Seafaring as a Conceptual Metaphor in Augustine of Hippo

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The work of Augustine of Hippo offers us a glimpse into how seafaring metaphors rooted in biblical and classical texts may effectually reorganize human experience and yield a meaningful individual narrative. Many Christian writers in late antiquity use biblical stories relating to the sea as the basis for a constellation of seafaring metaphors describing the human condition and the Christian life. Augustine of Hippo is unique, however, in using such metaphors to interpret his own lived experience. Drawing on work in metaphor theory (e.g. Lakoff, Johnson, and Turner), this paper will show how seafaring metaphors, informed by biblical narrative and the Aeneid, provide Augustine with a schema which gives meaning both to events in his life and to his psychological experience. Augustine in turn uses these interpreted experiences to enrich the metaphorical schema with which he begins.

Augustine takes as his foundation what had become a conglomerate of traditionally Christian seafaring metaphors. In its broad strokes, the church became a ship, the sinful world became the sea, and faith, love, and the rite of baptism became the actions that enable the sea’s crossing. While making use of all these component metaphors, Augustine primarily uses the sea to signify the universal state of sinfulness passed down from Adam. Every human is thus born into the sea and will either perish in it or, by ritually perishing in the waters of baptism, will pass through it to the kingdom of God (Io. eu. tr. 55.1; en. Psa. 103.4.4; serm. 213.9).

Yet Augustine cyclically builds on this foundation both by interpreting his lived experience within the schema of seafaring and by further enriching the schema with that interpreted experience. The former element of this cycle is evident in Confessions, where Augustine relates traditional metaphors of seafaring to his own voyage from Carthage to Rome. By alluding to the fourth book of the Aeneid (conf. 5.8.14-5), Augustine’s narration implies that he, like Aeneas, has been divinely driven to Italy. The events he narrates from Italy corroborate this implication and subsume Augustine’s personal voyage within a broader literary seafaring metaphor. Namely, in Italy Augustine meets Bishop Ambrose, discovers a philosophically sophisticated version of Christianity, and becomes a baptized Christian. In short, Augustine finds his personal salvation after crossing the Mediterranean Sea, which meaning he communicates by narrating his autobiographical tale within a recognizable literary-metaphorical schema.

The latter element is evident in one of Augustine’s recurring concerns – the impossibility for him (and for all humans) to fully know himself because of the fragmented state of his soul. The sea offers Augustine a symbol for capturing this psychological conception, which itself is not biblical. Inasmuch as the sea is an entity with parts that move in contrary, unpredictable ways, it can signify the soul, whose multiple, uncontrollable desires seek contrary ends, resulting in its fracturing. Augustine thus conceives of two seas that must be crossed: a sea without, the
corrupt world (*conf.* 1.16.25; *en. Psa.* 80.11), and a sea within, the human soul itself (*en. Psa.* 41.13). He enriches the traditional schema of seafaring with this addition and interprets biblical stories accordingly (e.g. *serm.* 38).

By using seafaring metaphors to interpret events in his life as well as prominent psychological experience, and also using that interpreted experience to expand upon such metaphors, Augustine offers an example of the way in which mythological motifs may shape human experience. Augustine’s use of these metaphors is not mere ornamentation but is evidence of his inhabiting a world shaped by religious symbol and narrative.