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SAINT AUGUSTINE

On Christian Teaching

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
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and our advice must be not to seek an interpretation of such texts, but an emendation. Another example: because moschus is ‘saff’ in Greek some translators did not interpret the word moscheumasa as ‘plants’ but translated it as ‘calves’ [Wisd. 4: 3]. This mistake has taken over so many manuscripts that an alternative reading is hard to find; and yet the meaning is quite obvious, because all is revealed in the words that follow. ‘False plants do not put out deep roots’ gives a better meaning here than ‘calves’, which are not rooted to the earth, but walk over it with their feet! This particular translation is guaranteed by the surrounding context.

Because the exact meaning which the various translators are trying to express, each according to his own ability and judgement, is not clear without an examination of the language being translated, and because a translator, unless very expert, often strays away from the author’s meaning, we should aim either to acquire a knowledge of the languages from which the Latin scripture derives or to use the versions of those who keep excessively close to the literal meaning. Not that such translations are adequate, but they may be used to control the freedom or error of others who in their translations have chosen to follow the ideas rather than the words. Translators often meet not only individual words, but also whole phrases, which simply cannot be expressed in the idioms of the Latin language, at least not if one wants to maintain the usage of ancient speakers of Latin. Sometimes these translations lose nothing in intelligibility but trouble those people who take more delight in things when correct usage is observed in expressing the corresponding signs. What is called a solecism is simply what results when words are not combined according to the rules by which our predecessors, who spoke with some authority, combined them. Whether you say inter homines or inter hominibus does not matter to a student intent upon things. And again, what is a barbarism but a word articulated with letters or sounds that are not the same as those with which it was normally articulated by those who spoke Latin before us? Whether one says ignoscere with a long or short third syllable is of little concern to someone who beseeches God to forgive his sins no matter how he may have managed to articulate the word.

What, then, is correctness of speech but the maintenance of the practice of others, as established by the authority of ancient speakers? But the weaker men are, the more they are troubled by such matters. Their weakness stems from a desire to appear learned, not with a knowledge of things, by which we are edified, but with a knowledge of signs, by which it is difficult not to be puffed up in some way; even a knowledge of things often makes people boastful, unless their necks are held down by the Lord’s yoke. Surely there is no obstacle to the understanding in this version: ‘what is the land in which they dwell upon it, whether it is good or wicked; and what are the towns in which they themselves live in them’ [Num. 13: 19]. I judge this to be the idiom of a foreign language rather than a particularly profound idea. And the version which we are now unable to remove from the mouths of our singing congregations—‘over him my sanctification will flourish [floriet]’ [Ps. 131: 18 (132: 18)]—certainly loses none of the meaning. A more educated listener would prefer it to be corrected (with floretur for floriet), and the only obstacle to this correction is the habit of those who sing it. So such matters can readily be ignored if one has no desire to avoid expressions which do not in any way detract from a sound understanding. But now take the apostolic saying, ‘The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God stronger than men’ [1 Cor. 1: 25]. Suppose that someone wished to keep the Greek expression, with hominum in place of hominibus: the mind of the alert reader would still get to the truth of the statement, but the less quick-witted reader would either fail to understand it or understand it wrongly. Such an expression is not just faulty Latin; it is potentially ambiguous, if it gives the impression that man’s foolishness is wiser, and man’s weakness stronger, than God’s. But the alternative sapientius est hominibus, though free of solecism, is not free of ambiguity: it is not clear, except in the light of the context, whether it is the plural of huic homini or hoc homine. A better version would be sapientius est quum homines or fortius est quam homines.

I shall speak later about ambiguous signs; now I am dealing with unfamiliar ones, of which there are two kinds, as far as words are concerned. A reader may be perplexed by either an
unfamiliar word or an unfamiliar expression. If they come from other languages the information must be sought from speakers of those languages, or else the languages must be learnt (if time and ability allow), or else a collection of several translations must be consulted. If we are unfamiliar with some words and expressions in our own language, they become known to us by the process of reading and listening. Nothing should be committed to memory more urgently than unfamiliar kinds of words and expressions; so that when we meet a knowledgeable person whom we can ask, or a similar expression which makes clear from the passages which precede and follow it, or both, what is the force or significance of the unfamiliar word, we can easily make a note of it, or find out about it, with the help of our memory. (Yet such is the force of habit, even in learning, that those who are nourished and educated in the holy scriptures are more surprised by expressions from elsewhere, and regard them as worse Latin than the ones which they have learnt in scripture but are not found in Latin literature.) In this area too it is very helpful to collect manuscripts and examine and discuss a number of translations. But inaccuracy must be excluded, for the attention of those who wish to know the divine scripture must first focus on the task of correcting the manuscripts, so that uncorrected ones give place to corrected ones, assuming that they belong to the same type of translation.

Among actual translations the Itala* should be preferred to all others, as it keeps more closely to the words without sacrificing clarity of expression. To correct any Latin manuscripts Greek ones should be used: among these, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, the authority of the Septuagint is supreme. Its seventy writers are now claimed in all the more informed churches to have performed their task of translation with such strong guidance from the Holy Spirit that this great number of men spoke with but a single voice.* It is generally held, and indeed asserted by many who are not unworthy of belief, that each one of these wrote his translation alone in an individual cell and nothing was found in anyone's version which was not found, in the same words and the same order of words, in the others; if so, who would dare to adapt such an authoritative work, let alone adopt anything in preference to it? But if in fact they joined forces so as to achieve unanimity by open discussion and joint decision, even so it would not be right or proper for any one person, however expert, to think of correcting a version agreed by so many experienced scholars. Therefore, even if we find in the Hebrew versions something that differs from what they wrote, I believe that we should defer to the divine dispensation which was made through them so that the books which the Jewish race refused to reveal to other peoples (whether out of religious scruple or envy) might be revealed, through the mediating power of King Ptolemy, well in advance to the peoples that were destined to believe through our Lord. It may indeed be the case that they translated in a way that the Holy Spirit, who was leading them and creating unanimity, judged appropriate to the Gentiles. But, as I said above,* the comparison of translations which have kept more closely to the words is often not without its value in explaining a passage. So, as I said to begin with, Latin manuscripts of the Old Testament should be corrected if necessary by authoritative Greek ones, and especially by the version of the scholars who though seventy in number are said to have been unanimous. The Latin manuscripts of the New Testament, if there is any uncertainty in the various Latin versions, should without doubt give place to Greek ones, especially those found in the more learned and diligent churches.

As for metaphorical signs, any unfamiliar ones which puzzle the reader must be investigated partly through a knowledge of languages, and partly through a knowledge of things. There is a figurative significance and certainly some hidden meaning conveyed by the episode of the pool of Siloam [John 9: 7], where the man who had his eyes anointed by the Lord with mud made from spittle was ordered to wash his face. If the evangelist had not explained this name from an unfamiliar language, this important meaning would have remained hidden. So too, many of the Hebrew names not explained by the authors of these books undoubtedly have considerable significance and much help to give in solving the mysteries of the scriptures, if they can be explained at all. Various experts in the language have rendered no small service to posterity by
explaining all these individual words from the scriptures* and giving the meaning of the names Adam, Eve, Abraham, and Moses, and of place names such as Jerusalem, Zion, Jericho, Sinai, Lebanon, Jordan, and any other names in that language that are unfamiliar to us. Once these are clarified and explained many figurative expressions in scripture become quite clear.

Ignorance of things makes figurative expressions unclear when we are ignorant of the qualities of animals or stones or plants or other things mentioned in scripture for the sake of some analogy. The well-known fact about the snake, that it offers its whole body to assailants in place of its head, marvelously illustrates the meaning of the Lord’s injunction to be as wise as serpents [Matt. 10: 16], which means that in place of our head, which is Christ [Eph. 4: 15], we should offer our body to persecutors, so that the Christian faith is not as it were killed within us when we spare our body and deny God.* And the fact that a snake confined in its narrow lair puts off its old garment and is said to take on new strength* chimes in excellently with the idea of imitating the serpent’s astuteness and putting off the old man (to use the words of the apostle) [Eph. 4: 22–4] in order to put on the new, and also with that of doing so in a confined place, for the Lord said ‘enter by the narrow gate’ [Matt. 7: 13]. Just as a knowledge of the habits of the snake clarifies the many analogies involving this animal regularly given in scripture, so too an ignorance of the numerous animals mentioned no less frequently in analogies is a great hindrance to understanding. The same is true of stones, herbs, and anything that has roots. Even a knowledge of the carbuncle, a stone which shines in the dark, explains many obscure passages in scripture where it is used in an analogy; and ignorance of the beryl and adamant often closes the door to understanding. It is easy to understand that unbroken peace is signified by the olive branch brought by the dove when it returned to the ark [Gen. 8: 11], simply because we know that the smooth surface of oil is not easily broken by another liquid and also that the tree itself is in leaf all year round. And because of their ignorance about hyssop* many people, unaware of its power to cleanse the lungs or even (so it is said) to split rocks with its roots, in spite of its low and humble habit, are quite unable to discover why it is said, ‘You will purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean’ [Ps. 50: 9 (51: 7)].

An unfamiliarity with numbers makes unintelligible many things that are said figuratively and mystically in scripture. An intelligent intellect (if I may put it thus) cannot fail to be intrigued by the meaning of the fact that Moses and Elijah and the Lord himself fasted for forty days [Exod. 24: 18; 3 Kgs. (1 Kgs.) 19: 8; Matt. 4: 2]. The knotty problem of the figurative significance of this event cannot be solved except by understanding and considering the number, which is four times ten, and signifies the knowledge of all things woven into the temporal order. The courses of the day and the year are based on the number four: the day is divided into the hours of morning, afternoon, evening, and night, the year into the months of the spring, summer, autumn, and winter. While we live in the temporal order, we must fast and abstain from the enjoyment of what is temporal, for the sake of the eternity in which we desire to live, but it is actually the passage of time by which the lesson of despising the temporal and seeking the eternal is brought home to us. Then the number ten signifies the knowledge of the creator and creation: the Trinity is the number of the creator, while the number seven symbolizes the creation because it represents life and the body. The former has three elements (hence the precept that God must be loved with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole mind) [Matt. 22: 37], and as for the body, the four elements of which it consists are perfectly obvious.* To live soberly according to this significance of the number ten—conveyed to us temporally (hence the multiplication by four)—and abstain from the pleasures of this world: this is the significance of the forty-day fast. This is enjoined by the law, as represented by Moses; by prophecy, as represented by Elijah; and by the Lord himself, who, to symbolize that he enjoyed the testimony of the law and the prophets, shone out in the midst of them on the mountain as the three amazed disciples looked on [Matt. 17: 1–8; Mark 9: 2–6]. In the same way a solution may be found to explain how the number fifty, which enjoys particular authority in our religion because of Pentecost,* comes from the number forty; and how, when it is multiplied by
three—either because of the three eras (before the law, under the law, under grace) or because of the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and with the conspicuous addition of the Trinity, refers to the mystery of the fully purified church, matching the 153 fishes that were caught in the nets cast on the right-hand side of the boat after the Lord’s resurrection [John 21: 6–11]. In this way, expressed in a variety of numbers, there are in the sacred books certain abstruse analogies which are inaccessible to readers without a knowledge of number.

Many passages are also made inaccessible and opaque by an ignorance of music. It has been elegantly demonstrated that there are some figurative meanings of things based on the difference between the psalterion and the lyre.* It is a matter of dispute among experts, not unreasonably, whether the psalterion of ten strings embodies some musical principle which obliges it to have this number of strings, or whether, if this is not so, the number should be understood rather in a special religious sense, either in terms of the Decalogue (and if that number is investigated, it can only be related to the creator and the creation), or in terms of the number ten itself as expounded above. The number of years given in the gospel for the building of the Temple, forty-six [John 2: 20], has some musical overtones, and when related to the constitution of the Lord’s body—which is why the Temple was mentioned—compels numerous heretics to admit that the Son of God took on a real human body, not an insubstantial one.* Indeed we find both number and music mentioned with respect in several places in the holy scriptures. But we must not listen to the fictions of pagan superstition, which have represented the Muses as the daughters of Jupiter and Memory. They were refuted by Varro,† a man whose erudition and thirst for knowledge could not, I think, be surpassed among pagans. He says that a certain town (I forget its name*) placed contracts with three workmen for three sets of images of the Muses to be set up as an offering in Apollo’s temple, intending to select and buy those of the sculptor who produced the most attractive ones. It so happened that the workmen’s products were equally attractive, and the town selected all nine and they were all bought for dedication in Apollo’s temple. He adds that the poet Hesiod later gave them names.* So Jupiter did not beget the nine Muses, but they were made by three sculptors, three apiece. And the town had placed contracts for three not because they had seen them in a dream or because that number had appeared before the eyes of one of its citizens, but because it was a simple matter to observe that all sound, which is the essence of music, is naturally threefold.* (A sound is either produced by the voice, as by those who make music with their mouths, without a musical instrument, or by breath, as with trumpets and flutes, or by percussion, as in the case of lyres, drums, or anything else which resonates when struck.) But whether Varro’s story is true or not, we should not avoid music because of the associated pagan superstitions if there is a possibility of gleaning from it something of value for understanding holy scripture. Nor, on the other hand, should we be captivated by the vanities of the theatre if we are discussing something to do with lyres or other instruments that may help us appreciate spiritual truths. We were not wrong to learn the alphabet just because they say that the god Mercury was its patron,* nor should we avoid justice and virtue just because they dedicated temples to justice and virtue and preferred to honour these values not in their minds, but in the form of stones. A person who is a good and a true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature, but rejecting superstitious vanities and deploring and avoiding those who ‘though they knew God did not glorify him as God or give thanks but became enfeebled in their own thoughts and plunged their senseless minds into darkness. Claiming to be wise they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible mortals and animals and reptiles’ [Rom. 1: 21–3].

But to analyse this whole matter more closely—and it is something of the greatest importance—there are two kinds of learning pursued even in pagan society. One consists of things which have been instituted by humans, the other consists of things already developed, or divinely instituted, which have been observed by them. Of those instituted by humans, some are superstitious, some not.
Something instituted by humans is superstitious if it concerns the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of the created order or part of it as if it were God, or if it involves certain kinds of consultations or contracts about meaning arranged and ratified with demons, such as the enterprises involved in the art of magic, which poets tend to mention rather than to teach. The books of haruspices and augurs are in this class, too—only their vanity is even more reckless.

To this category belong all the amulets and remedies which the medical profession also condemns, whether these consist of incantations, or certain marks which their exponents call ‘characters’, or the business of hanging certain things up and tying things to other things, or even somehow making things dance. The purpose of these practices is not to heal the body, but to establish certain secret or even overt meanings. They call these ‘physical’ matters, using this bland name to give the impression that they do not involve a person in superstition but are by nature beneficial—as, for example, earrings on the tip of one ear, or rings of ostrich bone on the fingers, or the advice given you when hiccuping to hold your left thumb with your right hand. Besides all this there are thousands of utterly futile practices—do this if a part of your body suddenly twitches, do that if a stone or a dog or a slave comes between you and a friend as you walk together. The habit of treading on a stone as if it were a threat to one’s friendship is less offensive than cuffing an innocent boy who happens to run between people walking together. But it is nice to record that such boys are sometimes avenged by dogs: some people are so superstitious that they go as far as striking a dog who comes between them, but they do so to their cost, because as a result of this inane remedy the dog sometimes sends its assailant straight to a real doctor. Other examples are these: treading on the threshold when you pass in front of your own house; going back to bed if you sneeze while putting on your shoes; returning inside your house if you trip up while leaving it; or, when your clothing is eaten by mice, worrying more about the premonition of future disaster than about the present damage. Cato had a witty saying about this: when approached by someone who said that mice had been nibbling his slippers he replied that this was not an omen, but would certainly have been if the slippers had been nibbling the mice.

We must not omit from this category of deadly superstition the people who are called *gemethiaci* because of their study of natal days, or now in common parlance *mathematus* [astrologers]. Although they investigate the true position of the stars at a person’s birth and sometimes actually succeed in working it out, the fact that they use it to try to predict our activities and the consequences of these activities is a grave error and amounts to selling uneducated people into a wretched form of slavery. When free people go to see such an astrologer, they pay money for the privilege of coming away as slaves of Mars or Venus, or rather all the stars to which those who first made this error and then offered it to posterity gave either the names of animals, because they resembled animals, or the names of people, in order to honour particular people. It is no surprise that even in relatively recent times the Romans tried to consecrate the star we call Lucifer in the name of, and in honour of, Caesar. And indeed this might have been done, and become sanctified by tradition, had not Venus his ancestress, though she had never possessed it or even sought to possess it in her lifetime, already taken the name, like a piece of property, and did not transfer it in any legal way to her heirs. For when a title was vacant, and not held in the name of any previous deceased, the usual practice was followed. We call the months July and August after the human beings Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar, and not by their old names of Quinctilis and Sextilis. So it is easy for anyone who so wishes to understand that those planets too previously moved in the sky without their present names, but that when people died whose memory the populace was compelled by royal power, or disposed by human vanity, to honour they gave the names of the deceased to the heavenly bodies and fancied that they were raising to heaven people who as far as they themselves were concerned were dead. But whatever men may call them, the heavenly bodies, which God made and arranged as he wished, certainly exist, and have fixed orbits from which the seasons derive their differences and variations. It is easy to record the details of these orbits when a person is born, according to the
rules which they have invented and codified. Holy scripture condemns them when it says, 'For if they were able to know so much that they could judge the world, how is it that they did not discover its Lord more easily?' [Wisd. 13: 9].

But the idea of using this data to predict the character and future actions and experiences of the newborn is a great mistake, and indeed great folly. In the eyes of those who have learnt that such things are better unlearned this superstition is without the slightest doubt invalid. (In what follows 'constellations' is their name for the diagrams of the positions occupied by the stars at the birth of the person about whom these wretched people are consulted by people even more wretched.) Now it can happen that some twins follow one another so closely out of the womb that no interval of time can be perceived between them and recorded in terms of constellations. It follows that some twins have the same constellations, and yet their actions and experiences turn out to be not the same but often quite different. One may live to be blissfully happy, the other to be desperately unhappy, like Esau and Jacob who, we are told, were born as twins with Jacob, the second to be born, holding in his hand the foot of his brother born before him [Gen. 25: 25]. The day and hour of these births could surely have been recorded only in terms of a single constellation common to both. But the vast difference between the two in terms of character and achievement, suffering and success, is attested by scripture [Gen. 25–37] and is now common knowledge among all peoples. It is not pertinent to say, as they do, that the small interval, the tiny fraction of time that separates the birth of twins is of great significance in view of the nature of the universe and the great speed of the heavenly bodies. Even if I conceded that it was of the utmost significance, it would still not be discoverable by the astrologer in the constellations from which he claims to make predictions. Since he cannot trace it in his constellations, which when examined are bound to be identical, whether he is consulted about Jacob or about his brother, what use is it to him if there is a difference in the heavens, which he thoughtlessly and casually belittles, but no difference in his diagram, which he earnestly and pointlessly beholds? So these ideas too, because they involve signs instituted by human presumption, must be classed among those contracts and agreements made with devils.

In this way it happens that, by some inscrutable divine plan, those who have a desire for evil things are handed over to be deluded and deceived according to what their own wills deserve. They are deluded and deceived by corrupt angels, to whom in God's most excellent scheme of things this lowest part of the world has been subjected by the decree of divine providence. As a result of these delusions and deceptions it has come about that these superstitious and deadly kinds of divination actually do tell of past and future things, which happen exactly as predicted; many things happen to observers in accordance with their observations, so that as they are caught up in them they become ever more inquisitive and entrap themselves more and more in the manifold snares of this most deadly error. This is a kind of spiritual fornication, and in the interests of spiritual health scripture has not failed to mention it. It warned off the soul by forbidding the practice of these things, but not on the grounds that its teachers utter falsehoods; it has actually said, 'If they tell you and it happens in that way, do not trust them' [Deut. 13: 2–3]. The fact that the ghost of the dead Samuel prophesied the truth to King Saul [1 Kgs. (1 Sam.) 28: 11–19] does not make the wickedness of summoning that ghost any less abhorrent. Nor did the fact that in Acts [Acts 16: 16–18] a soothsayer bore true testimony to the Lord's apostles lead Paul to spare that spirit rather than cleanse the woman by rebuking the demon and driving it out.

So all the specialists in this kind of futile and harmful superstition, and the contracts, as it were, of an untrustworthy and treacherous partnership established by this disastrous alliance of men and devils, must be totally rejected and avoided by the Christian. 'It is not', to quote the apostle [1 Cor. 10: 19–20], 'because an idol is something, but because whatever they sacrifice they sacrifice it to devils and not to God that I do not want you to become the associates of demons.' What the apostle said about idols and the sacrifices made in their honour must guide our attitude to all these fanciful signs which draw people to the worship of idols or to the worship of the created
order or any parts of it as if they were God, or which relate to
this obsession with remedies and other such practices. They
are not publicly promulgated by God in order to foster the love
of God and one’s neighbour, but they consume the hearts of
wretched mortals by fostering selfish desires for temporal
things. So in all these teachings we must fear and avoid this
alliance with demons, whose whole aim, in concert with their
leader, the devil, is to cut off and obstruct our return to God.

Just as there are deceptive human ideas of human origin about
the stars, which God created and ordered, so there are many
notions, apparently derived systematically from human sur-
mises and committed to paper by numerous writers, about
everything which is born or somehow comes into being by the
workings of divine providence—I mean things which happen
abnormally, like a mule giving birth or something being struck
by lightning.

The influence of all these things varies in proportion to the
extent of the agreement achieved with demons by presumptu-
ous minds through such kinds of common language. But they
are all brim-full of dangerous curiosity, agonizing worry, and
deadly bondage. They were not observed as a result of their
influence, but they gained their influence as a result of being
observed and recorded. This is how they came to have differ-
ent effects on different people, according to their particular
thoughts and fancies. Spirits who wish to deceive someone
device appropriate signs for each individual to match those in
which they see him caught up through his speculations and the
conventions he accepts. So (by way of example) the single
letter which is written like a cross means one thing to Greeks
and another to Latin speakers, and has meaning not by nature
but by agreement and convention; therefore a person who
knows both languages does not, if he wants to say something in
writing to a Greek, write that letter with the same meaning as
it has when he writes to a Latin speaker. And the word beta,
consisting of the same sounds in both languages, is the name
of a letter in Greek, but a vegetable in Latin. When I say lege
a Greek understands one thing by these two syllables, but
a Latin speaker something else.* All these meanings, then,
derive their effects on the mind from each individual’s

agreement with a particular convention. As this agreement
varies in extent, so do their effects. People did not agree to
use them because they were already meaningful; rather
they became meaningful because people agreed to use them.
Likewise the signs by which this deadly agreement with
demons is achieved have an effect that is in proportion to each
individual’s attention to them. This is clearly demonstrated by
the practice of augurs, who, both before and after making
their observations, deliberately avoid seeing birds in flight or
hearing their cries, because these signs are null and void unless
accompanied by the observer’s agreement.

Having pruned and uprooted these things from the Chris-
tian mind we must in turn consider those human institutions
which are not superstitious, that is, ones established not with
demons but with men. All things which are meaningful to
humans just because humans have decided that they should be
so are human institutions. Some of them are superfluous and
self-indulgent, others are useful and necessary. If the signs
made by actors while dancing were naturally meaningful,
rather than meaningful as a result of human institution and
agreement, an announcer would not have indicated to the
Carthaginians, as each actor danced, what the dance meant, as
he did in earlier days. Many old men still remember this, and
we often hear them talking about it. It is quite credible, for even
now if a person unfamiliar with these frivolities goes to the
theatre his rapt attention to them is pointless unless someone
tells him what the movements mean. Yet everyone aims at
some degree of similarity when they use signs, making signs as
similar as possible to the things which are signified. But
because one thing can be similar to another in many ways,
these signs are not generally understood unless accompanied
by agreement. In the case of pictures and statues and other
such representations, especially those made by experienced
artists, nobody who sees the representation fails to recognize
the things which they resemble. This whole category should
be classed among superfluous human institutions, except
when it makes a difference why or where or when or by whose
authority one of them is made. Finally, the thousands of
fictional stories and romances, which through their falsehoods
give people great pleasure, are human institutions. Indeed, nothing should be thought more peculiar to mankind than lies and falsehoods,* which derive exclusively from mankind itself. But there are useful and necessary institutions, established with men by men; such things as the conventional differences in dress and in bodily ornament, designed to distinguish sex or rank, and countless kinds of coded meanings without which society would function less smoothly, or not at all, and everything in the realm of weights and measures, coinage, and currency, which are peculiar to individual states and peoples, and so on. If these were not human institutions they would not differ between different peoples, nor would they be subject to change at the whim of the authorities in each country. This whole area of human institutions which contribute to the necessities of life should in no way be avoided by the Christian; indeed, within reason, they should be studied and committed to memory.

There are some human institutions which are modelled on natural ones* or at any rate similar to them. Those which involve an alliance with demons are, as I have said, to be completely rejected and abhorred, but those which men practise along with their fellow men are to be adopted, in so far as they are not self-indulgent and superfluous. This applies especially to the letters of the alphabet, without which reading would be impossible, and (up to a point) to the multiplicity of languages, which I discussed above.* In this category, too, are the symbols of shorthand, learnt by those who are now properly known as stenographers. These are useful, and it is not wrong to learn them; they do not involve us in superstition or undermine us with self-indulgence, provided that limited time is spent on them and that they do not become an obstacle to the more important things which they help us to obtain.

Now those elements of human tradition which men did not establish but discovered by investigation, whether they were enacted in time or instituted by God, should not be considered human institutions, no matter where they are learnt. Some of these concern the physical senses, others concern the mind. As for the former, we either take them on trust when they are told to us, or understand them when they are demonstrated, or infer them when they are experienced.

Whatever the subject called history reveals about the sequence of past events is of the greatest assistance in interpreting the holy books, even if learnt outside the church as part of primary education. Many problems are often investigated by us using Olympiads and the names of consuls.* Ignorance of the consulships in which the Lord was born and died has led many to the erroneous idea that the Lord suffered at the age of 46, because it was said by the Jews that their temple (which represented the Lord's body) was built in forty-six years [John 2: 19–20]. We have it on the authority of the gospel [Luke 3: 23] that he was baptized at the age of about 30; the number of years that he lived after that could be inferred from the pattern of his activities, but is in fact more clearly and reliably established, beyond any shadow of doubt, by a comparison of secular history with the gospel. It will then be seen that there was some point in the statement that the Temple was built in forty-six years: since the number cannot be explained in terms of the Lord's age, it must be explained as an abstruse lesson about the human body, which the only son of God, by whom everything was made [John 1: 3], did not disdain to put on for our sake.

On the usefulness of history—leaving aside Greek scholars*—I cite the major problem which was solved by my good friend Ambrose. A scandalous accusation was levelled by readers and admirers of Plato, who had the nerve to say that our Lord Jesus Christ learnt all his ideas—which they cannot but marvel at and proclaim—from the works of Plato, since, undeniably, he lived long before our Lord's coming in the flesh. After examining secular history the aforementioned bishop discovered that Plato went to Egypt (where the prophet then was) at the time of Jeremiah,* and demonstrated that it was surely more likely that Plato had been introduced to our literature by Jeremiah, and that it was this that enabled him to learn and write the things for which he is justly praised. In fact the literature of the Hebrew race, in which monotheism first made its appearance, and from which our Lord came according to the flesh [Rom. 9: 5], was not preceded even by Pythagoras,* from whose followers they claim that Plato learnt his theology. So as a
result of studying the chronology it is much easier to believe that the pagans took everything that is good and true in their writings from our literature than that the Lord Jesus Christ took his from Plato—a quite crazy idea.

Historical narrative also describes human institutions of the past, but it should not for that reason itself be counted among human institutions. For what has already gone into the past and cannot be undone must be considered part of the history of time, whose creator and controller is God. There is a difference between describing what has been done and describing what must be done. History relates past events in a faithful and useful way, whereas the books of haruspices and similar literature set out to teach things to be performed or observed, and offer impertinent advice, not reliable information.

There is also a kind of narration akin to demonstration, by which things in the present, and not the past, are communicated to people unfamiliar with them. In this category are various studies of topography and zoology, and of trees, plants, stones, and other such things. I dealt with this category earlier and explained that such knowledge is valuable in solving puzzles in scripture, but is not to be used in place of certain signs to provide the remedies or devices associated with some superstition. I distinguished this category too from the one that is lawful and open to Christians. For it is one thing to say, "if you drink this plant in powdered form your stomach will stop hurting," and another to say, "if you hang this plant round your neck your stomach will stop hurting." In the one case the health-giving mixture is commendable, in the other the superstitious meaning is damnable. But in the absence of incantations or invocations or "characters" it is often doubtful whether the thing tied on or attached in some way for healing the body works by nature—in which case it may be used freely—or succeeds by virtue of some meaningful association; in this case, the more effectively it appears to heal, the more a Christian should be on guard. Where the explanation of its power is not apparent, it is the attitude of the user that matters, as far as physical healing or treatment, whether in medicine or in agriculture, is concerned.

In astronomy—scripture mentions just a few things here—we have a case not of narration but demonstration. The orbit of the moon, which is regularly used to fix the annual celebration of our Lord's passion, is familiar to very many people, but very few have infallible knowledge about the rising or setting or any other movements of the other heavenly bodies. In itself, this knowledge, although not implicating one in superstition, does not give much help in interpreting the divine scripture—almost none, in fact—and is really more of a hindrance, since it demands the fruitless expenditure of effort. Because it is akin to the deadly error of those who prophesy fatuously about fate, it is more convenient and honourable to despise it. But as well as the demonstration of things in the present it has something in common with narration of the past, because one may systematically argue from the present position and movement of the stars to their courses in the past. It also makes possible systematic predictions about the future, which are not speculative and conjectural but firm and certain; but we should not try to extract something of relevance to our own actions and experiences, like the maniacs who cast horoscopes, but confine our interest to the stars themselves. Just as someone who studies the moon can say, after examining how large it is today, how large it was so many years ago or how large it will be in so many years' time, so in the same way skilled astronomers have learnt to pronounce about each of the stars. I have now explained my position on this whole subject, as far as its practical uses are concerned.

In the case of the other arts, by which something is manufactured, whether it be an artefact that remains after a craftsman has worked on it, like a house or a stool or a vessel of some kind, and so on, or whether they provide some service for God to work with, like medicine, agriculture, or navigation, or whether the whole end-product consists in action, as in dancing, running, and wrestling—in all these arts knowledge gained from past experiences causes future ones to be inferred. None of these craftsmen moves a muscle at his work except to link his experience of the past with his plans for the future. In human life knowledge of these things is to be used sparingly and in passing, and not in order to make things—unless a particular task demands it, which is not my concern now—but to assist our judgement, so that we are not entirely unaware of
not only on true propositions but also on false ones: it is easy to
learn which of them are valid given the
church but the truth of propositions must be sought in the
reasoning while indeed logic is of paramount importance in
understanding and resolving all kinds of problems in the sacred
texts. But one must beware of indulging a passion for
arguments and making a plenum show of skill in testing an opponent.
There are many sophisms as there are clear, well-defined
propositions. Y is not a point or a line, Y = X, and when
we are dealing with a syllogism, we must be consistently alert. The following proposition was put by
X to Y: you are not X, Y granted that, X was actually
false, I am a man, and when
the scriptural passage where it says, "The person who speaks
glibly and without reflection is also of little value." (Rom. 9:22) The word "sophistic" here is a term for
verbal ornamentation on a scale that does not suit a serious
writer.

There are also such things as valid syllogisms based
on false statements, which can be used to make an opponent
embarrassed by showing that if he chooses to stick to it he is logically compelled to uphold what
he condemned. The apostle Paul was not advancing true
statement, and our preaching is in vain, and your faith is vain,
neither did Christ rise, because this was not in vain, nor was the preaching of those who had believed from
the beginning. But these falsehoods were deduced quite validly from the

The supposed one is not valid, the deduction is true. Therefore, it is not the case that the
resurrection of the dead is after all a valid deduction, and the actual proposition expressed in

example. Suppose someone claimed that If small is an animal
it has a voice. With this granted, it is then shown that when
not, the conclusion is refuted. The antecedent is also refuted—

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snail is not an animal. This proposition is false, but validly derived from the false premiss that was granted. So whereas the truth of a proposition holds good through itself alone, the truth-value of a syllogistic conclusion is established from what the disputant believes or concedes. This explains why, as I said before, a falsehood is inferred in a valid process of reasoning to make the person whose error we wish to correct ashamed to have held opinions with consequences that he can see must be rejected. It is now easy to understand that there can be invalid deductions from true statements, just as there are valid ones from false statements. Suppose that someone put the proposition, ‘if X is just, he is good’, and that this was granted; that he then said, ‘but X is not just’; and then, with that granted, added the conclusion ‘so X is not good’. Even if all these statements were true, the deduction is not valid. For although it is necessarily the case that an antecedent is refuted by the refutation of the consequent, it is not the case that a consequent is refuted by the refutation of an antecedent. It is correct to say ‘if he is an orator, he is a man’, but if you then add the minor premiss, ‘he is not an orator’, it will not follow that ‘he is not therefore a man’.

So knowing the rules of valid deduction is not the same thing as knowing the truth of propositions. In logic one learns about valid and invalid inference, and contradiction. A valid inference is ‘if he is an orator he is a man’; an invalid one is ‘if he is a man, he is an orator’; a contradictory one is ‘if he is a man, he is a quadruped’. In these cases a judgement is made about the actual deduction. On the other hand, where the truth of propositions is concerned, it is the actual propositions in themselves, not their logical relationships, that need to be examined. But when uncertain propositions are combined with true and certain ones in a valid process of reasoning, it necessarily follows that they too become certain. Some people give themselves airs when they have learnt the rules of valid deduction, as if the truth of propositions resided in that. And conversely some people, although they often hold a true opinion, wrongly despise themselves for being ignorant of the laws of inference, although it is better to know that there is a resurrection of the dead than to know that if there is no resurrection of the dead it necessarily follows that Christ did not rise either.

The study of definition, division, and classification, though often applied to false things, is not in itself false; and it was not instituted by man, but discovered as part of the way things are. For just because it is often applied by poets to their fables and by false philosophers or heretics (in other words, false Christians) to the tenets of their misguided systems, that does not make it wrong to say that in defining or dividing or classifying something you must not include something irrelevant or leave out something that is relevant. This is true, even if the things being defined or classified are not true. Falsehood itself can be defined—we might say that falsehood is the description of something which is not actually in the state in which it is asserted to be, or put it in some other way—and the definition may be correct, although what is false cannot be true. We may also subdivide it, saying that there are two kinds of falsehood, one consisting of things which cannot possibly be true, another of things which are not true, but could be. If you say that seven and three make eleven, you are saying something that cannot possibly be true, but if you say, for example, that it rained on New Year’s Day, although in fact it did not, you are saying something which could have been true. So the definition and subdivision of falsehoods may be perfectly correct, although the falsehoods themselves are certainly not true.

There are also certain rules of the more flamboyant discipline now called eloquence,* which are valid in spite of the fact that they can be used to commend falsehood. Since they can also be used to commend the truth, it is not the subject itself that is reprehensible, but the perversity of those who abuse it. It is not the result of human institution that the expression of love* wins over one’s listeners, or that a brief and lucid narrative communicates facts efficiently, or that variety holds the attention without creating boredom; these and other such observations are true whether applied to true matters or false, to the extent that they cause something to be known or believed, or influence minds to seek or to avoid something. It was discovered that these things were true, not decided that they should be true. But when this subject is learnt, it has to be
used in communicating what has already been understood rather than in the actual process of understanding. The rules about syllogisms and definitions and classifications, on the other hand, greatly help people to understand, provided that they avoid the error of thinking that when they have mastered them they have learnt the actual truth about the happy life. But it tends to be the case that people develop the skills which the learning of these details is meant to develop more easily than they pick up the tortuous and rebarbative lessons of their teachers. It is as if someone who wanted to give rules about walking were to tell you that your back foot should not be raised until you have put down your front foot, and then describe in minute detail how you should move the joints of your limbs and knees. He would be right; walking in any other way is impossible. But people find it easier to walk by actually doing these things than by paying attention to them as they do them or by assimilating rules when they hear them. Those who are unable to walk pay much less heed to instructions which they cannot follow in practice. Similarly, a clever person is as a rule quicker to see that a conclusion is invalid than to understand the relevant rules; the dull person fails to see it, but has even less chance of understanding the rules. In all these matters it is often true that the pleasure derived from the open display of truth is greater than the assistance gained from discussing or examining it, though indeed these things can sharpen the intellect, which is a good thing provided that they do not also make people more mischievous or conceited or, in other words, more inclined to deceive others by plausible talk and questioning, or to think that by learning these things they have done something marvellous which entitles them to consider themselves superior to ordinary unsophisticated people.

As for the study of number, it is surely clear even to the dullest person that it was not instituted by men, but rather investigated and discovered. Virgil wanted the first vowel of Italia—traditionally pronounced short—to be long, and made it long;* but nobody can bring it about by willing it that three threes are not nine, or that they fail to make a squared number, or that the number nine is not thrice three, or one and a half times six, or twice no number (for odd numbers are not divisible by two*). So whether numbers are considered purely as numbers or used in accordance with the laws that govern figures or sounds or other kinds of motion, they have fixed rules, which were not in any way instituted by human beings but discovered by the intelligence of human brains.

Some people take such delight in all this that they like to boast among the unlearned instead of asking why the things which they simply perceive to be true actually are true, or why things that are not only true but also unchangeable (as they have understood them to be) actually are unchangeable; nor do they, as they come from the visible and physical to the human mind and find this too to be changeable—because it is now clever, now not,* being placed between the unchangeable truth above them and the changeable things below them—relate all these things to the praise and love of God, realizing that it is from him that all things have their existence. Such people may seem learned, but are in no way wise.

So it seems to me that the following advice is beneficial for young people who are keen and intelligent, who fear God and seek a life of true happiness. Do not venture without due care into any branches of learning which are pursued outside the church of Christ, as if they were a means to attaining the happy life, but discriminate sensibly and carefully between them. Those that are found to be of human institution—these come in many forms, because of the many different aims of those who instituted them, but offer little certainty, because of the speculative ideas of fallible people which underlie them—should be entirely repudiated and treated with disgust, especially if they involve an alliance with demonic powers established through a sort of contract or agreement to use particular esoteric meanings. Keep away too from the unnecessary and self-indulgent institutions of mankind, but in view of the demands of this present life do not neglect the human institutions vital to the cohesion of society. As for the other branches of learning found in pagan society, apart from the study of things past or present which concern the bodily senses (including the productions and experimentations of the practical arts) and the sciences of logic and number,* I consider
nothing useful here. In all these subjects the watchword must be ‘nothing in excess’,* and nowhere more so than in those which concern the bodily senses and are subject to time or restricted in space. Some scholars have made separate studies of all the words and names in Hebrew, Syriac, Egyptian, or any other language found in the holy scriptures that are used without any interpretation;* and Eusebius made a separate study of chronology,* because of the problems in the divine books which require its application. They did this in these specialized areas to save the Christian student a lot of bother over a few details. In the same way I can see the possibility that if someone suitably qualified were interested in devoting a generous amount of time to the good of his brethren he could compile a monograph classifying and setting out all the places, animals, plants, and trees, of the stones and metals, and all the other unfamiliar kinds of object mentioned in scripture. It might also be possible to put together an expository account of numbers, confined to numbers mentioned in the divine scripture. Perhaps indeed some or all of this has already been done; I have come across much information on which I did not realize that good and learned Christians had done research or written books. These things tend to remain unknown, whether because the bulk of scholars neglect them, or because jealous ones conceal them. Whether the same can be done for logic, I do not know. I rather think not, because logic permeates the whole body of scripture, rather like a network of muscles, and so is of more help to the reader in resolving and revealing ambiguities—of which I will speak later*—than in understanding unfamiliar signs, which is my present concern.

Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists,* which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them. Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel hated and shunned, but also vessels and ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves (they did this not on their own authority but at

God’s command, and the Egyptians in their ignorance actually gave them the things of which they had made poor use*) [Exod. 3: 21–2, 12: 35–6]—similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies* that involve unnecessary effort, which each one of us must loathe and avoid as under Christ’s guidance we abandon the company of pagans, but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction, as well as the various truths about monotheism to be found in their writers. These treasures—like the silver and gold, which they did not create but dug, as it were, from the mines of providence, which is everywhere—which were used wickedly and harmfully in the service of demons must be removed by Christians, as they separate themselves in spirit from the wretched company of pagans, and applied to their true function, that of preaching the gospel. As for their clothing—which corresponds to human institutions, but those appropriate to human society, which in this life we cannot do without—this may be accepted and kept for conversion to Christian purposes. This is exactly what many good and faithful Christians have done. We can see, can we not, the amount of gold, silver, and clothing with which Cyprian, that most attractive writer and most blessed martyr, was laden when he left Egypt; is not the same true of Lactantius, and Victorinus, of Optatus, and Hilary,* to say nothing of people still alive,* and countless Greek scholars? Isn’t this what had been done earlier by Moses himself, that most faithful servant of God, of whom it is written that he was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians [Acts 7: 22]? Pagan society, riddled with superstition, would never have given to all these men the arts which it considered useful—least of all at a time when it was trying to shake off the yoke of Christ and persecuting Christians—if it had suspected that they would be adapted to the purpose of worshipping the one God, by whom the worship of idols would be eradicated. But they did give their gold and silver and clothing to God’s people as it left Egypt, little knowing that the things they were giving away would be put back into the service of Christ. The event narrated in Exodus was certainly a figure, and this is what it
As students of the divine scriptures, equipped in this way, begin to approach the task of studying them in detail, they must ponder incessantly this phrase of the apostle Paul: ‘knowledge puffs up, but love builds up’ [1 Cor. 8: 1]. In this way, even if they leave Egypt well provided for, they realize that without first observing the Passover, they cannot be saved. Now ‘Christ our Passover has been sacrificed’ [1 Cor. 5: 7]; the sacrifice of Christ teaches us nothing more clearly than what he himself calls out, as if to those whom he sees suffering in Egypt under Pharaoh: ‘Come unto me, you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you and let your burdens fall, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is a soft one, and my burden light’ [Matt. 11: 28–30]. Who are these if not the gentle and lowly in heart, people not puffed up by knowledge but built up by love?

Remember those who celebrated the Passover in days gone by, in its unreal and shadowy form; when the command was given to mark their gateposts with the blood of a lamb, they were also sprinkled with hyssop [Exod. 12: 22]. This is a lowly and gentle plant, but nothing is stronger or more penetrating than its roots, so that ‘rooted and grounded in love’ we may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth* [Eph. 3: 18]. This refers to the Lord’s cross. The breadth is the crossbeam, on which the hands were stretched out; the length is the part from the ground to the crossbeam, to which is fixed the whole body from the hands downward; the height is the part from the crossbeam up to the top, to which the head is attached; the depth is the hidden part, firmly set in the ground. In the symbol of the cross every Christian act is inscribed: to do good in Christ and to hold fast resolutely to him, to hope for heaven, to avoid profaning the sacraments. If we are purified by such behaviour we will be able ‘to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge’ [Eph. 3: 19]—the love in which he, by whom everything was made [John 1: 3], is equal to the Father—and so be filled with all the fullness of God. Hyssop also has a cleansing power, so that nobody should boast, with his head inflated by a knowledge of the wealth he has taken from Egypt. ‘You will sprinkle me with hyssop,’ Scripture says, ‘and I shall be made clean; you will wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. You will give exultation and joy to my ears’ [Ps. 50: 9–10 (51: 7–8)]. Then to follow that up it adds, to demonstrate that hyssop signifies cleansing from pride: ‘the bones once abased will rejoice’.

The insignificance of the amount of gold, silver, and clothing which that people took away with it from Egypt, in comparison with the wealth that it later attained in Jerusalem, as shown particularly in the reign of Solomon [3 Kgs. (1 Kgs.) 10: 14–27], is the measure of the insignificance of all knowledge, I mean useful knowledge, that is collected from pagan books, when compared with the knowledge contained in the divine scriptures. For what a person learns independently of scripture is condemned there if it is harmful, but found there if it is useful. And when one has found there all the useful knowledge that can be learnt anywhere else, one will also find there, in much greater abundance, things which are learnt nowhere else at all, but solely in the remarkable sublimity and the remarkable humility of the scriptures. Readers furnished with such an education will not be held back by unfamiliar signs. Gentle and lowly in heart, peacefully subject to Christ, laden with a light burden, founded and rooted and built up in love, and incapable of being puffed up by knowledge, they should now proceed to consider and analyse the ambiguous signs in the scriptures, about which I will now endeavour to present, in my third book, such learning as the Lord deigns to deliver to me.