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Nostis qui in schola Christi eruditi estis, Iacob ipsum esse Israel: Sermo 122, In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7 and the Donatist and Pelagian Controversies

Abstract: *Sermo 122*, which does not have a clear date, is a complicated sermon, like so many others. In this sermon this has to do with a high level of allegory on all sorts of levels, where it is initially not so clear what Augustine aims at. We want to propose a narrative logic for the understanding of *Sermo 122* that explains the argumentative flow of the sermon, the reasons behind its allegorical moves, the meaning of these moves, and the historical background of these moves. The thesis to be defended in this article is that the main interest in the sermon circles around a phrase from John that is only introduced at the very end of the sermon: “This is an Israelite, in whom there is no guile” (John 1:47–51). This phrase could be taken as linked to the key Pelagian claim in the Pelagian controversy, namely that a morally perfect human being is possible (at least in theory). Taking this passage at face value, it seems as if Jesus claims that Nathanael is morally perfect. What we suggest is that Augustine’s main argumentative steps in the sermon are intended to reinterpret this passage in such a way as to postpone Nathanael’s moral perfection to the afterlife, so that the possible Pelagian claim is effectively disarmed. Through a comparison with other places in Augustine where he discusses Nathanael (notably *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7*), we will make an attempt to situate this sermon in the context of the question of the continuity between Augustine’s anti-Donatist doctrine of sin and his anti-Pelagian teachings on grace.

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Whoever starts reading *Sermo 122* may be surprised, especially when the reader is not too familiar with patristic exegesis in general or Augustine’s exegesis in particular. The reader might feel puzzled by the overwhelming amount of allegorical interpretation that characterises the sermon. One’s initial question might well be: why change the simple, instructive and beautiful message of the Nathanael story in John 1 into something so complex as *Sermo 122*? Why is it needed to

overthrow the simplicity of the story with such complicated allegorical lines of reasoning? Another reader, more familiar with patristic exegesis and used to all sorts of intricate examples of allegory, might have another impression: why not? Patristic authors do all kinds of strange things with biblical texts, so why not do what Augustine does in *Sermo 122*?

Both responses to a *prima facie* reading of *Sermo 122* share the same thing: both do not yet grasp the rationale behind this sermon. What the more experienced reader may learn from the less experienced reader is the natural question: what does this sermon mean and intend to achieve? What does the author want to say through such allegorical moves and strategies as have been used here? What the inexperienced reader may learn from the more experienced, is that the allegorical interpretation used here is less unfamiliar to the original audience of the text than to the modern reader, but this does not completely undo the inexperienced reader's question: how can we make sense of the purpose and the content of this strongly allegorical sermon? This is the question we want to answer in this article. We want to propose a narrative logic for the understanding of *Sermo 122* that explains the argumentative flow of the sermon, explains the reasons behind its allegorical moves, the meaning of these moves, and the historical background of these moves. We will try to answer the question the more experienced reader will probably have in mind: how is this homiletic discourse connected with Augustine's anti-Donatist doctrine of sin and his anti-Pelagian teachings on grace, since in this perspective—at first sight—strange assertions are uttered in *Sermo 122*.

The structure of this article is as follows: first, we briefly situate *Sermo 122* in the context of Augustine's homiletic activity and the scholarly study of it. We will also offer in this context an introduction into Augustine's reflections on human perfection and sin—which is the core of Augustine's allegorical campaign in *Sermo 122*. Second, we provide a close reading of the sermon, after which we compare the argument in *Sermo 122* with other resources dealing with the same biblical material, John 1:47–51, notably *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7* and some other parallel passages. Through our analysis it will become clear that the issues of human perfection, sin, and grace have a prominent place in Augustine's dealing with Nathanael, themes that feature—although in different forms—noticeably in the Donatist and Pelagian controversies.

1 Introduction

1.1 Augustine's sermons

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) preached for a period of close to forty years, from around the time of his priestly ordination in 390/391 to shortly before his death in 430.¹ His friend and biographer Possidius points out that Augustine was at

1 In Augustine's collection of sermons a distinction is made between *sermo* on the one hand and *tractatus* and *enarratio* on the other. We have circa 570 *sermones ad populum*, 124 *tractatus* on the gospel of John and 10 on the First Letter of John and 205 *enarrationes* on the 150 Psalms. A *sermo* tends to stand on its own and is not part of a running, verse by verse commentary on a book of the Bible. While exegesis—and even verse by verse exegesis—was to be found in the *sermones* (and even in small subcollections of subsequent *sermones*) the latter was not always Augustine's primary goal. In the *enarrationes* and the *tractatus*, however, the explanation of the Scripture was primary. The most fundamental difference between the *sermones* and the *enarrationes/tractatus* has to do with the fact that the latter were later edited by Augustine. A number of these second category homilies, moreover, were never delivered as such: some were dictated by Augustine as commentaries on the Scriptures, while others were put together as model sermons (as example for other preachers) and never preached to a congregation. Augustine himself states that he intended to edit the *sermones ad populum* also (*Retractationes* 2,67 [CChr.SL 57, 142,1–143,6 Mutzenbecher]), but in reality he was never able to realise this plan.—For Augustine's preaching activity, see: George Lawless, "Augustine of Hippo as Preacher," in *Saint Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays* (ed. Fannie Lemoine and Christopher Kleinhenz; Garland Medieval Casebooks 9; New York: Garland, 1994), 13–37; George Lawless, "Preaching," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), (675–677) 676–677; Christine Mohrmann, "Saint Augustin prédicateur," in eadem, ed., *Études sur le Latin des Chrétiens* 1 (Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura; Roma, 1958), 391–402; Gert Partoens, "Augustin als Prediger," in *Augustinus Handbuch* (ed. Volker H. Drecoll; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 242–247; Gert Partoens, "Sermones," in *Augustinus Handbuch* (ed. Volker H. Drecoll; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 393–416; Michele Pellegrino, "Introduzione Generale," in *Sant' Agostino: Discorsi* 1 (1–50): *Sul Vecchio Testamento* (ed. Michele Peregrino et al.; Opere di Sant' Agostino 29,3; Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 1979), ix–cii; English translation from Edmund Hill, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st Century* 3,1: *Sermons: On the Old Testament* 1–19 (ed. John E. Rotelle; New York: New City Press, 1990), 13–163; Michele Pellegrino, "Appunti sull'uso della Bibbia nei Sermoni di S. Agostino," *Rivista Biblica* 27 (1979): 7–39; Maurice Pontet, *Lexègèse de S. Augustin prédicateur* (Théologie 7; Paris: Aubier, 1946); Éric Rebillard, "Sermones," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 773–792; Martijn Schrama, "Als licht in het hart," in *Aurelius Augustinus: Als licht in het hart: Preken voor het liturgische jaar* (ed. Martijn Schrama et al.; Baarn: Ambo, 1996), 7–26; Johannes van Oort, "Augustinus Verbi Divini Minister," in *Verbi Divini Minister: Een bundel opstellen over de dienaar en de bediening van het goddelijke Woord aangeboden aan L. Kieviet v.d.m. ter gelegenheid van zijn vijftenzestigste verjaardag* (ed. Johannes van Oort et al.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1983), 167–188; Agostino Trapè, "Bibbia, teologia, mistica e poesia nella predicazione di

tracting large audiences when he preached. Possidius also notes that Augustine's immediate environment profited more from his homilies than from his writings.² In his sermons, Augustine opted for simplicity, for clear explanations, gripping language made all the more attractive by the techniques of rhetoric. Against the background of his pastoral concern to be understood by all, including the ordinary people, Augustine's homilies can be described as popular. In order to ensure their accessibility, Augustine refers in his sermons to concrete events and takes examples from everyday life. He also makes use of humour, wordplay and other rhetorical and didactic devices. Augustine adapted himself to the intellectual capacities of his listeners (on important liturgical feasts, he preaches for a large, and mixed audience, while at other occasions he probably had a more select group of educated listeners), but this did not imply that he avoided difficult topics, including complex theological questions. Augustine, for example, treats in his sermons Trinitarian theology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, sacramentology, eschatology, and several aspects of his doctrine of grace, sin, and predestination. Scholars only came to realise that Augustine's homilies have a theological content in recent decades. Previously, his sermons were dismissed as simple pastoral talks, while it was believed that his theological activity was restricted to his systematic writings. Several recent studies made it clear that we have to take Augustine's sermons into account to attain a complete and integrated picture of his thinking.

More specifically, the study of Augustine's sermons is of vital importance for our understanding of his doctrine of grace.³ If Augustine deals with complex

S. Agostino," *Divinitas* 24 (1980): 347–351; Gerard Wijdeveld, *Aurelius Augustinus: Twintig preken van Aurelius Augustinus: Ingeleid, vertaald en toegelicht* (Baarn: Ambo, 1986), 15–19; Gerard Wijdeveld, *Aurelius Augustinus: Carthaagse preken* (Baarn: Ambo, 1988), 7–20. For bibliographies on Augustine's *sermones* reference can be made to the aforementioned studies, but also—and more importantly—to the list of secondary literature on the *sermones* in Aurelius Augustinus, *Corpus Augustinianum Gissense* 2 (ed. Cornelius Mayer; Basel: Schwabe, 2004); Hubertus R. Drobner, *Augustinus von Hippo: Sermones ad populum: Überlieferung und Bestand, Bibliographie, Indices* (VCS 49; Leiden: Brill, 2000), represents an additional bibliographical instrument. See also the standard work on patristic homiletics: Alexandre Olivar, *La Predicación Cristiana Antigua* (Biblioteca Herder 189; Sección de Teología y Filosofía; Barcelona: Herder, 1991), 330–389, 571–574, 606–611, 699–712, 911–914, 932–935.

² Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 5,2–5; 7,3; 9,1 (ed. Wilhelm Geerlings, *Possidius: Vita Augustini* [Augustinus Opera / Werke; Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005], 34–36; 38; 42–44).

³ See the following initial study on the presence of grace in Augustine's early preaching: Pierre-Marie Hombert, "Augustin, prédicateur de la grâce au début de son épiscopat," in *Augustin Prédicateur (395–411): Actes du Colloque International de Chantilly (5–7 septembre 1996)* (ed. Goulven Madec; Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1996), 217–245.

theological issues in his sermons, is this also the case for the topic of grace? Is there a difference in the treatment of grace in Augustine's sermons (which were pastoral endeavours meant to exhort his community to lead an active ethical, faithful, and devout life) and his systematic, especially anti-Pelagian, writings (in which Augustine stressed the absolute necessity and the all-inclusive, non-meritorious and omnipresent nature of grace in all aspects of Christian life)? At first sight it does not seem tactical from the pastoral point of view to invite the faithful congregation to do their best and at the same time explain in the sermons that all human efforts are in the end the result of God's grace. The specific pastoral and exhortative aim of the genre of sermons thus offers us an interesting litmus test for Augustine's doctrine of grace. Moreover, this *corpus* is of interest for a study of its content because it covers the total period during which Augustine was theologically active. As such, the sermons offer a valuable research perspective within the recent scholarly debate on the chronological-doctrinal (dis)continuity—between, on the one hand, his early philosophical writings and, on the other hand, the writings from *Ad Simplicianum* onwards (397, when Augustine, through his reading of Paul, places the emphasis on the priority of grace in the relationship between God and man) and the anti-Pelagian writings in particular—within Augustine's thinking on grace.⁴ In short, we have to study the sermons to complete our understanding of his doctrine of grace.

4 Proponents of the discontinuity hypothesis: Peter Brown, James P. Burns, Kurt Flasch, Gaetano Lettieri, Athanase Sage; proponents of the continuity hypothesis: Nello Cipriani, Volker H. Drecoll, Anthony Dupont, Carol Harrison, Pierre-Marie Hombert, Goulven Madec, Thomas G. Ring. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: University of California Press, 2000); James P. Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1980); Nello Cipriani, "L'altro Agostino di G. Lettieri," *REAug* 48 (2002): 249–265; Volker H. Drecoll, *Die Entstehung der Gnadenlehre Augustins* (BHTh 109; Tübingen, 1999); Volker H. Drecoll, "Gratia," *Augustinus-Lexikon* 3 (Basel: Schwabe, 2004): 182–242; Anthony Dupont, "Continuity or Discontinuity in Augustine? Is There an 'Early Augustine' and What Does He Think on Grace?" (Review Article of: Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006]) *Ars Disputandi* 8 (2008): 67–79; Kurt Flasch, *Logik des Schreckens: Augustinus von Hippo: Die Gnadenlehre von 397: De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum 1,2* (2d ed.; Deutsche Erstübersetzung of Walter Schäfer, *Excerpta Classica* 8; Mainz: Dieterich, 1995); Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Pierre-Marie Hombert, *Gloria gratiae: Se glorifier en Dieu, principe et fin de la théologie augustiniennne de la grâce* (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 148; Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1996), 129–158; Gaetano Lettieri, *L'altro Agostino: Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina christiana* (Letteratura Cristiana Antica: Studi; Brescia: Morcelliana, 2001); Goulven Madec, "Sur une nouvelle introduction à la pensée d'Augustin," *REAug* 28 (1982): 100–111; Thomas G. Ring, "Bruch oder Entwicklung im Gnadenbegriff Augustins? Kritische An-

1.2 Augustine's reflection on human perfection

Augustine developed his doctrine of grace especially in the Pelagian controversy, a theological debate from 411 onwards in which he advocated the utter dependence of humanity on God's always preceding grace, because all humans share Adam's sin. Schematically speaking, one might argue that Augustine considers humankind after Adam's fall to be a helpless child in need of an all-inclusive grace on account of the universal human sinfulness. According to Augustine's interpretation of their thinking, Caelestius, Pelagius,⁵ and later Julian of Aeclanum⁶ consider humanity to be free, independent, and mature adults in its relationship with God and only in need of initial grace, namely being created with a good nature and with rational and moral capacities. Grace is a condition—and nothing more—for righteous actions, at least according to Augustine's reading of their writings.

merkungen zu K. Flasch, *Logik des Schreckens: Augustinus von Hippo: Die Gnadenlehre von 397*, *Augustiniana* 44 (1994): 31–113; Athanase Sage, "Péché originel: Naissance d'un dogme," *REAug* 13 (1967): 211–248.

5 The Pelagian controversy started by the condemnation of Caelestius, who rejected the participation of all of humanity in Adam's first sin, and claimed that all humans are born in an innocent state (like Adam before the fall). Pelagius, in line with Caelestius, explains that Adam did not intrinsically burden humanity with sin. Pelagius stresses that sin is always an individual decision, a personal fault. He believes that human persons only can be exhorted to live a life of moral standing if they realise they have the capacity to achieve such a life. So, at least in theory, he conceives it to be possible to be righteous, to live without sins. However, he also declares, that no human person in history has definitively and effectively reached *impeccantia*. Augustine responds Pelagius that during their life on earth, human persons can never be without sin. Besides individual sins, humankind is also determined by the first sin of Adam, which is transmitted to his descendents generation after generation. Augustine deems that Pelagius denies the necessity of the coming of Christ to free humankind from sin. If we can achieve justice on our own—because we are not affected by Adam's universal sin—Christ did not have to come to free us from this sin. According to Augustine, Pelagius claimed that Christians, after baptism, were capable of avoiding sin on the basis of their own good nature. The will to do the good and good deeds as such belong, according to Pelagius, to human freedom, since this capacity is given to human nature at the moment of creation. Augustine replies, on the other hand, that grace applies to the capacity and the will to do the good and to do just deeds. Grace does not only provide for the *possibilitas* (possibility) of acting justly, it also provides the just act itself.

6 Julian of Aeclanum rejected the condemnation of Pelagius. Julian was convinced that Augustine's concepts of *tradux peccati* and *peccatum originale* were damaging to Christian marriage and the Christian perception of sexuality. Augustine replies that while baptism takes away every sin, *concupiscentia* remains in baptised Christians as an inclination and tendency towards sin. Also the saints sin after their baptism. With Christ as the sole exception, no human being is without sin. After the fall, the will can only opt freely to sin and can no longer opt for justice unless it is liberated and assisted by God.

Consequently,—in Augustine’s eyes—they thought it was possible to lead a righteous and perfect life, to opt to not sin. At the core of Augustine’s (anti-Pelagian) theology is original sin. This original sin is the cause of mortality and affects human sexuality. Since Adam’s fall, man is always sinful in a double way: by his participation in Adam’s sin and by his individual sins. *Concupiscentia*, which is a penal consequence of Adam’s fall transmitted to all his descendants, remains even after baptism as an inclination towards sin, causing the situation that within this life nobody can resist sin (without the help of grace). The “Pelagians,” each with their own specific emphases, denied the existence of a non-individual sin that brings guilt to humanity. To sin or not is always a personal choice and as such a personal responsibility. Mortality is a natural fact and sexual desire is a natural good. The monastic communities of Hadrumetum, Marseille, and Provence (the so-called “semi-Pelagians”)⁷ recognised—differently, according to Augustine, from the “Pelagians”—the all-inclusive character of grace, but at the same moment asked the question whether the will still played some part in relation to grace, and if it was able to and ought to take the initiative. Augustine confirms that the will does indeed have a role to play, but that the initiative, assistance during an act, and the completion thereof belong entirely to grace.

Augustine’s thinking on grace is however not restricted to the Pelagian controversy. Elements of his understanding of grace are also to be found outside and before this controversy. He, for example, already rejected the idea of the possibility of sinlessness in his rebuttal of Donatist sacramentology and ecclesiology. The rigorous and elitist Donatists removed anyone who sinned immediately from the Church, so as to avoid the further infection of sin. They saw the Church as an alternative society, a refuge for the saints, “a closed garden, a sealed fountain” (Cant 4:12), to be “without stain or blemish” (Eph 5:27). This position implies that they believed it to be possible to live completely without sins. Augustine answered that the Church on earth is a “mixed body” (*corpus mixtum*), containing both saints and sinners and that there is a difference between *Ecclesia quae nunc est* and *ecclesia qualis futura est*.⁸ Only the heavenly Church will be without sinners.

⁷ The term “semi-Pelagianism” refers to Augustine’s correspondence with the monks of Hadrumetum, Provence, and Marseille. They feared that Augustine’s idea of all-inclusive grace that took no human merit into consideration undermined their efforts to live an ascetic life. Why attempt to live a good life, correct erring confraters, if everything is predestined? Augustine answers that grace does not annul human freedom. Human will is not lost by grace, since it is together with this will that grace collaborates. Without this grace, however, the human will can not opt to act good, but only to sin.

⁸ For source material and further reading concerning Augustine’s anti-Donatist ecclesiology, see Emilien Lamirande, “Corpus permixtum,” *Augustinus-Lexikon* 2,1/2 (Basel: Schwabe, 1996):

Here, in the earthly Church, we have to tolerate and forgive sinners. Moreover, in the end, here on earth, all Christians are sinners.

Augustine reacted fervently against the thesis of sinlessness, which he considered to be Pelagianism's most attractive thesis for his flock. Augustine had only recently emerged out of the Donatist schism, a movement that likewise offered the possibility of sinlessness and enjoyed enormous popularity in North Africa. Whatever the case, both Christian and pagan philosophical thought at the time had enormous respect for the ascetic life, whereby it was frequently presupposed that people had the capacity to live a righteous life if they did their best. This was the precise point on which the monastic communities of Hadrumetum, Marseille, and Provence—the so-called semi-Pelagian thinkers—questioned Augustine's doctrine of grace. The (im)possibility of human perfection thus was a point of vehement discussion in the time of Augustine.

2 The flow of the argument in *Sermo 122*

2.1 The Christian individual: Anti-Pelagian traces?

Sermo 122, which does not have a clear date,⁹ is a complicated sermon, like so many others.¹⁰ In this sermon this has to do with a high level of allegory on all

21–22; Emilien Lamirande, “Ecclesia,” *Augustinus-Lexikon* 2,5/6 (Basel: Schwabe, 2001): 687–720.

⁹ Augustine, *Sermo 122* (PL 38:680–684) generally is not dated within the Augustine research (cf. Roger Gryson, Bonifatius Fischer, and Hermann J. Frede, *Répertoire général des auteurs ecclésiastiques latins de l'Antiquité et du Haut Moyen Âge, 5e édition mise à jour du Verzeichnis der Sigel für Kirchenschriftsteller 1: Introduction, repertoire des auteurs A-H* [Vetus Latina 1,1; Freiburg: Herder, 2007], 238 and Rebillard, “Sermones” [see note 1], 778). According to Adalbero Kunzelmann, *Sermo 123* is preached one day after *Sermo 122* (on the basis of links between *Sermo 123,3–4* and *Sermo 122,5*), while he does not give a specific date for *Sermones 122–123* (Adalbero Kunzelmann, “Die Chronologie der Sermones des Hl. Augustinus,” in *Miscellanea Agostiniana 2: Studi Agostiniani* [Roma: Typografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1931], [417–520] 429). José Anoz, “Cronología de la producción agustiniana,” *Augustinus* 47 (2002): (229–312) 275.

¹⁰ Edmund Hill observes about *Sermo 122* in general: “This sermon and the next, which was probably delivered on the following day . . . , give me the impression of having been informal talks given to the equivalent in those days of bible study groups, rather than sermons preached to a large congregation in a church. If that was the case, then Hippo Regius, Augustine's own Church, is the most likely place for them, though his admirers in Carthage could easily have got him to do the same sort of thing for them there. They offer no clue about their date.” Edmund Hill, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st Century* 3,4: *Sermons: On the New Testament 94A–147A* [ed. John E Rotelle; Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1992], 242).

sorts of levels, where it is initially not so clear what Augustine aims at. The thesis to be defended in this article is that the main interest in the sermon circles around a phrase from John that is only introduced at the very end of the sermon: “This is an Israelite, in whom there is no guile” (John 1:47–51).¹¹ This phrase could be taken as linked to the key Pelagian claim in the Pelagian controversy, namely that a morally perfect human being is possible (at least in theory). Taking this passage at face value, it seems as if Jesus claims that Nathanael is morally perfect. What we suggest is that Augustine’s main argumentative steps in the sermon are intended to reinterpret this passage in such a way as to postpone Nathanael’s moral perfection to the afterlife, so that the possible Pelagian claim is effectively disarmed.

A first step in approaching the argument in the sermon is to collect the Scriptural material. We find various units of thought circling around a few main notions and figures. Before we examine these units of thought in detail, we need to pay attention to the way in which Augustine reorganises the biblical material, because he changes the order of the central Biblical exposition John 1:47–51 considerably. At the beginning of the sermon, he skips the potentially problematic verse 47: “This is an Israelite in whom there is no guile” and proceeds immediately to the end of verse 48: “When you were under the fig tree, I had already seen you.” After having touched lightly on verse 49 at the end of paragraph 1, he moves to verse 50: “You will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Augustine does not return to the story before the penultimate paragraph of the sermon, in paragraph 5, where he finally discusses verse 47: “This is an Israelite in whom there is no guile,” retelling the story there as a whole.

After having said this, let us see what each unit of thought has to offer to the overall argument. What is numbered as § 1 in our editions can be considered as the first step in Augustine’s argument. Already in this first paragraph, Augustine touches on various issues that we know from the Pelagian controversy: a clear distinction between a pre- and a post-lapsarian state, the collectivity of the fall for the whole of the human race, and the position of Christ as an exception to this universal spread of sin. When Augustine discusses the beginning of the story, in which Nathanael sits under the fig tree, he immediately interprets this in a figurative way; he says that in sitting under this tree, Nathanael represents

¹¹ For the link between *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,23 and *Sermo* 122,5–6 in Augustine’s explanation of John 1:51 and for other (homiletic) examples of his exegesis of this verse, see: Marie-François Berrouard, “Saint Augustin et le ministère de la prédication: Le thème des anges qui montent et qui descendent,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 2 (1962): 447–495.

the whole human race that is bound by sin.¹² The symbolic function of the tree as a reference to sin is linked to the fig-leaves that Adam and Eve used to hide their nakedness after the fall. Before the fall, so Augustine emphasises, this was not necessary, but now after the fall, they feel ashamed. As a final aspect of this first paragraph, the position of Christ needs to be highlighted. Augustine says: *Et ad rem gestam quidem respiciens, recordatus est Nathanael se fuisse sub ficu, ubi non erat Christus.*¹³

This is noteworthy, because in distinguishing so sharply between the sinfulness of all human beings and the sinlessness of Christ, Augustine points at some of the key issues in the Pelagian controversy.¹⁴

But then, in § 2, Augustine takes a creative step in linking Jesus' suggestion that Nathanael will see the heavens opened and the Son of Man descending and

12 “The fig (*ficus*) occurs 70 times, sometimes being mentioned as an item of diet, particularly in regard to the Manichees [note 136: *De moribus* 2,41.43.57; *Confessiones* 3,18]. Fig is also used in the context of the good and evil trees [p. 42–44 in the same article] when Christ asked if men gathered grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles (Matt 7:16; Luke 6:44 [note 137: *De sermone domini in monte* 2,78; *Speculum* 25; 27; *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 5,21; *Sermo* 46,22; 74,4; 137,13; *In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus* 3,8]). Various allusions concern the barren fig tree of Matt 21:19–20 and Mark 11:12–14.20–21 [note 138: *De consensu euangelistarum* 2,130–132; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 31,2,9; 138,18; *Sermo* 89,1–5; 110,1]. The fact that Adam and Eve covered their private parts with fig leaves after sinning (Gen 3:7) receives attention on numerous occasions [note 139: *De consensu euangelistarum* 2,130–131; *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1,7; 2,17.52; *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum* 1,31; *Contra Iulianum* 2,16–17; 4,58–59; 5,5.25; *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,20–22; *Epistula* 243,10; *Sermo* 69,4; 122,1; *Sermo Morin* 13,1]. From this, Augustine sees the fig tree as symbolizing fallen humanity [note 140: *Sermo* 110,1; 122,1; *Sermo Morin* 13,1]. The significance that Augustine imputes to the fig leaves of Gen 3:7 provides a particular interpretation of Christ's supernatural seeing of Nathanael beneath the fig tree (John 1:45–50). Accordingly, Augustine interprets Nathanael's condition as representing humanity under the sentence of concupiscence resulting from the theft of the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:6) [note 141: *Quaestiones euangeliorum* 1,39; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 2,19; 31,9; 32,2; 44,20; *Sermo* 69,4; 90,5; 174,4]. In addition, the episode of Nathanael beneath the fig tree seems to have been the source of inspiration for the obtrusive detail of the fig tree in the conversion scene of *Confessiones* 8,28 [note 142: Vinzenz Buchheit, “Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu Conf. VIII),” *VigChr* 22 (1968): 257–271; Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1968), 139].” (Leo C. Ferrari, “The Tree in the Works of saint Augustine,” *Augustiniana* 38 [1988]: [37–53] 50–51). For the link between the tree of figs and sin (via Gen), and for Augustine's use of the fig tree of Luke 13:6 as reference to all of humanity, see also: Pontet, *L'exégèse* (see note 1), 153 (note 9), 175 (note 86), 561 (note 23).

13 Augustine, *Sermo* 122,1 (PL 38:681).

14 For the opposition Christ's sinlessness and humanity's sinfulness in Augustine's *sermones*, see: Anthony Dupont, “Augustine's Recourse to 1 Jn 1,8 Revisited: The Polemical Roots of an Anti-Pelagian Stronghold,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 46 (2011): 71–90.

ascending from heaven, with the story of Jacob's ladder. As mentioned above, from then on, Jacob's story will replace the Nathanael narrative and will be dominating the sermon until the penultimate paragraph 5, where it culminates in quoting Jesus' verdict about Nathanael: "An Israelite in whom there is no guile."

The Jacob argument is built carefully. The first step, in § 2, is that Augustine tells the story of Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28:11–18) until he mentions the stone that Jacob erects after his dream at Bethel. The stone, Augustine suggests, has to be read as Christ, linking Genesis with Ps 117:22, a link which is well known from the synoptics. Thus, the oil that Jacob poured out on the stone is a sign of Jacob's faith in Christ.¹⁵ Augustine repeats this theme at the end of paragraph 5, just before he returns to Nathanael in the final paragraph of the sermon. This is evidence of how carefully crafted Augustine's line of reasoning actually is. Jacob is put into the sermon to prefigure as a model for the hearer of the sermon, more in fact than Nathanael. Rather than proposing Nathanael, a believer striving for and even having reached moral perfection, as an example, Augustine uses the reference to the story of Jacob to replace Nathanael in fact by Jacob, and we will see that through this, more steps can be taken to push the hearers of the sermon in the right anti-Pelagian direction. In this same paragraph, Augustine touches on Christology again by emphasising the humiliation of God in the incarnation:

*Ipse est lapis, de quo ipse dixit: Quicumque offenderit in lapidem illum, conquassabitur; super quem uero uenerit lapis ille, conteret eum. Offenditur in iacentem: ueniet autem super eum, cum uenerit de alto iudicare uiuos et mortuos.*¹⁶

In order to construe Jacob as the model for the believing hearer, Augustine now takes a new step by linking up the Jacob of Bethel with the Jacob of Pniel, the latter is the Jacob struggling with the angel of the Lord.¹⁷ This step plays a double role. On the one hand, the touching of Jacob's heap at the end of the Pniel story is used by Augustine to emphasise that Jacob is not yet perfect in this life. On the other hand, the change of names from Jacob to Israel that occurs in the Pniel

¹⁵ For the link between *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,23 and *Sermo* 122,2 in Augustine's explanation of the stone on which Jacob rested his head, and for other (homiletic) examples, see: Marie-François Berrouard, ed., *Augustinus: Homélie sur l'Évangile de Saint Jean I-XVI* (Bibliothèque Augustinienne, Œuvres de Saint Augustin 71; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969), 458–459 (note 5).

¹⁶ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,2 (PL 38:681). For references to the rejected stone that becomes the corner stone in Augustine's preaching, see: Pontet, *L'exégèse* (see note 1), 258 (note 4), 161 (note 38).

¹⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,2: the battle of Jacob prefigures the paradox of Christ's crucifixion, see: Gaetano Lettieri, *L'altro Agostino: Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina Christiana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2001), 294 (note 188).

story is used by Augustine to reintroduce the problem that was the original intention of the sermon: how to explain the meaning of John 1:47 in such a way as to avoid a Pelagian statement.

Augustine opens § 3 with a sentence that seems innocent at first sight, but upon closer examination, turns out to be a programmatic claim that captures the point of the sermon as a whole: *Nostis qui in schola Christi eruditi estis, Iacob ipsum esse et Israel*.¹⁸ It seems like a statement of fact, but in fact, the whole point of the sermon is already made long before its full force can be understood by the audience: Nathanael, the Israelite in whom there is no guile, is, as long as he is in this life, still both (earthly) Jacob and Israel, and not yet purely (heavenly) Israel. Augustine touches upon the meaning of the name Jacob, translating it as *supplantator*, one who trips up another's heels, a supplanter.¹⁹ Thus, Augustine construes a link between Nathanael as a sinner sitting under the fig tree, and Jacob as the supplanter, counterposing these two to Nathanael and Jacob as Israel, but then as morally perfect and only in the afterlife, because only in the afterlife, they will be able to see God and remain alive.

In the same § 3, Augustine discusses the Pniel story: Jacob wrestles with “a man.” Here, the theme of the humiliation of God in Christ returns. The angel loses the fight, although he is much more powerful than Jacob:

*Quando uictor a uicto benedicebatur, Christus figurabatur. Angelus ergo ille, qui intellegitur Dominus Iesus, ait ad Iacob: iam non uocaberis Iacob, sed erit nomen tuum Israel; quod interpretatur: Videns Deum. Deinde tetigit neruum femoris eius, id est latitudinem Iacob femoris, et aruit ei; et factus est claudus Iacob.*²⁰

We see various factors at work in this paragraph, and all are heavily laden with meaning and symbolic significance. The reading key of this passage, which comes at the end, is a preparation for the next step in § 4. Jacob is blessed, that is, born again, brought to Christ, but *claudus*.²¹ This points to the fact that he cannot be proud of his being in Christ. He is not yet perfect. This links up with what Christ

¹⁸ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,3 (PL 38:681). The Church is the school with Christ as the one Teacher, from whom Augustine is together with his flock a fellow disciple. See: Wilhelm Geerlings, *Christus exemplum: Studien zur Christologie und Christusverkündigung Augustins* (Tübinger Theologische Studien 13; Mainz: Gruenewald, 1978), 190 (note 18).

¹⁹ This is a play of words in Latin: *supplantator* contains *planta*, meaning foot. Jacob held the foot of Esau when they were born.

²⁰ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,3 (PL 38:682).

²¹ “Le Patriarche Jacob, blessé par l’ange dans le combat nocturne, représente par sa claudication la part de son peuple demeurée juive.” (Pontet, *L’exégèse* [see note 1], 380 [note 269]).

does. Christ saves him through his humiliating act. Jacob wrestles with Christ and even wins, but it is a victory in disguise. It is the victory of pride that is utterly mistaken, and that is why Christ causes Jacob to become lame, and why the blessing is so undeserved. If indeed the implicit opponents of Augustine are the Pelagians, we see that his problem with them, be they Manicheans, Platonists, Donatists, or Pelagians, is that they open up the possibility for pride, for a proud appropriation of divine grace by human merits.

But then, in § 4, Augustine makes a move that seems peculiar again at first sight, and he himself admits it, which makes it suspect: *Verum ex hac occasione non est praetereundum, quod potest fortasse sua sponte uestrum aliquem commouere.*²² The rest of the paragraph is devoted to the argument that all name changes in the Bible are definitive, notably the changes of Abram to Abraham, and of Saul to Paul; the older name is no longer used once the change has occurred. Now, Augustine is insistent to note that there is one exception: the case of Jacob and Israel. Israel, Augustine has already said in § 3, means: “the one who sees God.”²³ Augustine scholars know to what text this notion of seeing God is always linked: Matt 5:8: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” This is Augustine’s key point that he indeed makes in § 4: *Nomen autem Israel ad alterum saeculum pertinet, ubi uidebimus Deum. Populus ergo Dei, populus Christianus, in hoc tempore et Iacob est et Israel; Iacob in re, Israel in spe.*²⁴

Thus, we observe, the name change and the specific character of it enables Augustine to see Nathanael as both sinner (Jacob) and one who sees God (Israel, the “Israelite in whom there is no guile”), the first *in re*, the other still only *in spe*. Basically, the point has already been made, but the problematic phrase concerning Nathanael is not even yet mentioned. The argument comes full circle in § 5. Indeed, Augustine says, making recourse to all of his favourite Scriptural material, then, in the fullness of time, when all Israel will be saved (Rom 11) we will see God face to face (*facie ad faciem*). *Modo uidemus per speculum in aenigmate et ex parte.*²⁵ Then, Augustine says, there will be no Jacob anymore, but only Israel: *Et iam non erit Iacob, sed solus erit Israel; tunc eum in persona huius sancti Nathanael uidebit Dominus, et dicet: Ecce uere Israelita, in quo dolus non est.*²⁶

²² Augustine, *Sermo* 122,4 (PL 38:682).

²³ For the link between *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,22 and *Sermo* 122,4 in Augustine’s explanation of the name “Israel,” and for other (homiletic) examples, see: Berrouard, *Homélie*s (see note 15), 456–457 (note 2).

²⁴ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,4 (PL 38:683).

²⁵ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,5 (PL 38:683).

²⁶ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,5 (PL 38:683). Marie-François Berrouard (“Saint Augustin et le ministère de la prédication: Le thème des anges qui montent et qui descendent,” *Recherches Augustiniennes*

2.2 The Christian collective: Anti-Donatist traces?

So far, it seemed as if Augustine's argument in *Sermo* 122 has to be applied to the life of the individual Christian. Nathanael is an individual Christian of whom it needs to be claimed that he cannot be without guile within this earthly life. However, through the whole of the sermon runs another line of argument that is specifically addressing the parallel question of the moral perfection of earthly existence, but then on the collective level of the Church.

The statement in § 5 that “all of Israel will believe at the end of this age” is read by Maurice Pontet as a statement that Israel, the Jewish people, will convert to Christianity.²⁷ This is probably an unfounded reading of Augustine's sermon. The statement actually indicates traces of Augustine's anti-Donatist ecclesiology and *totus Christus* thinking in this sermon. Concisely put: “all Israel” does not refer to the Jewish people in § 5, but to the heavenly Church. In § 3, Jacob represents Israel, and Augustine observes that Jacob represents the Jewish people in a twofold manner. The “blessed Jacob” (the blessing after the fight with the angel) denotes the segment of the Jewish people that followed Jesus (during his earthly life) and the apostles: the “Jewish Christians.” The “lame Jacob” (thigh-paralysis by combat with the angel) represents the Jews who today are Jew, thus the segment of the Jewish people that did not recognize Christ, and their descendants. In § 4, Augustine points out that Abraham, after his name change, is only mentioned as Abraham, while Jacob after his name change is called both Jacob and Israel. At this moment there is a significant shift in Augustine's reasoning: the distinction Jacob/Israel does not refer here to the two sorts of Jewish people, but to the distinction of the earthly/heavenly Church. Jacob refers to the earthly Church, here on earth, factual and contemporary. Israel indicates the Church of heaven in the afterlife, which is our hope now and where *uisio Dei* will be our part. This new reading of the distinction Jacob/Israel is underlined by the preacher when he complements that the Church is similar to Jacob the younger brother/the supplanter with respect to the Jews—the Jews who were blind for Christ. The one who

2 [1962]: 447–495) studies Augustine's allegorical exegesis of Christ's promise to Nathanael in John 1:51 in: *Sermo* 89,5; *Sermo* 122,5–6; *Sermo* 123,3–4 (both 396/397 according to Berrouard); *Sermo* 265B (= *Bibliotheca Casinensis* 2,76,3); *Contra Faustum Manicheum* 12,26; *Annotationes in Iob* 39,27–30; *De catechizandis rudibus* 10,15; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 30; *Enarratio* 2; *Sermo* 1,2; 44,20; 103; *Sermo* 1,16 and *Sermo* 3,7; 117,21; 119,2; *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 57 (for *Sermo* 122 cf. notes 19, 20, 23, 24, 129, 130, 131, 128; for *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,23 cf. notes 7, 17, 24, 26, 28, 29, 99, 104, 119, 135).

²⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,5: *veniet finis saeculi et credet totus Israel*. For the reading that Israel will convert at the end of times in *Sermo* 122,5 see: Pontet, *L'exégèse* (see note 1), 383 (note 288).

came later (Jacob—the Church) replaced the first born (Esau—the non-Christian Jews). When Augustine now in § 5 speaks of “all Israel,” he is preaching on the heavenly Church (and not the Jewish people, as Maurice Pontet wrongly argued). This becomes even clearer in light of the fact that Augustine indicates in § 5 that sinners will not be present there, that they will go to the place they deserve. This is in line with Augustine’s ecclesiology: the earthly Church contains both sinners and saints in a *corpus mixtum*, and in the heavenly Church, there are only saints (who logically all believe in a proper manner). The distinction earthly Church/Church of heaven is at the heart of Augustine’s anti-Donatist ecclesiology, rejecting the Donatist elitist and reductionist image of the Church. This distinction he developed later more extensively in his two-cities doctrine in *De ciuitate Dei* and the statement that here on earth—even in the earthly Church—nobody can be without sin in his anti-Pelagian polemics.

In addition to the above collectivity analysis it should also be noted that the sermon is imbued with a totality idea. Augustine says at the beginning of the sermon, in § 1, that what Christ says to Nathanael applies to all of mankind. More specifically, he means that all humans are sinful. This corresponds to Augustine’s thinking about the negative solidarity of mankind: all of mankind shares in the sin of Adam. Augustine refers implicitly to this (anti-Pelagian) issue in *Sermo* 122 in his account of the episode of the fig leaves as a cover for the shame caused by Adam’s fall. The positive solidarity—the salvation of all mankind in Christ—is also present in this sermon, especially at the end of the sermon (perhaps as a form of rhetorical *inclusio*), in § 6.²⁸ Augustine’s thinking about the *totus Christus* is clearly present there, notably when he quotes Acts 9:6 in § 6. In reading Acts 9:6, Augustine emphasises that Christ does not say to Saul “why are you persecuting my followers,” but “why are you persecuting me.” This identification of Christ with all Christians is a *topos* in Augustine’s conception of the Total Christ: head (Christ) and members (Christians, the Church) together form one total Christ. This totality idea can also explain Augustine’s previous emphasis on “all Israel” in § 5.

28 Augustine, *Sermo* 122,6 (PL 38:683): Christ in heaven and Christ on earth constitute the one Christ, see: Aimé Becker, *De l’instinct du bonheur à l’extase de la beatitude: Théologie et pédagogie du bonheur dans la prédication de saint Augustin* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1967), 206 (note 102); Christ’s identification with his members (*totus Christus*), argued by Augustine via Christ’s call to Saul in Acts 9:6, see: Paola Vismara Chiappa, *Il tema della povertà nelle predicazione di sant’ Agostino* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1975), 193 (note 38).

3 A comparison with *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7*

Sermo 122 is all the more interesting because we have such excellent material at hand for a comparison, particularly Augustine's *Tractatus 7* on the Gospel of John.²⁹ When the date of *Sermo 122* is still unclear, we know with much more certainty that *Tractatus 7* was preached around 406/407.³⁰ The early sermons on the gospel of John are full of traces of the Donatist controversy. Almost every tractate touches on it, and so does *Tractatus 7*.³¹

Tractatus 7 deals with the Nathanael story extensively at the end, from § 15 onwards. There are all sorts of interesting points of comparison between *Sermo 122* and *Tractatus 7*. We will make an attempt at discussing the most important aspects in view of a question that arises almost naturally from our reading of *Sermo*

²⁹ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7* (CChr.SL 36, 67–81 Radbodus; PL 38:1437–1450). For the link between *Sermo 122* and *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7* regarding Natanael under the fig tree (compared with Augustine's conversion scene in the garden in Milan, and read as the [neo]platonic movements of descents and ascents), see: Andrew Mc Gowan, "Ecstasy and Charity: Augustine with Natanael under the Fig Tree," *Augustinian Studies* 27 (1996): 27–38.

³⁰ For the group of sermons *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 1–16*: 406/407, the latest 408, is the generally accepted date since Anne-Marie La Bonnardière and Marie-François Berrouard (cf. Allan Fitzgerald who refers to both scholars for his dating of *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 1–16*). Roger Gryson states "fin 406/mai 407." Specifically for *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7*, Pierre-Marie Hombert suggests: "24 mars 407." The dating of La Bonnardière and Berrouard (406/407) is recently also accepted by Hildegund Müller. José Anoz writes: "dom. 17 de febrero 407." Without giving arguments, Edmund Hill, introducing his translation of this sermon, indicates: "preached on Sunday, March 24, 407, the third Sunday of Lent." José Anoz, "Cronología de la producción agustiniana," *Augustinus* 47 (2002): (229–312) 262; Marie-François Berrouard, "La date des 'Tractatus I–LIV in Iohannis Euangelium' de saint Augustin," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971): 105–168; Edmund Hill, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st Century* 3,12: *Sermons: Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40* (with an introd. by Allan D. Fitzgerald, Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2009), (145–167) 145; Allan D. Fitzgerald, "Augustine's Works (Dates and Explanations)," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), (xliii–il) xlvi; Gryson, Fischer, Frede, *Répertoire général* (see note 9), 221; Hombert, *Gloria gratiae* (see note 4), 153 (note 464); Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, *Recherches de chronologie augustiniennes* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1965); Hildegund Müller, "Iohannis euangelium tractatus CXXIV," *Augustinus-Lexikon* 3,5/6 (Basel: Schwabe, 2008): (704–730) 705–708. For this overview of datings, see also: Fitzgerald, "Augustine's Works (Dates and Explanations)" (see above), xlvii.

³¹ Regarding polemical elements in *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus*, Hildegund Müller perceives anti-Donatist aspects in the first series of *tractatus* (1–19) and anti-Pelagian in the second (*Tractatus* 23–54); Müller, "Iohannis euangelium tractatus CXXIV" (see note 30), 720–721.

122 so far: whether it should be situated within the anti-Donatist controversy or rather in the anti-Pelagian controversy.

The key point of comparison appears immediately at the beginning of the discussion of the Nathanael story in *Tractatus* 7. Strikingly different from *Sermo* 122, *Tractatus* 7 opens immediately with the phrase of John that in *Sermo* 122 comes at the very end: *Ecce uere Israelita, in quo dolus non est*. And even more, it seems that Augustine introduces it with much joy and admiration for the man who received such a praiseworthy verdict from Jesus: *Magnum testimonium! Hoc nec Andreae dictum, nec Petro dictum, nec Philippo, quod dictum est de Nathanaele: Ecce uere Israelita, in quo dolus non est*.³²

Here, in *Tractatus* 7, Augustine does not suggest that Jesus' verdict was a problem. Indeed, Augustine accepts Jesus' verdict of Nathanael as someone without guile, but affirms that this verdict should not lead to pride.³³ This, Augustine argues in *Tractatus* 7,17, was the reason why Nathanael was not chosen as an apostle.³⁴ He was a learned man, and if he was chosen to become an apostle, he and others might have thought that he was chosen because of his wisdom.

The point about grace is made, and let us see a bit more extensively how, letting Augustine speak for himself:

Iam caetera de ipso uideamus: Ecce uere Israelita, in quo dolus non est. Quid est, in quo dolus non est? Forte non habebat peccatum? Forte non erat aeger? Forte illi medicus non erat necessarius? Absit. Nemo hic sic natus est, ut illo medico non egeret.³⁵

First of all, we can see that in this case, Augustine does not hide the question of grace or original sin at all. He discusses it immediately and openly, defending the same position as put forth in *Sermo* 122, namely: original sin applies to

³² Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,16 (76,14–17 R.).

³³ In *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,19 (77,1–78,37 R.), Augustine connects Matt 9:11 and Matt 9:12–13. The Pharisees advise Christ not to eat with sinners and tax collectors. Matt 9:12–13 represents Christ's response to the Pharisees, from the *medicus* to the *phrenetici*. According to Augustine, Christ says: "it is precisely because you declare yourselves *iusti* that you are sinners." The Pharisees consider themselves to be healthy and refuse the offer of medicine although they are in fact sick. Augustine finds an illustration of the same pride elsewhere in the gospels. The repentant sinner in Luke 7:39 realised that she was sick and thus sought healing from the *medicus*. Here, too, the Pharisees considered themselves healthy. Augustine concludes anew that it is this very Pharisaic pretence that makes their healing impossible. Anthony Dupont, *Gratia in Augustine's Sermones ad Populum during the Pelagian Controversy: Do Different Contexts Furnish Different Insights?* (Brill's Series in Church History 59; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

³⁴ See Berrouard, *Homélie* (see note 15), 889 (note 54): "Nathanaël est-il devenu l'un des Apôtres?"

³⁵ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,18 (77,1–5 R.).

everyone, so no one is without sin. A few sentences later, he explains how he interprets “without guile”:

*Si ergo dolus in isto non erat, sanabilem illum medicus iudicavit, non sanum. Aliud est enim sanus, aliud sanabilis, aliud insanabilis: qui aegrotat cum spe, sanabilis dicitur; qui aegrotat cum desperatione, insanabilis; qui autem iam sanus est, non eget medico. Medicus ergo qui venerat sanare, uidit istum sanabilem, quia dolus in illo non erat. Quomodo dolus in illo non erat? Si peccator est, fatetur se peccatorem. Si enim peccator est, et iustum se dicit; dolus est in ore ipsius. Ergo in Nathanaele confessionem peccati laudavit, non iudicavit non esse peccatorem.*³⁶

In *Tractatus* 7,20, “being with guile” is applied to the Pharisees who believed themselves to be righteous and needed no physician, as recorded in the synoptics. It is also linked up with the figure of Mary Magdalene who washed the feet of Jesus, confessing her sins and therefore, being like Nathanael, someone without guile. Unfortunately, Augustine does not link this theme with the polemics of that time explicitly. It is very tempting to link up the pride of the Pharisees with the alleged claim to sinlessness on the part of the Donatists, but it takes a moment before he touches on the Donatist controversy more explicitly in this tractate.

This happens when he explains the symbol of the fig tree. Here, he explicitly argues that the fig tree denotes sin, as he does elsewhere and also in *Sermo* 122. However, he does not apply this figure of sin as denoting the personal sin of Nathanael, like he does in *Sermo* 122, but he applies it somewhat inorganically to the fact that the Church, who was called from a life of sin and not sought for salvation out and of itself, still calls the Donatists to return to the Church:

*Ergo quaesiti sumus, ut inueniremur; inuenti loquimur. Non superbiamus, quia antequam inueniremur, perieramus, si non quaereremur. Non ergo nobis dicant quos amamus, et uolumus lucrari paci Ecclesiae catholicae: Quid nos uultis? Quid nos quaeritis, si peccatores sumus? Ideo uos quaerimus, ne pereatis: quaerimus, quia quaesiti sumus; inuenire uos uolumus, quia inuenti sumus.*³⁷

The same application of the Nathanael story to the Church can be found towards the end of the *tractatus*, where Augustine explains the phrase of the ascending and descending angels on the Son of Man. Similar to *Sermo* 122, Augustine connects it with the story of Jacob at Bethel, but in *Tractatus* 7,23 he applies it to the ministers of the Church, taking his example from the apostle Paul who was taken up into the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2–4) but made himself speak as if to babies (1 Cor 3:1–2) in order to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ.

³⁶ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,18 (77,18–28 R.).

³⁷ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,21 (79,29–35 R.).

By way of conclusion, what we can say is that the grace theme is not absent in *Tractatus 7*, but finds its place in the context of the collective position of the Church rather than the moral perfection of the individual believer. Much less than in the case of *Sermo 122*, *Tractatus 7* construes the fact that Nathanael is without guile as a problem. At first, it is confirmed that he was, and it is explained as his confession of his sinfulness later on. Themes like the question of whether Nathanael can be sinless in this life or the central role of the change of names in *Sermo 122* receive no attention at all.

If we can rightly say that *Tractatus 7* should be situated in the Donatist controversy and *Sermo 122* in the Pelagian controversy, we see an interesting link between the two controversies that remains a central aspect of Augustine's theology. Both the claim to moral perfection of the Donatist bishops and the claim to moral perfection by the so-called Pelagians reveal, according to Augustine, a certain possibility of pride, where one denies one's sinfulness and therefore trusts oneself rather than God's mercy in Jesus Christ, wrongly thinking that one can resist sin without additional divine help. This theme was there in the Donatist controversy, as *Tractatus 7* shows, but in a way which is still not in the forefront and not at the heart of the polemic, so that a text which seems to support the possibility of moral perfection needs to be explained properly, but does not need to be hidden. In the Pelagian controversy, we would like to suggest, the claim to moral perfection has become so disputable that a rhetorical smoke screen is required to hide it until it is explained in Augustinian terms to such a level that not even twenty-first century readers notice its Pelagian potential, as *Sermo 122* could testify to.

4 Other interpretations of Nathanael and the fig tree

In this section, we discuss a few other places where Augustine deals with Nathanael and the fig tree and which throw some additional light on the question of whether our reading of *Sermo 122* suggests a context for the sermon in the anti-Pelagian controversy.

Sermo 89 is remarkable in various ways. It is an early sermon.³⁸ The sermon deals with Matt 21:19–12, the story of the tree that bore no fruit and was condemned

³⁸ Adalbero Kunzelmann considers Augustine, *Sermo 89* (PL 38:539–553), to be delivered in 396, because it deals with the issue of grace without making an explicit link with the Pelagians.

by Jesus. Shortly before the end of the sermon, Augustine introduces the story of Nathanael, linking up the fig tree with sin and emphasising what was said of Nathanael, notably that he was an Israelite without sin. Interestingly, when explaining the meaning of the fig tree, Augustine succinctly says, already in 397/405:

*Et Dominus ad eum: Cum esses sub arbore fici, uidi te: tamquam diceret: Cum esses in umbra peccati; praedestinaui te. Et ille, quia meminerat se fuisse sub arbore fici, ubi Dominus non erat, agnuit in illo diuinitatem, et respondit: Tu es Filius Dei, tu es rex Israel.*³⁹

Here we see two elements that also occur in *Sermo 122*: the tree is associated with sin, and in such a way as to point to the individual sin of Nathanael, who, by acknowledging this and believing in Christ, is being saved. Moreover, already here, Augustine explicitly notes that Christ is without sin by pointing to the fact that Jesus was not under the tree. Most strikingly, however, is the fact that Augustine mentions something that he does not even do in *Sermo 122*: predestination. This makes all the more clear that chronology is no easy matter in Augustine. One would very easily be tempted to date this sermon within the Pelagian controversy, while most scholars place it in 397/405. 397, of course, is the year in which Augustine wrote his much debated *Ad Simplicianum*, in which he also deals extensively with predestination, grace, and free will.

Nevertheless, the fact that Augustine mentions sin and predestination does not mean that his interpretation of the Nathanael story is completely similar in *Sermones 89* and *122*. Quite to the contrary. Interestingly, in *Sermo 122*, Augustine

Éric Rebillard situates *Sermo 89* in Carthage during the lent of the year 397. Without giving any proof or explanation, Edmund Hill states: “This sermon was preached between 22 May and 24 June 397, during a council of African bishops held in Carthage, from May to August.” *Sermo 89* is part of Pierre-Marie Hombert’s project to analyse the traditional chronology of the sermons. He argues the date of 405 for *Sermo 89* because Augustine’s exegesis of Matt 21:19–20 (the barren fig tree), Luke 24:28 (*Ipse autem finxit se longius ire*—Christ feigning that he wanted to continue his journey) and Isa 5:6c (*mandabo nubibus meis ne pluant super eam imbrem*—as indicating that Israel lost its covenant, which is now offered to the pagans) best fits in this chronological framework (in between *Quaestiones Euangeliorum* [403] and *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus/In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus* [406–407]). The chronologies of Roger Gryson and José Anoz follow Hombert: Carthage, 405; cf. Anoz “*Cronologíā*” (see note 30), 273; Gryson, Fischer, Frede, *Répertoire général* (see note 9), 236; Pierre-Marie Hombert, *Nouvelles recherches de chronologie augustiniennne* (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 163; Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 2000), 355–358, 640; Kunzelmann, *Die Chronologie* (see note 9), 453, 512; Rebillard, “*Sermones*” (see note 1), 777; Edmund Hill, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st Century* 3,3: *Sermons: On the New Testament 51–94* (ed. John E. Rotelle; Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1991), (439–446) 445.

³⁹ Augustine, *Sermo 89,5* (PL 38:557).

puts all emphasis on Jacob as a sinner, deriving that meaning from the touching of Jacob's thigh, but in other material, notably *Enarratio in psalmum* 44 (cf. *infra*) and *Sermo* 89, he actually refers to Gen 25 where it is said that Jacob was without guile. For example, in *Sermo* 89, Augustine says:

Quae sunt ista maiora? Amen dico uobis. Quia Israelita ille, in quo dolus non est; respice ad Iacob in quo dolus non est; et recale, unde loquitur, lapidem ad caput, uisionem in somno, scalas a terra in coelum, descendentes et ascendentes; et uide quid Dominus dicat Israelitae sine dolo: uidebitis coelum apertum: Audi, Nathanael sine dolo, quid uidit Iacob sine dolo: uidebitis coelum apertum, et Angelos ascendentes et descendentes; ad quem? ad Filium hominis.⁴⁰

Here, in spite of the fact that Augustine does put Nathanael in a sinful condition a few sentences earlier, as we have seen above, he still portrays both Nathanael and Jacob as being without guile, something he does not do in *Sermo* 122. This suggests that Augustine links up Nathanael and Jacob as both without guile in certain parts of his work and as sinful in other works. It would of course be tempting to suggest that he implies that they can be sinless in his earlier work and emphasises their sinfulness in his later works. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, Augustine precludes this temptation, because in *Sermo* 89, we find both approaches, and the same is true of *Tractatus* 7 discussed above.

In *Enarratio in psalmum* 44, Augustine also discusses the Nathanael story. This Psalm-focused sermon is dated before the outbreak of the Pelagian controversy, most probably around 403.⁴¹ In the said *enarratio*, the narrative of Jacob anointing

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Sermo* 89,5 (PL 38:557).

⁴¹ Seraphin M. Zarb, Anne-Marie La Bonnardière and Otto Perler situate *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 44 (CChr.SL 38, 493–517 Dekkers/Fraipont) in the Carthaginian *Basilica Restituta* on Wednesday, September 2, 403. Maria Boulding and José Anoz follow this: in the *Restored Basilica*, on Wednesday, 2 September, possibly in C.E. 403. Henri Rondet prefers the years 407–408 (“se situerait bien dans un concile carthaginois, soit en juin 407, soit en juin 408”), because the content of the *Enarratio* comes close to *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 1–16 preached by Augustine in that period (in Hippo). Pierre-Marie Hombert initially dated this *Enarratio* as September 404, but later he opted for September 2, 403 (referring to a similar exegesis of Deut 25:5–6 in *Contra Faustum* 32,10 and *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 44,23—the only two places in Augustine's oeuvre where this Bible text is explained). Hildegund Müller indicates Carthage, Wednesday, September 2, and refers further to the said Zarb, Rondet and the second chronology of Hombert (403). Anoz, *Cronologíá* (see note 30), 256; Fitzgerald, “Augustine's Works (Dates and Explanations)” (see note 30), xlv; Gryson, Fischer, Frede, *Répertoire général* (see note 9), 227–228; Hombert, *Augustin, prédicateur* (see note 3), 236; Hombert, *Nouvelles recherches* (see note 38), 28; Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, “Les ‘Enarrationes in Psalmos’ prêchées par saint Augustin à l'occasion de fêtes de martyrs,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971): 73–103; Hildegund Müller, “Enarrationes in Psalmos, A. Philologische Aspekte,” *Augustinus-Lexikon* 2,5/6 (Basel: Schwabe, 2001): (804–838)

the stone (Gen 28) has the primary function. The fig tree is mentioned, but it is not put into the context of sin, nor is the question of the sinfulness of Nathanael or Jacob an issue in this sermon.

Finally, in *De ciuitate Dei* 16,38—situated in 419–420⁴²—, the Nathanael story is again discussed in the context of the Jacob story. *De ciuitate Dei* is all the more significant, because of this work we are fully sure that it has been written during the Pelagian controversy. Here, Augustine discusses Jacob's dream at Bethel and the anointment of the stone and moves immediately to the name of Christ which means anointment. In this context, Augustine suddenly introduces the Nathanael story:

*Scalam uero istam intellegitur ipse Saluator nobis in memoriam reuocare in Euangelio, ubi, cum dixisset de Nathanael: Ecce uere Israelita, in quo dolus non est, quia Israel uiderat istam uisionem (ipse est enim Iacob), eodem loco ait: Amen, amen, dico uobis, uidebitis caelum apertum et angelos Dei ascendentes et descendentes super filium hominis.*⁴³

As to this introduction of the Nathanael story, it is remarkable that Augustine leaps from the stone at Bethel to Christ in the Nathanael story without mentioning Ps 117 (118), a reference that is common in various of Augustine's discussions of Jacob and Nathanael.

Significantly for this later text on Jacob and Nathanael is that Augustine does not touch on the problem of sin in *De ciuitate Dei* 16,38–39, neither in his account of Bethel nor in his account of Pniel, although he is keen to note in passing that the meaning of Israel as “seeing God” will be the reward of all the saints, but “in the end.”⁴⁴ The discussion of Pniel does *not* include the suggestion that the touching of the thigh of Jacob denotes his enduring sinfulness. There are two

813; Othmar Perler, *Les voyages de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1996), 247–248, 448–449; Henri Rondet, “Essais sur la chronologie des ‘Enarrationes in Psalmos,’” *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 61 (1960): (117–217) 117–127, 185–187; Maria Boulding, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st Century* 3,16: *Sermons: Exposition of the Psalms 33–50* (ed. John E. Rotelle; Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 2000), (280–309) 280; Sépharim M. Zarb, *Chronologia Enarrationum S. Augustini in Psalmos* (Valetta: St. Dominic's Priory, 1948), 89–92.

42 There is a general consensus in the Augustine research to date books 15 and 16 of *De ciuitate Dei* in the period of 419–420, shortly after he wrote *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* and *Locutiones in Heptateuchum*, writings he did not initiate before 419. Anoz, “*Cronologiá*” (see note 30), 237; Fitzgerald, “Augustine's Works (Dates and Explanations)” (see note 30), xliii; Gryson, Fischer, Frede, *Répertoire général* (see note 9), 203; Gerard O'Daly, “*Ciuitate dei (De-)*,” *Augustinus-Lexikon* 1,7/8 (Basel: Schwabe, 1994): (969–1010), 974.

43 Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 16,38 (CChr.SL 48, 544 Dombart/Kalb).

44 *Quod erit in fine praemium sanctorum omnium.* (Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 16,39 [545 D./K.]).

passages in *De ciuitate Dei* 16,38 that bear a remarkable similarity to *Sermo* 122. The first is in the discussion of the Bethel story. When Augustine mentions that Jacob erects a stone and anoints it with oil, Augustine explicitly notes that this was not an act of idolatry. *Sermo* 122,2 says it like this: *Ergo unxit lapidem Iacob. Numquid idolum fecit? Significauit, non adorauit.*⁴⁵ In *De ciuitate Dei* 16,38, we find almost the same expression: *Hoc ad prophetiam pertinet; nec more idololatriae lapidem perfudit oleo Iacob, uelut faciens illum Deum; neque enim adorauit eumdem lapidem uel ei sacrificauit.*⁴⁶ Still, in *Tractatus* 7, we find the same so that it gives us no clue as to determine whether *Sermo* 122 is early or late:

*Non enim sic posuit lapidem unctum, ut ueniret et adoraret: alioquin idololatria esset, non significatio Christi. Facta est ergo significatio, quo usque oportuit fieri significationem, et significatus est Christus. Lapis unctus, sed non in idolum. Lapis unctus: lapis quare? Ecce pono in Sion lapidem electum, pretiosum, et qui crediderit in illum, non confundetur.*⁴⁷

The second passage is in the discussion of the Pniel story. In *Sermo* 122, we find the following expression: *Populus ergo Dei, populus Christianus, in hoc tempore et Iacob est et Israel; Iacob in re, Israel in spe.*⁴⁸ In *De ciuitate Dei* 16,39 we find this phrase: *Erat itaque unus atque idem Iacob et benedictus et claudus; benedictus in eis, qui in Christum ex eodem populo crediderunt, atque in infidelibus claudus.*⁴⁹

The difference between *Sermo* 122 and *De ciuitate Dei* 16,39 is that the argument in *Sermo* 122 seems to centre around the fact that the blessing and lameness are a single entity, be it either the single believer or the collective Church as the body of Christ, whereas in the interpretation in *De ciuitate Dei*, the blessing is explicitly applied to believers, and the lameness is applied to unbelievers.

5 Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to unravel the content but also the rhetorical force of Augustine's *Sermo* 122. At first, this sermon seemed full of strange allegorical interpretations which render it difficult to make sense of at first sight. Still, the naive presupposition of a reader who is new to patristic exegesis actually turned out to make sense: our analysis of the sermon showed that all steps in the sermon,

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,2 (PL 38:681).

⁴⁶ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 16,38 (544 D./K.).

⁴⁷ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7,23 (80,7–13 R.).

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Sermo* 122,4 (PL 38:683).

⁴⁹ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 16,39 (545 D./K.).

even the most speculative allegorical ones, could be made sense of in terms of an overall argument, namely an argument to initially hide and eventually reinterpret Jesus' claim about Nathanael as someone without guile. Of course, this does not mean that the scholar's verdict about strange allegories is false in general. The fact that we are able to make argumentative sense of one allegorical sermon does not mean that there is a distinct theological motive for every allegorical move in patristic exegesis.

Our analysis of *Sermo* 122 suggests, confirmed by the comparison with other references to the Nathanael story, that in *Sermo* 122, Augustine's interpretation of Jesus' claim was under strong rhetorical pressure. Whereas the earlier Augustine held on to the same basic conviction, namely that Jesus' claim did not amount to the idea that Nathanael is sinless, Augustine is very open about this in his earlier work, he is very concerned about sharing this conviction with his audience in *Sermo* 122. This suggests, but probably no more than that, that the debate concerning whether or not a human being can be sinless in this life, has become a lot more controversial during the time when *Sermo* 122 was preached than it was during the time when, for example, *Sermo* 89 or *Tractatus* 7 were originally preached or revised. This suggests a later date for *Sermo* 122, not so much in terms of what is actually being claimed, because Augustine held these views since at least 405 or even 397, but in terms of the way in which the claim is being made, namely in terms of the intellectual and rhetorical smoke screen that Augustine creates in order to properly prepare his audience for appreciating his reading of the Nathanael story, and putting an (anti-Pelagian) individual reading next to an (anti-Donatist) collective reading.

This leads us to our final conclusion: the question of continuity. If the above is plausible, namely that *Sermo* 122 originates in the later stages of Augustine's life, specifically in his anti-Pelagian endeavours, then our analysis of *Sermo* 122 and the comparison with *Tractatus* 7 and *Sermo* 89 in particular, provide an excellent example of how Augustine's view of grace remains continuous throughout not only the Pelagian but also the Donatist controversy. The basic conviction behind his anti-Donatist and anti-Pelagian position remains the same: both the Donatist collective view of the Church and its bishops and the Pelagian view of the capabilities of the individual believer open up a possibility of pride: human beings may take a position before God in which they become sinless and feel no longer dependent on God's grace. This, according to Augustine, is an utmost dangerous position, because it is actually a position in which one uses one's salvific state in order to commit the sin of hubris and independence from God. The idea that we as human beings are independent from God is, according to Augustine, the root of all sin and should therefore always be rejected, whatever form it takes and in whatever theological debate it is discussed.