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*Book Review*

**Wisdom from Africa: Theological Reflections on the Confessions of St. Augustine**

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# Book Reviews

## ***Wisdom from Africa: Theological Reflections on the Confessions of St. Augustine***

Ronald D. Burris

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016. 176 pages.

ISBN 978-10061434341

\$23.00

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Scholars wishing to write a book on St. Augustine of Hippo are confronted with the reality that the Doctor of Grace has been a subject of intense theological and scholarly interest for at least the past several centuries. Indeed, much has been written about St. Augustine of Hippo and his theology. In his book, Burris does not forward a new interpretation of the *Confessions*, and scholars already familiar with Augustine's works would likely find that *Wisdom from Africa* does not blaze a new trail. But, as Burris intimated in his introduction, the book arose from an introductory course on Augustine he teaches regularly at the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, California. Thus, the book aims not only to introduce the Bishop of Hippo to the modern student of theology, but also unearth the wisdom that could be resourced for ministry today. It is with this aim in mind that the efficacy of the book must be evaluated.

*Wisdom from Africa* contains 13 chapters, each corresponding to the 13 books in the *Confessions*. The introduction suggests that the book provides analysis and theological reflections, but it would be more accurate to describe the book as providing a

walkthrough with some analysis, while providing some resources for students to do some theological reflections on their own. In each chapter, the author covers the major points that Augustine raises, often raising questions that illuminate the Bishop of Hippo's mindsets and dispositions as he wrestled through his memories, or supplying the historical context that situates the Bishop in the places he sojourned through during his life. The book is a suitable and accessible reading companion for the *Confessions*, particularly in an M.Div. introductory course on theology or Augustine.

Nonetheless, I offer two small critiques that in no way detract from the value of the book for students. These critiques do not identify parts of the book which detract from its intended purpose, but rather suggest "missed opportunities" which may have made the book more useful for students in other ways.

First, this reviewer feels that much more can be done to bring what Augustine wrestled with into conversation with the pressing questions of today. Consider Burris's discussion of Manichaeism in Chapter 3. As a brief aside, titling the chapter "College Days at Carthage" indicates how Burris tries to make the *Confessions* understandable to the modern audience. He introduces the reader basically to Manichaeism, and walks through Augustine's wrestling with it. But much more can certainly be said about Manichaeism and the influence of its ideological tendrils in Augustine's other works. Consider how a low theological anthropology continues to pervade in some Christian traditions today, or how various forms of Gnostic thinking is alluded to in the form of conspiracy theories or "fake news." The practical applications for present challenges are profound. Perhaps, instead of putting these reflections and analyses forward, Burris aims to allow the students to do the analyzing and applying. Hence, one of his questions at the end of Chapter 3 concerns precisely how Manichaeism is manifested today. Such a pedagogical approach may work for some, but others may need to

know Augustine and his historical context deeper before being able to make suitable connections between ancient wisdom and contemporary context.

Another (minor) missed opportunity is how the book sticks almost exclusively to Augustine's *Confessions*. This is understandable considering that the focus of the book was the *Confessions*. However, if the book is likely to be used in a master's-level course, it can be helpful for Burris to cross-reference some of Augustine's sermons and letters. Augustine was no mere academic theologian, as much as he may have wished to be one; he took his pastoral and bishopric duties seriously, and students will benefit from reading the work that he did as part of those duties. For students preparing for parish ministry, referencing Augustine's sermons may open future pastors to a treasure trove of preaching resources. Additionally, Augustine's history with the Manichaeans is recorded in the *Confessions* beginning in Book III, but even before his pastoral ministry, he had already composed anti-Manichean writings such as *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*, *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos*, and other works since the beginning of his ministry. Cross-referencing some of those texts in chapters three to six would enable the book to serve as a gateway to the wider body of Augustine's works. Another way to enhance the usefulness of this book may be to reference subsequent theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, etc., to see how Augustine's thought has been reimagined in light of different historical contexts. This would demonstrate the pervasive influence the bishop of Hippo has on Western theology.

Again, those are but minor critiques of the book. There will no doubt be students who will find *Wisdom from Africa* helpful for their sojourns through Augustine's text. The question is which students would benefit most from the book. Augustine's *Confessions* is among his most famous texts, and there is certainly no shortage of

commentaries written about it. Doctoral students and advanced masters students beginning their sojourn into Augustine's *Confessions* will find more detailed engagements and other resources in works such as James O'Donnell's 3-volume commentary<sup>116</sup> or William Mann's edited volume on the *Confessions*.<sup>117</sup> But for M.Div. and undergraduate students who may not have read Augustine before, this book serves as a useful guide although, given the readability of the *Confessions*, *Wisdom from Africa* should be read alongside the actual text as a reading companion. The format of the book facilitates such a reading strategy; students can read *Confessions* Book 1, and then follow that up with Burris's chapter one, using the discussion questions at the end of each chapter as helpful tools for reflecting theologically on the chapter that was just read.

Given how virtually every Christian pastor and theologian of many traditions stands in the shadow of the Doctor of Grace, Augustine should be required reading for every aspiring minister and theological scholar. But the reality is that many students leave seminary without having read much of Augustine, if at all. Some M.Div. students I have encountered who are strongly persuaded by more progressive theological strands often recoil at the thought of having to read yet another "dead, male theologian." Yet, the tapestries of liberal theology, liberation theology, virtue ethics, process theology, political theology, and many other theological subdisciplines have strands of Augustine in them. The same could be said of more traditional theologies. Here, *Wisdom from Africa* can be a great asset towards introducing people to this towering theological figure, as well as disabusing students of their preconceptions.

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<sup>116</sup> James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions, Vols. I-III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

<sup>117</sup> William E. Mann, ed., *Augustine's Confessions: Critical Essays* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006)

Augustine's many writings, after all, do not merely contain abstract theology from another dead man. They contain wisdom from Africa.

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***Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness***

Jay Emerson Johnson

New York: Seabury Books, 2014. 248 pages.

ISBN 978-1596272507

\$24.00

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In recent years, as more and more Christian communities and individuals have become receptive to LGBTQ people and causes, we have been gifted with a variety of resources that offer guidance on how to think and live Christianity and queerness together. Jay Emerson Johnson's *Peculiar Faith* is a most welcome resource in this expanding and evolving genre. A foundational claim of this book is that Christianity and queerness are not merely compatible, but that