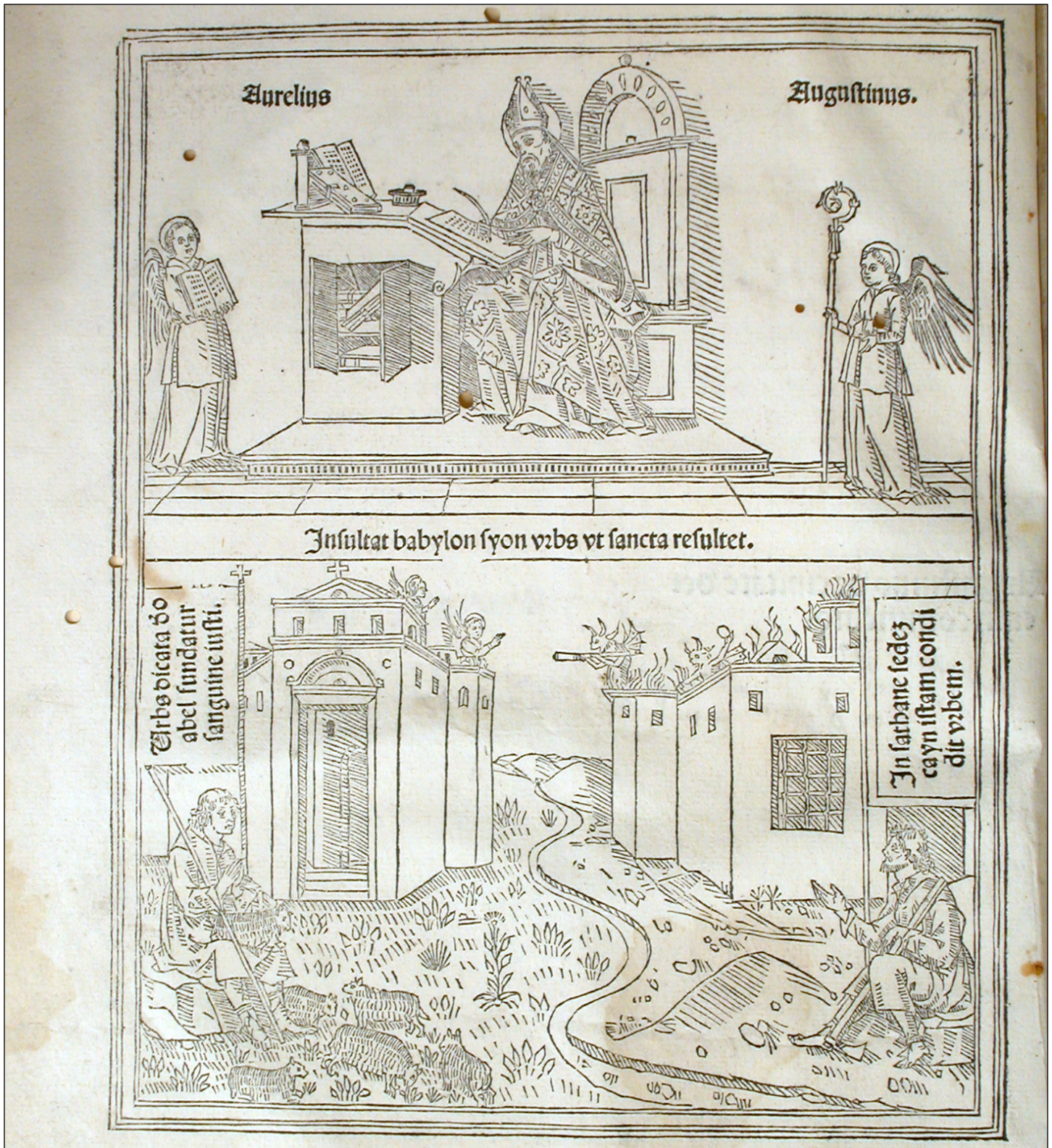


# Augustine

## The Bible and Science

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Augustine, *De civitate Dei* (Venice, 1489))

### Augustine and Western science

Augustine's influence towers over the western theological tradition; just as significant was his influence on science:

- Augustine's Christian Platonism encouraged the study of mathematics;
- Augustine's emphasis on the contingent character of the created order required empirical methods to confirm the conclusions of reason and logic;
- and Augustine's arguments that space and time are fellow creatures, and not eternal, contributed to a sense that even nature has a history and can only be understood in terms of its unfolding over time.

### Augustine's *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*

We see Augustine's attitude toward the Bible and science in a commentary on the literal interpretation of Genesis:

"In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we may find treated in Holy Scripture, different interpretations are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture." Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Bk. I, ch. 18; 1:41; cf. Bk. I, ch. 19; 1:41-42.

Augustine articulated several principles to guide the interpretation of the Bible with respect to natural science. They include the principles of:

- **Multiple Interpretations** (that scriptural references to nature are not specific to a single scientific explanation);
- **Unity of truth** (that properly interpreted, science and scripture will not conflict);
- **Accommodation** and
- **Phenomenalism**.

### Accommodation & Phenomenalism

*Accommodation* means that the language of the Bible was written to communicate what is necessary for salvation in a way that could be understood by ordinary people without expert knowledge. There are several ways, for Augustine, that Scriptures are accommodated to common human understanding, including the use of idiom appropriated from the target culture (but stripped of idolatrous connotations), the use of anthropomorphic descriptions of God, and the principle of phenomenalism.

The word phenomena means "appearances," how nature appears to our senses, in contrast to theories, which are explanations involving hidden causes. The principle of "*phenomenalism*" is one form of accommodation. According to the principle of phenomenalism, the original writers of Scripture accommodated their physical statements to the capacities of ordinary people by simply describing sensible phenomena as they would appear to any observer. Therefore physical references in Scripture should be interpreted whenever possible as entailing only those things that are immediately obvious to the senses. The principle of phenomenalism means that the writers adapted Scripture to refer to obvious phenomena in a common-sense manner, and avoided entangling themselves in distracting debates by alluding to hidden causes or bits of secret knowledge that would only confuse the general reader in any culture.

Concerned that some might jeopardize the credibility of Scripture by misconstruing its physical statements, Augustine warned that "in the matter of the shape of heaven the sacred writers knew the truth, but that the Spirit of God, who spoke through them, did not wish to teach men these facts that would be of no avail for their salvation."

*Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Bk. II, ch. 9; 1:59.

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