The Inspiring Power of Scripture: Three Case Studies

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Abstract
The charism of biblical inspiration also includes the special impact of the Sacred Scriptures on those who read or hear them. This article examines three examples of such an impact: in the lives of St Antony of Egypt, St Augustine of Hippo, and Girolamo Savonarola, who were deeply affected by Matthew 19:21, Romans 13:13–14, and Genesis 12:1, respectively. These passages from the Scriptures prompted them at once (Antony and Augustine) or within a year (Savonarola) to surrender possessions (Antony), plans for his personal existence and career (Augustine), and life at home with his parents (Savonarola), and to embrace a new way of life as a hermit (Antony), as a baptized Christian and within ten years as a bishop (Augustine), and as a Dominican teacher and preacher (Savonarola).

Keywords
conversion, inspiration, Savonarola, Scriptures, St Antony, St Augustine

When interpreting the nature of biblical inspiration, some scholars, as well as acknowledging its role for the biblical authors themselves, have rightly understood that the charism of inspiration also includes an inspiring impact on those who read Sacred Scripture.1 This charism affects readers as well as writers. If we agree with such a theory of biblical inspiration, what might it look like in practice? Some shining


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examples of Christian holiness allow us to recognize and, to some extent, explore what the inspiring impact of the Scriptures could be like in practice.

I think here of such figures as St Antony of Egypt (d. 356), St Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), and Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498). In all three cases we know how specific biblical texts played a decisive role towards ‘inspiring’ dramatic changes in their lives. It was St Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) who recorded the occasion when Matthew 19:21 turned around the existence of Antony and led him to become the founder of the eremitic monasticism of solitary hermits. Augustine and Savonarola left in writing their own accounts of how Romans 13:13–14 and Genesis 12:1, respectively, profoundly influenced the course of their lives. Without being the founder of collective or cenobitic monasticism—for which St Pachomius (d. 346) takes the credit—Augustine and a century later St Benedict (d. around 550) helped to promote it widely in Western Christianity. Savonarola’s heroic attempt to reform the Catholic Church in the heartland of Italy was brutally terminated by his execution. Let us take up in turn what we can glean about the ways in which scriptural texts shaped definitively the story of these three figures.

Antony of Egypt

Born into a wealthy family, Antony was about 19 years of age when his parents died and left him to care for his much younger sister. Less than six months after the death of his parents, on the way to church he recalled how the apostles gave up everything and followed Jesus (see Matt 4:20; 19:27) and how some early Christians sold their possessions and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles for distribution to those in need (see Acts 4:34–35). When he arrived and went into church, the Gospel was being read and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man: ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell all your possessions and give them to the poor, and come follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven’ (Matt 19:21). Antony took to heart that passage, realizing how ‘it had been read for his sake.’ At once he left the church and distributed to the people of his village the 300 ‘fertile and very prosperous acres’ he had inherited. Then, by selling his possessions, he raised much money and distributed it among the poor, keeping only a little for the needs of his sister.

A second text from Matthew touched Antony when he returned to the church and heard the Lord saying in the Gospel: ‘Do not be concerned about tomorrow’ (Matt 6:34). Antony left the church, distributed anything he still owned to the poor, and began to lead

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2 Athanasius of Alexandria, The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2003). Despite some recent objections, the traditional attribution to Athanasius of this life of Antony should continue to be accepted; see David M. Gwynn, Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15.

3 For the basic data about their lives and valuable bibliographical information, see F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 3rd rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81 (St Antony), 129–32 (St Augustine), and Savonarola (1468–69).
an ascetical life close to his own village, as did other monks in those days. First he sought
the guidance of an old hermit who lived in a neighbouring village. Then, whenever he
heard of anyone else practising serious asceticism elsewhere, he would go like ‘the wise
honey bee’ (see Prov 6:8) to meet and learn from that person. Since the New Testament
disapproved of lazy people (2 Thess 3:10), he worked with his hands, spent part of what
he earned for his own food, and gave the rest to those in need. Obeying strictly another
New Testament injunction, he prayed without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). He followed so
closely what was read in church that nothing in the Scriptures escaped his attention; his
memory became a kind of biblical library. Eventually he was led to initiate a new form
of asceticism: life in the distant desert.

For the details of Antony’s life, we have to rely almost entirely on what Athanasius
wrote. We also need to recognize how The Life of Antony constructed the image of some-
one who could serve as both a model of ascetic life and a champion of orthodox faith
against the inroads of Arian heresy. Accepting these reservations, what comments might
one make on the inspiring impact of Matthew 19:21 on the spiritual journey of Antony?

First of all, in the history of Christianity Antony became the first person we know who
put into literal practice the invitation of Matthew 19:21. Other Christians were to do so
later. But Antony led the way in divesting himself of his wealth and giving it to the poor
and needy. In presenting the history of interpretation of this verse from Matthew, Ulrich
Luz recalls Antony as someone who completely rejected possessions but fails to mention
that he was the first known case of someone accepting Jesus’ radical invitation.\footnote{4}
Unlike later Waldensians, Franciscans and others, when Antony sensed that Matthew 19:21 had
been ‘read for his sake’ and let the verse inspire his immediate action, he broke new
ground in the ‘practical’ interpretation of the Scriptures.

Second, Antony was around 19 years of age when this verse had a decisive impact on
him. To judge from The Life of Antony, he had enjoyed a devout, sheltered upbringing
and proved himself a ‘good,’ undemanding and not very intellectual son.\footnote{5} All this set him
apart from his fellow African, Augustine.

Third, unlike Augustine, from his youth Antony ‘listened attentively to the readings
from the Scripture, and kept in his heart what was profitable from them.’\footnote{6} Making his
way to church on the day when Matthew 19:21 brought its demanding claim to bear on
him, he was already mulling over other New Testament passages that were similarly
concerned with voluntarily divesting oneself of possessions. The lifelong biblical orien-
tation of the young Antony set him apart from Augustine. In his first contacts with the
Scriptures, Augustine found them barbarous in comparison with the high works of clas-
sical culture (Confessions, 3. 5).

Fourth, in mediating the dramatic, divine call to Antony, Matthew 19:21 did not stand
alone. As we saw above, hearing on another day in church a further text, Matthew 6:4,
The experience of Lara can raise a question that the available information does not allow us to answer: did misery, in his case over the recent death of his parents, make Antony ready to hear the inspiring voice of the Scriptures? Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. M. Hayward and M. Harari (New York: Pantheon, 1960), 44–45; trans. corrected.

Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* portrays life in Russia during the first three decades of the 20th century. Early in the novel, Lara, still only a schoolgirl, was seduced by a rich lawyer. Desperate and depressed, she visited a church, feeling as if the pavement might open at her feet or the vaulted ceiling might collapse on her. It would, she thought, ‘serve her right and put an end to the whole affair.’ Her life had become unbearable and she would have been glad to die. Her misery made her ready to listen. In the echoing, half-empty church her cousin was reading at breakneck speed the beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit… Blessed are they who mourn… Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness.’ Lara shivered and stood still. These were words addressed by Christ directly and personally to her. ‘He was saying: Happy are the downtrodden. They have something to say for themselves. They have everything before them. That was what he thought. That was Christ’s opinion of it.’ She no longer felt meaningless and without a future. Even there in the drab and distracting church, Lara knew Christ’s gentle promise of mercy. She heard him speaking to her even through the words that someone was rattling off without devotion.

Sixthly and finally, the text from Matthew inspired Antony to divest himself of all his possessions. But in and through his asceticism, poverty and prayer he became a blessing to those of his own village, and later to many more people—not least to those who followed him by embracing a monastic existence in the mountains and desert. As David Gwynn says, Antony ‘engaged with the world around him,’ and his ‘pastoral achievements’ proved ‘greater than those of many bishops and represented Athanasius’ ideal model, inspiring through spiritual leadership those who could not reach the same degree of perfection.’ By the time he died in 356, Antony’s influence had reached Spain and
Gaul. Written after his death, *The Life of Antony* was soon translated into Latin. In 386 it would affect Augustine after he came to stay in Milan, and became a key moment in his conversion.\(^{11}\) During Antony’s lifetime and after his death, right down to our own day, the enduring impact of Matthew 19:21 has reached out to innumerable people. In that larger sense, this inspired verse continues to prove itself inspiring around the world.

### Augustine of Hippo

Augustine had almost turned 32 when two verses from Paul’s Letter to the Romans helped bring about a dramatic change in his life and opened the way for his being baptized the following year by St Ambrose of Milan.

On the very day that Augustine was deeply affected by Romans 13:13–14, the *Life of Antony* played a role in preparing him for that experience. A devout fellow-African, Ponticianus, visited the home in Milan where Augustine was staying and told him about the holy life of Antony, the miracles he had worked, and his continuing impact in attracting Christians to an ascetic and monastic life (*Confessions*, 8. 6–8).

After Ponticianus left, Augustine went out into the garden attached to his residence. His *Confessions* spend pages describing the fearful tumult of memories, questions, and emotions that continued to well up inside Augustine. He was weeping his heart out when he heard the voice of a child coming from a nearby house and repeating over and over again ‘take it and read it.’ Recalling what he had heard earlier that day about the ‘revelation’ that came to Antony by hearing Matthew 19:21, Augustine hurried to the place where he had left a copy of Paul’s letters, opened it, and read in silence the first passage his eye fell upon: ‘[let us live honourably as in the day], not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires’ (Rom 13:13–14). As soon as Augustine had read these words ‘all the darknesses of doubt were dispersed, as if by a light of peace flooding’ into his heart. With his companion, Alypius, Augustine went into the house and told his mother Monica what had happened. For years she had prayed for her wayward son, and now she blessed God, ‘who can accomplish far more than we ask or understand’ (Eph 3:20) (*Confessions*, 8. 8–12).\(^{12}\)

As Augustine told the story of the climax of his conversion, Antony had a significant part in what happened and, not least, in Augustine’s expectation that some passage of Scriptures might solve his problems and bring him peace. Yet the two stories differ markedly. (1) Antony was about 19 and already baptized when he reacted with startling generosity to a verse from Matthew. Augustine was more than ten years older and not yet baptized, when two verses from Romans opened the way to a new and transformed future. (2) Unlike Antony who grew up with the Scriptures, Augustine did not accept and learn from them easily. Earlier in life he had dismissed the Christian Bible as unworthy

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 130.

of comparison with Cicero and other classical authors (Confessions, 3. 5).\textsuperscript{13} (3) In terms of a cultured education and public standing as a scholar, he stood apart from Antony who was brought up in a sheltered fashion at home. (4) The decisive moment came for Antony after both his parents had died and when he heard a passage from Matthew read in church. In the case of Augustine, his mother was still very much alive and shared immediately in his radical moment of conversion. That change came, not in church and hearing a Gospel proclaimed, but in a garden where he heard a child’s voice directing him to pick up and read something.

Perhaps the most startling difference (5) concerns the remarkable way in which Augustine described his confused and painful struggle with fleshly desires and with his worldly aspirations. Abruptly two verses from Paul dispelled the darkness and gave Augustine instant peace. We find nothing like that in The Life of Antony, which remains silent about his spiritual and psychological state when he heard in church the words from Matthew that transformed his life for ever. The Life of Antony describes at length something that came later: the spiritual struggles of the saint when he was repeatedly assaulted by demonic powers.\textsuperscript{14}

It is Augustine himself who in his Confessions tells the story of how reading a passage from Paul turned his life around. Interestingly, in a letter (Epistola, 55. 37), written around 400 and so very shortly after the Confessions, Augustine expresses disapproval of seeking guidance for worldly affairs by consulting the Gospels at random.\textsuperscript{15} Of course, what motivated the random consultation of Paul’s epistles that confronted him with Romans 13:13–14 was the desire to be liberated from a profoundly spiritual crisis and not a desire to be guided in some merely worldly affair.

One curious ‘omission’ brings Antony and Augustine together. The Life of Antony quotes or, much more often, echoes numerous passages from the Old and New Testaments. But the key verse that triggered the revolutionary change in the saint’s life, Matthew 19:21, appears (as a quotation) only once, when in church he heard it ‘read for his sake.’\textsuperscript{16} Since this verse enjoyed such a far reaching impact on his own life and through him on others, one might have expected it to recur, even frequently, in the story that followed. But it is acknowledged only as the striking point of departure for a long and fruitful life that gave shape to eremitic monasticism. When Antony was around 19 years of age, the text did its job and that was it.

In the case of Augustine, one might have expected him to return with gratitude to Romans and the specific passage that had brought him such light and peace. Instead, his major biblical commentaries and sermons took up Genesis, the Psalms, the Gospel of

\textsuperscript{13} Later on debates between Manichees and Elpidius, an otherwise unknown Christian, helped open Augustine up to the Scriptures (Confessions, 5; 11).
\textsuperscript{14} Athanasius of Alexandria, The Life of Antony, 64–91; see also 106–51, 168–71, 190–93.
\textsuperscript{15} In this letter to Januarius, a Catholic layman, Augustine wrote: ‘As for those who read their fortunes in the pages of the gospels, though it is preferable that they do this rather than run to consult the demons, I still do not like the custom of wanting to use for worldly affairs and for the vanity of this life the words of God that speak of the next life’; Letters 1–99, II/1, trans Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2001), 235.
\textsuperscript{16} See the scripture index in Athanasius of Alexandria, The Life of Antony, 273–79.
John, and the other Gospels. He composed two brief and minor works on Romans: *Expositio Quarundam Propositionum ex Epistola ad Romanos* (in which there is only a passing reference to Romans 13:14) and *Epistolae ad Romanos Inchoata Expositio* (which refers neither to Romans 13:13 nor to 13:14).17 The extant sermons of Augustine contain incidental references to Romans 13:13–14: in, for instance, sermons on Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, and at the start of Lent. But he did not dwell on these verses, let alone comment on them from the viewpoint of his personal history.18 Nor did he do that, when he made a passing reference to these verses in two other sermons.19

A passage from Matthew and Romans, respectively, inspired a dramatic new direction in the existence of Antony and Augustine. Antony was to leave behind only seven letters, increasingly acknowledged as authentic.20 For access to him, we rely primarily on The Life of Antony, an obviously hagiographical work and yet one that has been rightly recognized as substantially historical. Augustine left behind not only his *Confessions* and numerous writings (e.g., his letters) that give us historical access to his story but also a huge legacy of theological and biblical works that have shaped for ever Christian, and in particular Western, theology. Both of them lived on for many years, Antony as a hermit until his death in 356 and Augustine as a priest (from 391) and bishop (from 395) until his death in 430. Their long lives stand in tragic contrast with Savonarola who was not yet 50 when a brutal martyrdom ended his life.

### Girolamo Savonarola

Born in Ferrara in 1452, Savonarola grew up deeply shaped both intellectually and spiritually by a devout and learned grandfather.21 Immersed in philosophical and biblical studies, by the age of 18 he is supposed to have learned by heart the entire Bible. He had also become disgusted with the decadence of morals and religious practice in Italy. He was on holiday in Faenza on 1 May 1474 when he entered by chance the church of San Agostino. An Augustinian friar was preaching, but it was a word from God (to Abraham) that suddenly struck Savonarola: ‘go forth from your country and your kindred and your father’s house (egredere de terra tua)’ (Gen 12:1). The call of ‘egredere de terra tua’ gave him no rest: ‘he heard it everywhere; it cast its shadow over family affections; it woke him from his sleep. The conflict within him raged fiercely, but only for a short time. Before a year had passed, the young man, his mind finally made up by a dream, set out...

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17 In PL 35, these works run to col. 2063–88 and 2087–106, respectively; the reference to Romans 13:14 comes at col. 2085.
18 See *Sermons* III/6 (184–229Z) on the Liturgical Season, 190. 1; 205. 1; and 229B. 1, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1993), 38, 104, and 273.
to follow his call.’ 22 Without saying anything to his parents, on 24 April 1475 he slipped out of Ferrara and walked to Bologna where he joined the Dominicans.

We can both compare and contrast Antony, Augustine, and Savonarola. Like Antony, Savonarola was changed by a biblical passage that, seemingly by accident, he heard in church. Unlike Antony and Augustine, the scriptural verse that inspired Savonarola’s dramatic change of life not only took time to produce its full impact but also remained with him for ever. In several sermons preached late in his life, he referred to the way in which in a church in Faenza he heard the verse from Genesis that had come to haunt and eventually change him. 23

Unlike Augustine, who was struggling with his own secular ambitions and sex drives when two verses of Romans brought him light and peace, Savonarola’s turmoil was prompted by the dreadful state of the society and church around him. Like Augustine, Savonarola became a powerful preacher, albeit one who practised an apocalyptic style that prophesied impending divine punishment and drew on special revelations that he claimed to receive.

Unlike Antony and Augustine, Savonarola came into lethal conflict with civil authorities (in Florence) and with the scandalously corrupt Bishop of Rome (Alexander VI). He was not yet 50 when he was hanged and burned. Some honour him as a prophet and martyr; others dismiss him as fanatical and misguided.

Conclusions

The biblical texts from Genesis, Matthew, and Romans that changed the course of life for Savonarola, Antony, and Augustine, respectively, did so because they provided not some merely speculative insight but a source for radical action. All three men were ready to let the Scriptures come home to them in ways that led them at once (Antony and Augustine) or within a year (Savonarola) to surrender possessions (Antony), plans for his personal and professional future (Augustine), and life at home with his parents (Savonarola) and to embrace a new way of life as a hermit (Antony), as a baptized Christian and within ten years a bishop (Augustine), and as a Dominican teacher and preacher (Savonarola).

In two of the cases (Augustine and Savonarola) we know how powerful emotions made them ready ‘hearers of the word.’ Painful and confused feelings over his past conduct and future course of action were disturbing Augustine when enlightenment and peace suddenly came from two verses in Romans. Disgust and anger at the dismal religious state of church and society provided the matrix in which Savonarola heard the words of Genesis, ‘go forth from your country.’ In the case of Antony one can speculate that the death of both his parents fashioned the mood in which Matthew 19:21 could lead him to divest himself of his home and all his possessions.

22 Ibid., 7.
23 In a sermon preached on 21 December 1494, for instance, he quotes the verse from Genesis 12. 1 and refers to its impact on him: Luigi Firpo, ed., Prediche sopra Aggeo (Rome: Belardetti, 1965), 324. In a sermon preached on 28 February 1497, he refers to what happened in the church of Faenza but without quoting the words of Genesis: Roberto Ridolfi, ed., Prediche sopra Ezechiele, vol. 1 (Rome: Belardetti, 1955), 374.
This article has illustrated the inspiring influence of Scripture by examining three great figures from the history of Christianity. Antony, Augustine, and Savonarola write large what happens in the lives of innumerable others: the charism of inspiration affects the readers and hearers, as well as the writers, of biblical texts. Detailed surveys would, I am sure, confirm that conviction, as well as revealing the richly diverse ways in which the inspired Scriptures change and inspire the lives of those who attentively hear and read them.

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