

# ST. AUGUSTINE'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE FALL OF ANCIENT CITY OF ROME

Charles C. Nweke\*

## **Abstract**

This paper highlights the import of hermeneutics in philosophy. As the art of interpretation, hermeneutics in philosophy can either be viewed as an area or a method. As an area of philosophy, hermeneutics is studied independently as a specialty. As a method of philosophy, hermeneutics aid philosophical researches in interpretation of texts, concepts, existential situations, being and indeed reality. St. Augustine's interpretation of the fall of the ancient city of Rome is a ready instance of a viable hermeneutic engagement in philosophy. A philosophic account of that unique exercise is the objective of this paper with a view to promote Augustine as a prime figure not only in biblical but general hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics, Interpretation, Text, Existential Situation, City, Rome.

## **Introduction**

St. Augustine is reckoned an important precursor of modern hermeneutics for his role in the organic evolution of the term. The historical account of the formal development of hermeneutics expresses its initiation as informed by the need to clear biblical texts of obscurities. That project was popularized by St. Augustine whose hermeneutic endeavor was not limited to biblical texts but silently extends to existential realities. Ever before the ontological turn of hermeneutics in Heidegger, which extended the business of interpretation to existential situations, the preceding romantic period of hermeneutics in its Schleimacker and Dilthey models were concentrated on texts. Hence, Augustine forecasted the elasticity of hermeneutic business with the interpretation of the fall of the ancient city of Rome in his popular work, *City of God*.

## **Appropriate Hermeneutics**

Given the divergences of approach to the application of hermeneutics, the question arises as to the kind of hermeneutic that best attends to

Augustine's project of interpretation of the fall of the Ancient city of Rome. The reason for determining the appropriate hermeneutics is that although the subject of hermeneutics could be centralized as the theory or art of interpretation and understanding, its application varies contextually. Hence, hermeneutics could be the interpretation of biblical texts, texts in general, languages, historical events and so on.

### **Heidegger's Ontological Turn**

With Heidegger, the ontological turn of hermeneutics involves the interpretation of being (*Dasein*) in its existential reality. It is a kind of hermeneutic phenomenology, a method which Heidegger employed for the analysis of *Dasein*. Phenomenology is here designated as a means of disclosing being as it is in all its facticity and historicity. Heidegger maintained as Palmer puts it that, "The combination of *phainestha* and *logos*, then, as phenomenology means letting things become manifest as they are, without forcing our categories on them." (Palmer 1969:128)

But how does Heidegger relate phenomenology to hermeneutics? He holds that interpretation, rather than being grounded in human consciousness and categories, rests on the manifestness of the thing encountered. With this notion, Heidegger gave hermeneutics a different meaning. Palmer captured it thus:

This kind of hermeneutics is certainly not old-fashioned philological methodology, or even the general methodology of the *Geistwissenschaften* envisioned by Dilthey. It lays open what was hidden; it constitutes not an interpretation of an interpretation (which textual explication is) but the primary act of interpretation which first brings a thing from concealment. (Palmer 1969:129)

With Heidegger, the hermeneutic function of interpretation negates the reality of presuppositions but hinges more on understanding. Understanding is the basis for all interpretations as something co-original with one's existing and present in every act of interpretation. It is the power to grasp one's own possibilities for being, within the context of the life-world in which one exists. For Heidegger, its

important characteristic is that it always operates within a set of already interpreted relationships, a relational whole. (Palmer 1969:131) Hence hermeneutics is but the ontology of understanding, not as understanding of understandings but a prime understanding of that which unconceals itself.

Heidegger's core concern for delving into hermeneutics is its usefulness in his analysis of *Dasein*. Hence according to Palmer, hermeneutics, with one step, has become interpretation of the being of *Dasein*. Philosophically:

It sets forth the basic structures of possibilities for *Dasein*; it is an analysis of the existentiality of *Existenz* that is, of the being's authentic possibilities for being. Hermeneutics, says Heidegger, is that fundamental announcing function through which *Dasein* makes known to himself the nature of being. (Palmer 1969:129-30)

The theory of being (ontology) must not be speculative or subjective. Rather, ontology must become phenomenologically hermeneutic, in the sense that it must turn to the process of understanding and interpretation through which things show themselves in order to open the mood of human existence, and thus render visible the invisible structure of being-in-the-world. The understanding of Heidegger's hermeneutics of *Dasein* is not a static or presuppositioned interpretation of being but a historically formed understanding. What it means is that the understanding of the fullness of being is achieved in its constant appearing accumulated in the very experience of encountering phenomena. Thus with Heidegger, hermeneutics was imbued with fresh understanding. It became a viable philosophical tool for interpreting not just texts but for understanding in its truest nature, existence including situation found therein.

### **Gadamer's Hermeneutics**

The inclusion of the world of experience in the spectrum of hermeneutics was further developed by Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutics was founded on

Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics. For him, methodical contemplation is opposite to experience and reflection. Hermeneutics is a search for truth which is reachable only by understanding or even mastering our experiences. (Wikipedia) Experience for him is not fixed but rather changing and indicating new perspectives. The project of *Truth and Method* was aimed at the exploration of the consequences of Heideggerian hermeneutics for the understanding of human science. Thus with Gadamer, hermeneutic humanism ensued with the advocacy of leaving behind the framework of romantic hermeneutics, both in its Diltheyan and Schleiermacherian versions. Hence, "Going back to Vico and the neo-Aristotelian strands of early modern humanism, Gadamer wants to combine the Heideggerian notion of the world-disclosive synthesis of understanding with the idea of *building*, of education in culture." (Wikipedia)

To understand an existential situation, Gadamer holds, would also involve historical works on the situation in question. Hence, a hermeneutic understanding of such historical text will be necessary. To do so would require the interpreter's existential involvement in the tradition of the historical work. The essence is to avoid the problem of objective reconstruction since historical works present themselves to us, not as neutral and value-free objects of scientific investigation, but as part of the horizon in which we live and through which our world view gets shaped.

In interpreting a historical work, Gadamer claims that we have no access to its original context of production or to the intention of its author. But since tradition is always alive, productive and in constant development then "the past is handed over to us through the complex and ever-changing fabric of interpretations, which gets richer and more complex as decades and centuries pass." (Wikipedia) In the encounter with the past, the authority of the historical text which precedes our own is kept alive and recognized in the present. Hence by entering into a dialogical relationship with the past, and by engaging with it in textual explication and interpretation, the authority of a text is recognized. Thus Gadamer stresses that:

As we come through the work of interpretation, to understand what at first appears alien, we participate in the production of a richer, more encompassing

context of meaning - we gain a better and more profound understanding not only of the text but also of ourselves. (Wikipedia)

### **Hermeneutics of Culture**

With Heidegger's and Gadamer's hermeneutic revolution, scholars like Okere and Serequeberhan were able to embark on hermeneutic projects upon African culture and African existential situations respectively. In the introduction of his work, *Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*, Serequeberhan stated:

The axiomatic point of departure for this effort is the view, first articulated by Heidegger and further developed by Gadamer, that philosophy - as, strictly speaking, with all things human - is an inherently interpretative undertaking grounded in the mortal existentiality of human existence. (Serequeberhan 1994:2)

He (1994:2) stated further that, "The hermeneutics of African philosophy refers to the interpretative and reflexive (presuppositional) reflections grounded in and on the actuality of our post-colonial present."

Okere (1983, 2005) delved into what he referred to as the hermeneutics of culture. Writing on Okere's adoption of the hermeneutic method, Nwigwe noted that:

His (Okere's) application of hermeneutics in the study of African philosophy is not in the Diltheian sense, but in the Heideggerian/Gadamerian sense of interpretation as an ontological event. This sense of interpretation has one aim in view, namely, the production of objective knowledge of man which are not obtainable in empirical sciences. (Nwigwe 2005:10)

It is pertinent, at this juncture, to note that the crux of this project is to articulate St. Augustine's interpretation of the fall of the

Ancient City of Rome. Appropriating the Heideggerian hermeneutic for the project would entail that the ancient city would hugely involve existential situation with a viable historicity. Of course it does, for although the city was an existential commonwealth. For instance, the scientific breakthroughs which underpin the world's current appeal to secularism cannot be the objects of speculation. Rather, they are historical facts recorded in texts and other works of arts. That is the reason for the relevance of the hermeneutic of Gadamer in the present work. For the interpretation or understanding of the city necessarily involves the interpretation of historical accounts about its evolution and developments.

### **Augustine's Hermeneutics of the Ancient City of Rome**

Augustine has been acknowledged as a great precursor of modern hermeneutics. His hermeneutic prominence has been anchored in his unique biblical interpretations with little or no reference to existential situations. The *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* has it that:

With Augustine we encounter a thinker whose influence on modern hermeneutics has been profoundly acknowledged by Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. According to Gadamer, it is Augustine who first introduces the universality-claim of hermeneutics. This claim arises from the connection Augustine establishes between language and interpretation, but also from his claim that interpretation of Scripture involves a deeper, existential level of self-understanding. (Plato Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

The essence of the interpretation of the bible is to clear the obvious obscurity of some biblical passages in order to lay bare their real meanings. Such was Augustine's project which he commenced in the *De Genesi ad Literam* (The Literal Interpretation of Genesis) as he noted that:

In view of this and in keeping it in mind constantly while dealing with the book of Genesis, I have,

insofar as I was able, explained in detail and set forth for consideration the meanings of obscure passages, taking care not to affirm rashly some one meaning to the prejudice of another and perhaps better explanations. (Wikipedia)

Thus, for Augustine, interpretation is a synonym of explanation. His Hermeneutics could be termed the theory of explanation aimed primarily at adequate understanding of the meaning of obscure biblical passages. Interpretation as explanation is one of the three dimensions of meanings of hermeneutics. Palmer (1969:20) noted that: "Interpretation as explanation emphasizes the discursive aspect of understanding; it points to the explanation rather than the expressive direction of interpretation." Hence, central to Augustine's hermeneutic project is the clearing of obscurity by way of providing better explanations. Although Augustine employed methods like criticism, analysis and evaluation, hermeneutics (as explanatory method) ranked prominently as his philosophic method. Augustine's bid to explain or interpret is not limited to biblical texts. In fact, the writing of the *Civitate Dei* (City of God) was prompted by that knack to explain, for adequate understanding, the cause of the fall of Rome, which was erroneously blamed on the Christians and their God. That could be termed the beginning of Augustine's existential hermeneutics. The passage below is quite informative.

In a. d. 410, a pivotal moment in Western history, the Vandals, under the command of their king, Alaric, captured the city of Rome. Rome was known as the Eternal City because the Romans thought that it would literally never fall, and the year 410 shook this belief to its foundation and ultimately led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. The world itself seemed to have been destroyed, and everyone sought answers about what to do and what to believe in. Those who adhered to the waning pagan faith were quick to blame the Christians, claiming that the gods had abandoned Rome because many Romans had forsaken them and taken the new faith. These

Romans claimed that Christians were not patriotic enough because they asked people to serve God rather than the state, and they advocated forgiveness toward enemies. More important, they said the Christian God had failed to protect Rome, as he should have done, since Constantine had declared him to be the true God. The angry wrangling between the two communities prompted Augustine to begin writing *The City of God* in 413. (Wikipedia)

To achieve the intended hermeneutic project, Augustine employed the tools of exposition, demonstrations, and critical analysis as could be gleaned from the review of the first ten books of the city of God below:

The first ten books of *The City of God*, which make up the first part of the work, refute the pagans' charges that Christians brought about the fall of Rome. The first five books deal with the pagan belief that people must worship the old gods to achieve material advantages in this world, including the continuation of the Roman Empire and the supremacy of the city of Rome. In book I, Augustine attacks that pagans, who claimed that Rome fell because the Christian religion had weakened it, and he stresses that misfortune happens to everyone. In book II, he demonstrates that the fall of Rome is not a unique event in human history. The Romans suffered calamities before, even when the old gods were being actively worshipped, and those gods did nothing to prevent those calamities from happening. He suggests Romans became weak because of these gods, since they gave themselves up to moral and spiritual corruption. In book III, Augustine continues discussing catastrophes that occurred in pagan times to further prove that Christianity did not cause Rome to fall. To drive home this point, he asks again why the old gods did not defend Rome in the past. (Wikipedia)

The interpretation proper reads: "Rome endured for many centuries because it was the will of the true God, and its survival had nothing to do with pagan gods such as Jove, who behaves only in the lowest manner." (Wikipedia)

It is noteworthy that Augustine's interpretation of the fall of the Roman city was not done in a vacuum. Rather, the exercise involved his theocentric tendency, which he placed as a paradigm of interpretation. In other words he interpreted the situation in the light of his theocentric thought. Augustine's division of the universal human society into the earthly city and city of God is a clear instance of his hermeneutic ideal/tendencies. He saw no better ways to explain or interpret the bi-polar camps of human existence if not to project their understanding the way he did. Hence with Augustine, humanity bears a unique meaning that practically endures for all ages. O'neara (1985) considered the division as one of Augustine's interpretation of the bible in the context of philosophy because of the reference of his title to Ps 136:3.

Augustine's idea of the earthly city is simply borne out of his perception of the state especially the Roman State. For its polytheism and paganism, the city lacked true justice since true justice demands the worship of one true God. A state remains, for Augustine, indefinable exception in the context of true justice. Consequently, pagan Rome was not a state since it lacked true justice. Augustine's interpretation of the Roman city is that it is pagan for its lack of worship of the true God, the Christian God. For lacking justice it swells in immorality and so is to be identified with the earthly city.

## **Conclusion**

Beginning with the interpretation of the fall of the ancient Roman city, Augustine's hermeneutics extended beyond the textual. His included existential hermeneutics for he employed hermeneutics for the interpretation of existential situation. Thus, Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, which he employed in the analysis of Dasein, must have greatly been founded on Augustine's existential hermeneutics. That Dasein could only be understood in its historicity, as Heidegger posited, has been prefaced by Augustine. In Augustine's hermeneutics, a proper understanding of the fall of the

ancient city of Rome was possible within the city's historicity and facticity.

*\*Charles C. Nweke, PhD. Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Email: nkesun2002@yahoo.com*

## References

- Nwigwe, B.E. 2005. "The Philosopher and Society: A Portrait of Msgr. T. Okere" in J.O. Oguejiofor and G.I. Onah (eds) *African Philosophy and the Hermeneutics of Culture*. Studies in African Philosophy Series, Vol. 2.
- Okere, T. 1983. *African Philosophy : A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation Of The Conditions Of Its Possibility*. Lanham: University Press of America
- O'Meara J. 1985. *An Augustine Reader*, New York: Image Books.
- Palmer R. E. 1969. *Hermeneutics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Serequeberhan, T. 1994. *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine\\_of\\_Hippo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo) Accessed. 9/5/10
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutics> Accessed. 7/5/10.
- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/> Accessed. 9/5/10