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Ambrose the Pastor and the Image of the 'Bride':
Exegesis, Philosophy, and the *Song of Songs*

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by

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Ambrose the Pastor and the Image of the 'Bride':
Exegesis, Philosophy, and the *Song of Songs*

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Ambrose of Milan remains a dilemma. He was an eminent ecclesiastical leader, who knew how to promote the independence of the Church in an imperial city. In his sometimes stormy encounters with three emperors and two usurpers, he invariably maintained his position and power. Yet, he was considered one of the great theologians of the early Church and a source for Christian mysticism based on the *Song of Songs*. A nuanced appraisal of these two sides of Ambrose is complicated by the fact that he was thrust unprepared into the ecclesiastical duties of teaching and preaching. To redeem his deficit, he borrowed from his Greek and Latin predecessors; his homilies and treatises are studded with their exegetical and philosophical ideas. Who is the man behind the political adroitness, the mystical bent, and the erudite borrowings? What is the interior genius of Ambrose? Historians need to reassess him in order to grasp the full import of his episcopacy and his influence.

Ambrose has provided a key to this process of reappraisal in his use of the *Song of Songs*. Analysis of this, his favorite, Scripture in diverse treatises has enabled me to probe his thought and his understanding of his role as bishop. I have investigated three major treatises: the *De Isaac*, the *De Bono Mortis*, and the *Expositio Psalmi 118*. Each is directed to Ambrose's congregation at large, and indirectly to the wider community of interested outsiders.

I have discovered an Ambrose deeply engaged in a dialogue with the philosophical tradition of Platonism. Scholars who consider him opposed to philosophy mistake anti-pagan rhetoric for personal conviction. The Church as bride represents the interior capacity for God in the soul of each baptized Christian. This represents a transformation of Origen's ideas and methods into a simple, effective tool for late fourth-century catechesis and Scriptural exegesis. On the deepest level, Ambrose thinks in terms of poetic image; metaphor is his native environment. This innate poetic sense allows him to see both the layers of allegory in the *Song of Songs* and the richness of human love as the foundation for interpretation.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The subject of this study is Ambrose of Milan's extensive use of the *Song of Songs*. The goal is to analyze a text of particular significance to Ambrose, in order to probe his thought, his attitude to the Christian life, and his understanding of his role as bishop of Milan. In the words of one modern biographer, "the 'real' Ambrose will in any case elude us."¹ It may be that the real Ambrose will lie always in large measure beyond our reach; but if we are to penetrate his mind and his attitudes, the surest means of penetration are his own writings. In a sense the texts are Ambrose himself, as we can know him. This study, therefore, is primarily an analysis of some key texts from the writings of Ambrose. Since, however, fourth-century bishops like Ambrose often wrote in response to pastoral problems and theological controversy, a consideration of the historical circumstances surrounding these writings enters into the analysis. Yet, my consistent discovery has been that the texts themselves reveal more about the historical circumstances of their composition than a general consideration of historical circumstances can elucidate the texts. This is an interesting irony, a reminder of the absolutely fundamental role of text analysis in the study of early Christianity. I think that this analysis of the varied uses Ambrose made of a favorite Scriptural text has indeed lifted the veil on the thought and interior life of the real Ambrose. Does this mean that something of the real Ambrose has been discovered that he

¹ Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and State in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 377.

himself would wish hidden? Certainly not. It only means that the texts do reveal something of the interior man.

In order to understand the significance of textual analysis for a deeper insight into Ambrose, we should look briefly at the historical record in the representation of him. The circumstances and events of his life cast him into high profile roles both in the empire and the Church. The public image associated with these roles created an afterlife for him that has marked centuries of historical appraisal and research. As Paulinus in his *Vita* – and Augustine, who commissioned it – looked back, they saw a holy bishop, whose speech was sweet as honey and who used his great talents to raise the minds of men from worldly to heavenly realities.² They saw a divinely appointed and imperially sanctioned bishop, who championed the cause of the Church and Nicene orthodoxy.³ It was imperative to bring this side of Ambrose to the fore in the second and third decades of the fifth century, when Augustine was combating the Pelagian writings of Julian of Eclanum; in their argumentation, it appears that both men had appealed to Ambrose as an authority.⁴ Later, generations of churchmen would also look back to Ambrose's writings and name him one of the four great doctors of the Western Church.⁵ Modern historians, on the other hand, have attempted to reach beyond the process of looking back, in order to uncover a more realistic picture of Ambrose, one less marked by the need to edify. The complementary views that have emerged from this inquiry focus on Ambrose's successful

² Paulinus, *Vita* 1.

³ *ibid.* 6-8.

⁴ Éric Rebillard *In hora mortis : évolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort aux iv^e et v^e siècles dans l'occident latin* (Rome : École Française de Rome, 1994), 9-10, 30, 37-8. Julian's arguments are so close to those of Ambrose in the *De Bono Mortis* that even if Julian did not cite Ambrose directly as an authority, Ambrose could easily have been seen as sympathetic to the Pelagian stance.

⁵ The other three are Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. They were formally recognized by papal decree in 1298.

handling of emperors and political crises, his strong-minded defense of the rights and property of the Milanese Church, his uncompromising – even stubborn – defense of Nicene Christianity.⁶ As perceptive as these studies have been, they have led to something of a double portrait of Ambrose. To the old picture of a saintly churchman has been added a new picture of an adroit and lucky politician, one adept at retaining power and position. One senses uneasily that these are alternative portraits, rather than one unified whole. In the following dissertation, I propose yet another dimension to this double portrait, a fresh inquiry into the mind of the bishop, his pastoral goals and challenges, his tastes, and his attitudes towards the fundamental realities of the Christian life. This is a history from the inside, so to speak. Ambrose himself has provided a marvelous key in his love for and use of the *Song of Songs*.

Ambrose never wrote a formal exegetical commentary on this, his favorite, book of the Bible, as did Origen or Gregory of Elvira.⁷ But he refers to it throughout the entire range of his writings. The treatises on virginity, the commentaries on the psalms, the shorter treatises on Biblical patriarchs and other Scriptural themes, his letters, the mystagogical catecheses, the funeral orations, the *Hexameron*, the dogmatic treatises – these all contain allusions to the *Song of Songs*. The only major exception is the *De Officiis*, a work inspired by Stoic ideals inherited from Cicero and intended for his clergy. It is significant that the treatise destined for the clergy in

⁶ Some authors include: Neil McLynn (mentioned above); Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (London: Longman, 1999); Garry Wills, *Font of Life: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Mystery of Baptism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷ Karl Shuve, *The Song of Songs in the Early Latin Christian Tradition: a Study of the Tractatus de Epithalamio of Gregory of Elvira and its Context* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2010), 179-80. See also Shuve's reassessment of Gregory of Elvira's dates, 280-86. If his dating for the composition of the *Tractatus* is correct (c.350), it is possible that Ambrose read Gregory of Elvira's commentary on the *Song of Songs*.

particular should have no references to the *Song*; for in their role as leaders in the Church they do not fit the image of the Bride.

A complete analysis of Ambrose's treatises containing extensive references to the *Song of Songs* would include the treatises on virginity and the funeral oration for Valentinian II. In this dissertation, I have not considered these in detail because they are intended for particular audiences. My focus is rather on Ambrose as the pastor of his church at large and on the spiritual and intellectual challenges he faced from within his congregation and from the larger intellectual and cultural community of Milan in the late fourth century. I have limited this study, therefore, to three treatises, each of which has a different theme but contains the *Song of Songs* as a significant element of structure. First, the *De Isaac* is the second of the patriarchal treatises. It is an exhortation to personal holiness and perfection. The *Song of Songs* appears throughout most of the treatise as a spiritual commentary tied to the Old Testament story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca. Second, the *De Bono Mortis* is a preparation for death, a *consolatio* before the fact. It is also a philosophical treatise in which Ambrose challenges the Neoplatonism that stood in the late fourth century as an alternative to Christianity. The *Song of Songs* comes into the treatise as an apparent aside but with profound implications for the conclusion of Ambrose's argument. Third, the *Expositio Psalmi 118* is a verse-by-verse commentary on the great psalm dedicated to the Law of the Old Testament. Ambrose introduces the *Song of Songs* as a parallel text to the psalm. It is his particular commentary on the limitations of the Old Law and the fulfillment brought by the New.

Since the broad intellectual custom within which Ambrose thought and wrote was largely defined first, by the philosophical tradition derived from Platonism, including Plotinus and

perhaps Porphyry; second, by a commitment to the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures; and third, by the rhetorical and literary habits of thought received from a traditional education, all three of these elements enter into Ambrose's attitude towards the *Song of Songs*. In our analysis of the *De Isaac* we will find a surprising alliance between Ambrose and Plotinus. Yet there is an all-important difference between them, presented through the imagery of the *Song of Songs*. In the *De Bono Mortis*, we will see both the extent and depth of Ambrose's acceptance of the ambient philosophical tradition and the way he tries to change that tradition; the *Song of Songs* is his trump card in the endeavor. In the analysis of his *Expositio Psalmi 118*, we will see the classical literary tradition at work as well as Ambrose's exegetical method and his reworking of Origen. Again, the *Song of Songs* enters into the discussion to effect a radical but subtle change of perspective. Reading Ambrose, therefore, through the lens of the *Song of Songs* shows him adjusting and reshaping inherited traditions. Tracing these adjustments and innovations is a delicate task, but I think it uncovers some of the vibrant colors of his unified portrait.

Before we begin the analyses, I would like to review here two fundamental aspects of Ambrose's thought that determine his understanding of and commitment to Scripture and the *Song of Songs*. These are principles Ambrose shares with the great majority of early Christian writers; but since they inform the whole of his literary and exegetical work, I would like to consider them here. They will also return in different contexts throughout the dissertation. One is the assumption that Christ is the center and unifying Principle of the whole of the divine revelation contained in the Scriptures. The other is the understanding that the *Song of Songs* is an allegory of love.

CHRIST THE CENTER AND UNIFYING PRINCIPLE OF SCRIPTURE

For the early Church, Christ is the essential key to a true and penetrating knowledge of the Scriptures.⁸ All the Scriptures ultimately refer to him. Consequently, one gains a true understanding of the various parts of the Scriptures only in reference to him. He is the source of unity, on the one hand, between the Old and the New Testaments, and on the other, between the Scriptures and the interpretation of them in the lives of Christians. This principle may appear so obvious, there is no need to insist. I mention it here for two reasons: first, it is the prerequisite foundation for our discussion of allegory below; second, it is the foundation for all early Christian metaphysics and morality. The entire intellectual and moral life of the early Church was defined by and centered upon Christ. When the early Christian writers and exegetes discovered Christ in the Scriptures, they found the interpretive key to the meaning of texts. They also found a person, the Word, the savior, the source of spiritual growth and perfection, the perfect manifestation of God and of his love for mankind. This is why the Fathers could play incessantly on the ambiguity between the word of Scripture and the Word of God. It is also one reason why Ambrose made such an extensive use of the *Song of Songs*: the fullness of the divine revelation found in the Scriptures is at the same time the covenant of love between Christ and the Church, between Christ and the redeemed soul. I would like to give a few examples here of

⁸ Paul had said to Timothy, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2Tim.3:16). From the second epistle of Peter: "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2Pet.1:21). See also Rom.16:25-7; Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16-28 and 121-39. Young points out that in the writings of Paul, it is clear already that Christ both confirms the Scriptures, that is the writings of the "Old" Testament and makes them relative to the events of salvation. The old texts, therefore, remain essential as proofs of the divinity of Christ and the authenticity of his mission. In fact, this looking back for evidence is found in the Evangelists as well, where divine verification of the words and acts of Christ is sought by comparing them to sayings and events from the Scriptures, that is from the "Old" Testament. On the road to Emmaus Christ opened the Scriptures to them: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." (Lk.24:27).

statements made by the early exegetes, and by Ambrose in particular, that show the universal scope of this attitude towards Scripture. It is an all-governing mentality.

For Irenaeus, the Scriptures are the perfect, direct intervention and manifestation of God: “The Scriptures are perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit.”⁹ Origen, in the *Peri Archon*, links the words and teachings of Christ the Word in the Scriptures (including the law and the prophets) with the grace and truth he brought in person when he came into the world:

All who believe and are convinced that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (Jn.1:17)... derive the knowledge which calls men to lead a good and blessed life from no other source but the very words and teaching of Christ. By the words of Christ we do not mean only those which formed his teaching when he was made man and dwelt in the flesh, since even before that, Christ the Word of God was in Moses and the prophets.¹⁰

Hilary also emphasizes the unity of revelation in the Old and New Testaments. Events spanning both Testaments join to deliver one coherent message:

Every work contained in the sacred books announces by [prophetic] oracles, shows by events, and confirms with examples the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which, sent *from* the Father, *of* the Virgin, and *through* the Spirit, he was born a man.”¹¹

Basil says, in a well-known passage from the *Hexameron* where he distinguishes between the meaning of “image” and “likeness,” “To say there is an idle word in Scripture is a terrible

⁹ Si autem omnium quae in Scripturis requiruntur absolutions non possumus invenire, alterum tamen Deum praeter eum qui est non requiramus: impietas enim haec maxima est. Cedere autem haec talia debemus Deo qui et nos fecit, rectissime scientes quia Scripturae quidem perfectae sunt, quippe a Verbo Dei et Spiritu eius dictae; nos autem, secundum quod minor sumus et novissimi a Verbo Dei et Spiritu eius, secundum hoc et scientia mysteriorum eius indigemus (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, 2.28.2). See also John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: an Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 10-11.

¹⁰ Origen, *Peri Archon* 1.Preface.1. See also the fragments from Book 5 of Origen’s commentary on John.

¹¹ My italics: Omne autem opus, quod sacris uoluminibus continetur, aduentum Domini nostri Jesu Christi, quo missus a patre ex uirgine per spiritum homo natus est, et dictis nuntiat et factis exprimit et confirmat exemplis. (Hilary of Poitiers, *De Myst.* 1.1). Hilary continues in the same vein: Namque hic per omne constituti huius saeculi tempus ueris atque absolutis pñfigurationibus in patriarchis ecclesiam aut generat aut abluit aut sanctificat aut eligit aut discernit aut redimit : somno Adae, Noe diluuiio, benedictione Melchisedech, Abrahae iustificatione.

blasphemy.”¹² Why? Basil gives a series of rhetorical questions in response; but the underlying reason is because God speaks in Scripture. Every term, therefore, is correct, worthy of scrutiny, and revelatory of truth.

Ambrose, in a particularly intense passage from his commentary on Psalm 1, creates a medley of Scriptural images centering around Christ as “drinkable” and “eatable.” Living water, wine, and bread, so rich in sacramental overtones, are all applied to the Scriptures, so that an assiduous reading and digesting of the sacred texts produces vital juices bringing life to the soul:

Drink each cup, that of the old testament and that of the new, since in each you drink Christ. Drink Christ, since he is the vine (Jn.15:1-5). Drink Christ, since he is the rock that pours forth water (Ex.17:6). Drink Christ, since he is the fountain of life (Ps.35:9). Drink Christ, since he is the river, whose rushing waters rejoice the city of God (Ps.45:4). Drink Christ, since he is peace; drink Christ, since out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water (Jn.7:38). Drink Christ, that you may drink the blood by which you are redeemed (cf.1Pet.1:18-9). Drink Christ, that you may drink his words: the Old Testament is his word, the New Testament is his word. One drinks the divine Scripture and one devours the divine Scripture, when the juice of the eternal Word descends into the veins of the mind and the faculties of the soul; indeed “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God (Mt.4:4).” Drink this word, but drink in the right order: first from the Old Testament. Do it quickly, that you may drink also from the New Testament.¹³

Ambrose also, in his *Exhortatio Virginitatis*, associates the virgin’s search for her beloved both with the seeking of the bride of the *Song* and the reading of Scripture:

¹² Basil, *Hex.* 10.15. I assume here that Basil did in fact write Homily 10. See Basile de Césarée, *Sur l'origine de l'homme (Hom. X Et XI de l'hexaéméron)*, ed. Alexis Smets, S.J. et Michel van Esbroeck, S.J. (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 24-6, 50-52.

¹³ utrumque ergo poculum bibe ueteris et noui testamenti, quia in utroque Christum bibis. bibe Christum, quia uitis est (Jn.15:1-5), bibe Christum, quia petra est quae uomuit aquam (Ex.17:6), bibe Christum, quia fons uitae est (Ps.35:9), bibe Christum, quia flumen est, cuius impetus laetificat ciuitatem dei (Ps.45:4), bibe Christum, quia pax est, bibe Christum, quia flumina de uentre eius fluent aquae uiuae (Jn.7:38), bibe Christum, ut bibas sanguinem quo redemptus es (cf.1Pet.1:18-9), bibe Christum, ut bibas sermones eius; sermo eius testamentum est uetus, sermo eius testamentum est nouum. bibitur scriptura diuina et deuoratur scriptura diuina, cum in uenas mentis ac uires animae sucus uerbi descendit aeterni; denique *non in solo pane uiuit homo, sed in omni uerbo dei* (Mt.4:4). hoc uerbum bibe, sed ordine suo bibe, primum in ueteri testamento, cito fac ut bibas et in nouo testamento (Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. XII.1.33*).

The reward is good, but more divine is the one who gives the reward and the one who is author of the gift. In the Kingdom there is the reward, in Christ the power of remuneration. Seek the reward in the divine Scriptures, where Christ is found that you may say, as she once said, “Tell me, you whom my heart loves...” (Sg.1:6).¹⁴

The acceptance of both the Old and the New Testaments as revelatory of Christ is also like a litmus test of orthodoxy. In many passages Ambrose makes this point.¹⁵ Finally, the figurative, sacramental role of the Old Testament is central to his catechesis. Augustine tells us that it was Ambrose’s figurative readings of difficult passages in the Old Testament that first opened his own eyes to the coherence of the Scriptures and the defensibility of the Catholic faith.¹⁶

Later, Augustine added his own manifesto to the tradition. At the beginning of Book 11 of the *De ciuitate dei*, for example, he begins his description of the city of God with references to it from Scripture. He prefaces his gathering of references with a general appeal to Scripture, to which he attaches the highest authority:

We speak of the city of God, of which that Scripture is a witness, which – not by the chance inspirations of the human intellect but by the manifest disposition of the highest providence and excelling by divine authority – has made subject to itself all the classes of human endeavor and ingenuity, above and beyond all the literatures of every people.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bona merces, sed diuini dispensator mercedis et auctor muneris. In regno merces, in Christo remunerandi potestas. Quaerite illam in scripturis diuinis, ubi Christus inuenitur, et dicite sicut illa dicebat: Annuntia mihi quem dilexit anima mea (Sg.1:6) (Ambrose, *Exhortatio Virginitatis*, 9.56).

¹⁵ For example: 1) populus qui sedebat in umbra mortis, lucem uiderunt magnam. quis est enim lux magna nisi christus, qui inluminat omnem hominem uenientem in hunc mundum? deinde librum accepit, ut ostenderet se ipsum esse qui locutus est in prophetis et remoueret sacrilegia perfidorum, qui alium deum dicunt ueteris testamenti, alium noui uel qui initium christi dicunt esse de uirgine; quomodo enim coepit ex uirgine qui ante uirginem loquebatur: spiritus domini super me? vides trinitatem coaeternam atque perfectam. ipsum loquitur scriptura Iesum deum hominemque in utroque perfectum: loquitur et patrem et spiritum sanctum (Ambrose, *In.Luc.4.43-5*); 2) Aduertimus igitur, quantum nobis ambulandum sit, ut ueniamus ad Christum, ambulandum in lege, quia finis legis est Christus. sine lege ergo non peruenitur ad Christum. unde manifestum est quod haeretici, qui legem ueteris non accipiunt testamenti, etsi dicant quod Christum teneant, tamen tenere non possunt finem, qui initium non tenuerint. ipse est Iesus initium et finis. oportet igitur, ut ambulemus secundum legem spiritalem, ut ueniamus ad legis finem dominum Iesum. oportet, ut sequamur testimonia, ut peruenire possimus ad magnum testimonium dominum Iesum (Ambrose, *Exp.Ps.118 5.24*). We will see other examples over the course of the dissertation.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Conf.5.14*.

¹⁷ ciuitatem dei dicimus, cuius ea scriptura testis est, quae [non fortuitis motibus animorum, sed plane summae dispositione prouidentiae] super omnes omnium gentium litteras omnia sibi genera ingeniorum humanorum diuina excellens auctoritate subiecit (Augustine, *De ciu. dei.11.1*).

As we said, the corollary to this insistence on the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures is the equally fundamental need to respond to the revelation of Christ contained within them. The early Christian stood on the threshold of eternal life. Christ was the way and the truth; and for Nicene Christians such as Ambrose, he was, as God-Man, the ultimate end of the Christian life. I would like to present an example here that shows how Ambrose read Old Testament stories in terms of the saving presence of Christ and the soul's response to that presence. This example also shows us Ambrose engaged in a free spiritual reworking of an Old Testament historical event; and so it is a fine example of the difficulties – which we will discuss in the next paragraphs – that arise out of the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures.

Ambrose had a friend in Milan, Irenaeus, to whom it seems he was able to communicate his intimate reflections about the philosophical and Christian life. In one letter, he gave an interpretation of the story of the Old Testament king Hezekiah that seems to preclude all interest in the historical, literal level of the text: when Hezekiah was ill and Jerusalem in grave danger of attack, God put the sun in reverse, so that 15 steps in the courtyard came out of the shadow; it was a sign to Hezekiah that 15 years would be added to his life (Is.38:5-8). Ambrose interprets this story as a figure of the illumination of Christ, by which Christians ascend to the heights of eternal life:

It is not without purpose that we read David's 15 psalms of the steps and that the sun rose back up 15 steps when the righteous king Hezekiah received a reprieve of this life [an extension of 15 years]. For this signified that the Sun of Justice would come, who would illumine the 15 steps of the Old and New Testaments by the light of his presence. By these [steps] our faith ascends to eternal life.¹⁸

¹⁸ Nec otiose quindecim anabathmorum psalmos davidicos legimus et quindecim gradibus ascendisse solem, cum Ezechias, iustus rex, vitae huius acciperet commeatum. Significabatur enim esse venturus sol iustitiae, qui gradus quindecim veteris et novi testamenti illuminaturus esset praesentiae suae lumine, quibus nostra fides ad vitam adscendit aeternam (Ambrose, *Ep.*68.10). The "psalms of the steps" are Ps.119-133 and were sung by pilgrims

For Ambrose, the spiritual kernel beneath the historical event of the reversal of the sun 15 steps is that it is a sign of the light of Christ's presence, the light by which we ascend to eternal life. Yet – and this brings us to the question of the spiritual reworking of historical events – this interpretation has something unsettling about it. If Scripture is the revelation of divine truth, at the center of which is Christ, finding the right interpretation is essential to an understanding of that truth. Still, how does Ambrose know that by making the association between the physical sun and the prophetic “Sun of Justice” (Mal.4:2), he is giving us the right interpretation of this story? His interpretation seems arbitrary in the sense that the physical sign given to a king of Israel at a moment of personal suffering and national peril is emptied of historical significance. Ambrose only seems to care for the Sun of Justice, the Testaments, and eternal life.

Here we are in the presence of a question of the greatest importance. Given that Christ is the center and the unifying principle of Scripture, to what extent does the historical base of Scriptural texts contribute to a true knowledge of him as the center and goal of revelation? To what extent does Ambrose care about the historical base? A definitive answer to this question exceeds the scope of this dissertation. I think, however, that this question of the degree to which the divine revelation in Scripture depends on a literal reading of the texts is one of those primary questions which accompany any close reading of the texts of early Christian writers. It also seems to me that the answers come from many different sectors and reveal much about the temperament, education, and metaphysics of the individual writer. Many factors come into play beyond the immediate questions of the appropriate degree of typological or allegorical interpretation of a given text. With regard to the *Song of Songs* in particular, one basic question

making the final ascent to Jerusalem. Ambrose says that the sun ascended 15 steps in the courtyard; most Biblical versions give 10.

is: what role does human love as it is described there play in the revelation of divine love? How significant, for example, is the lovers' kiss? For Ambrose this level of human love is a significant base for the revelation of divine love. The reasons why he sees it as significant have to do with his temperament, with his innate sense of the power of the poetic image, and with his role as bishop in a late fourth-century imperial city. All of these factors contribute to his understanding of the relation between the base text and the revelation of divine love in Christ.¹⁹

Before we turn to a discussion of metaphor and allegory, I would like to mention a distinction made by John O'Keefe and R.R. Reno in *Sanctified Vision*. It is the right kind of distinction to keep in mind in an environment where the hidden, spiritual meaning is presumed to be more real and significant than the literal, obvious text. They point out that since the early Christians viewed the Scriptures as vehicles of divine revelation, they looked for luminous manifestations of the truth, found in the factual historical record. They took the Biblical narratives, therefore, at face value but *as the basis for* a revelation of something larger than the text, the "order and pattern" of divine intervention.²⁰ This "order and pattern" is the spiritual sense that grows out of and surpasses the literal sense. The essential distinction, therefore, is the one between the biblical narratives that are the object of interpretation and the patterns of divine intervention that emerge from them. To see the order and patterns was to see Christ.

¹⁹ One of the significant aspects of Ambrose's thought that appears throughout his texts is his balanced approach to the ordinary secular affairs of his congregation. Though he views all the aspects of normal human life as ordered to a higher life of the soul in Christ, living for Christ does not require the individual Christian to flee from the engagements of human life. This is a question of Ambrose's own approach and the way he reads Scripture, but also a question of the pastoral needs he faced in the sophisticated environment of Milanese society. When he describes the patriarch Isaac as alone and separated from affairs of the world (cf. Gen.24:63), he is careful to point out that Isaac withdraws (*abalienare*), in order to flee evil, not to flee legitimate elements of human life on earth (*De Isaac*, 2.5-3.6). Similarly, though Ambrose encourages virginity and discourages widows from remarriage, he shows no distaste for the married life. It is the stable, practical, literal level behind his allegorizing of the *Song of Songs*.

²⁰ *Sanctified Vision*, 11.

Exegesis was a spiritual discipline, a journey through the literality of scripture.... For the fathers did not hold Jesus Christ as an inert truth; they believed that they could only dwell in him, and he in them, if they dwelled in his illuminating light. To read under his guidance was to dwell in his light; to interpret the mosaic of scripture was to catch a glimpse of his image.²¹

The early exegetes, therefore, did not ignore the historical base texts but saw in them the hand of God writing another script.

THE *SONG OF SONGS*, AN ALLEGORY OF LOVE

The ancients attributed the *Song of Songs* to Solomon: either in a title, as in the Vulgate, or in the first verse, as in the LXX followed by most modern versions, where the first verse reads: “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (Sg.1:1). This second arrangement preserves the original Hebrew intensive construction: *Song of Songs*.²² *Song* in the context of Biblical literature implies praise of God and is closely associated with contexts of worship and with other terms signifying worship.²³ By opening the *Song of Songs* with such a phrase, the composer of the *Song* signified to early Jewish minds, at least, that the intent in the love poetry contained within it was the highest possible praise of God.²⁴ With the exception of Theodore of

²¹ *ibid.*, 44

²² Other examples are well-known “Holy of Holies,” “Lord of Lords,” “King of Kings,” the “Heavens of the Heavens” (*caeli caelorum*), the “ages of ages” (*saeculi saeculorum*).

²³ Edmée Kingsmill, SLG, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: a Study in Biblical Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6-7. She discusses the famous remark of Rabbi Akiba that “the whole world is not worthy of the day when the *Song of Songs* was given to Israel. For all the Scriptures are holy, but the *Song of Songs* is the holy of holies.” We will discuss this in greater detail below. She also refers throughout her study to allusions found in the *Song of Songs* to Temple worship and to the Jewish mystical tradition built up around Temple imagery.

²⁴ The modern trend that sees only sensual human love in the *Song of Songs* was alien to the Jewish rabbinic tradition and to the early Church, which inherited this tradition. If the *Song of Songs* is viewed in the context of Scripture as a whole, this exclusively sexual orientation cannot be maintained. Modern exegetes, from the mid-1990s are turning away from it towards a more integrated and spiritual approach. See, for example, Kingsmill (already mentioned); Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, *Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Paul J. Griffiths, *Song of Songs, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011);

Mopsuestia, the consensus in the ancient world and throughout the Middle Ages was indeed that the *Song of Songs* was an allegory of divine love. This went hand in hand, however, with an idea of *eros* that was much wider than the idea implied by the clear-cut, modern distinction between *agape* and *eros*.²⁵ As a result, the metaphor of the bride and bridegroom was more available to the Christian mind and heart. Men and women of all walks of life could enter into the bridal imagery of the *Song* and find in it a meaningful image for their relationship with Christ and for their identification with the Church. This large and comprehensive idea of *eros* is essential to the mystical interpretations of the *Song of Songs*. It signifies that the same joy and happiness of “being in love” in the ordinary sense of that phrase – of feeling an all-commanding attraction for someone who is beautiful and good, someone with whom one would like to enter into a relation of the deepest intimacy – may be rightly applied to the relation between the soul and the incarnate Christ. Of course, there are differences in the manifestation and “living out” of this love – He is God as well as Man – but there is nevertheless a kernel of true *eros* that bridges the gap between humanity and divinity. This is why the mystics, like Origen, Ambrose, Bernard of Clairvaux, Gertrude of Helfta, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and so many others are comfortable with the imagery of the *Song of Songs*. They speak of their love truly, though they speak the language of analogy and allegory.

In order to understand the use and impact of the imagery of bride and bridegroom, as well as the complexities inherent in working it out in detail, I would like to review here the classical definitions of metaphor and allegory. Our discussion of allegory will also provide an occasion to point out the difference between it and typology. Though in practice typology and allegory are

²⁵ Kingsmill, 3-4.

less easily differentiated than has sometimes been hoped, the concepts are nevertheless distinct. These ideas and terms will be of significance throughout the dissertation, both as they stand and as Ambrose modifies them. So a first and general look at them here will facilitate references to them later on.

METAPHOR

First, a *metaphor* is a *trope*, that is, a turning, or transfer (μεταφέρω) of the meaning of one word away from the subject to which it properly belongs over to another subject. The transfer results in a new meaning of some sort.²⁶ When we predicate one thing of another, there are normal expectations generated by the things of which we speak and what we want to say. “Achilles is a man” is a normal straightforward statement. If, however, I replace “man” with “hero,” “lion,” or “whole host,” I change the expectations. The range of relationships between the type of term I use to replace “man” determines the various subsets of tropes. Synonyms, for example, are also tropes. Here the change from one term to another is slight, but it brings in nuances and variation. “Achilles is wrathful” may be changed to “Achilles is enraged”: *wrathful* and *enraged* do not have exactly the same meaning but they are close. In a metaphor, the expected term is replaced by a semantically unrelated term that nevertheless carries over onto the term to which it is applied some idea that is appropriate and significant; some element of the meaning of the metaphor is transferred over to the term to which it is applied.”Achilles is a lion”

²⁶ In the discussion that follows I rely on the following sources: Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: a Foundation for Literary Study*, trans. Matthew T. Bliss et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), nos. 552-64; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b; Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor* (London: Methuen, 1972); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Note also that Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian all define metaphor as a brief, reduced form of the εἰκὼν or *similitudo* (Lausberg, 558). Instead of saying that one thing is *like* another, the metaphor says that it *is* the other.

is a metaphor. There are two fundamental aspects of metaphor in evidence here. First, a tension is established between the expected word and the metaphorical replacement: as soon as one hears that Achilles is a lion, there is an element – perhaps minimal – of dislocation or surprise. One thinks something like: “Achilles is not really a lion.” Second, a metaphor requires decoding and so the listener must interpret the metaphor and *participate* in the imagery in some way. One thinks something like, “Achilles is a lion because he is raging and dangerous.” When the tension is gone and no interpretation is needed, the metaphor is said to be “dead.” Common linguistic exchange is filled with metaphors in varying stages of weakening; for example, in the statement “I see what you mean,” *see* might be considered a dead metaphor. The statement “time is money,” however, still has some, though not much, metaphorical vitality.²⁷

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines four different types of metaphor, distinguished by the relationship between the metaphorical term chosen for use and the normal term it has replaced. First, the metaphor may transfer a generic term onto a specific subject: “Achilles is a whole host” where *whole host* is generic for *warrior*. Second, it may transfer a specific term onto a generic subject: “the last days of the empire” where *days* may evocatively stand for *years*. Third, it may transfer a term belonging to one species onto another: “Authority melts from me”²⁸ where *melt* is a form of physical disintegration transferred onto the process of spiritual disintegration. Fourth, metaphors may be based on a proportion between two subjects and two attributes or objects normally predicated of them. One of Aristotle’s examples is that of Dionysus and Ares (subjects), whose attributes are respectively the cup and the shield. Because Dionysus has the same relation to his cup (epithet) as Ares to his shield, one may transfer the attribute of one

²⁷ Lausberg, no. 562, 255.

²⁸ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (act 3 scene 13).

subject onto the other and so describe war poetically as the “cup of Ares.” There are then multiple ways to expand and vary this basic proportional metaphor; for instance, one may speak of “the wineless cup” or the “dregs of war.” This proportional type is the kind of metaphor that pertains to the *Song of Songs*. The bridegroom stands to the bride as Christ to the Church or soul. By transferring, or crossing over, the members of the proportion, we may speak of the Bride of Christ or the Bridegroom of the Church and say that Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church and that the Church is the Bride of Christ.

Aristotle and the other ancient theorists also found numerous other ways to classify the uses of metaphor, among them the division according to what Quintilian calls *virtus*, the power or ability of the metaphor to perform well a particular function. A metaphor is classified as apt or fitting, as opposed to ornamental, when “a noun or a verb is transferred from that domain in which it is proper, to that in which a proper meaning is lacking [*catachresis*] or in which the transferred term is better than the proper term. We do this either because it is necessary or because it is more meaningful.”²⁹ The use of metaphor to express in a veiled or better way, or in the only way possible, realities that are beyond the ordinary world of sense experience is the basis for much theological use of metaphor. For the early Christians, the image of the bride and bridegroom in the *Song of Songs* fits this use. Applied to Christ and the Church it cannot possibly refer to betrothal and marriage in the proper sense. Nevertheless, it is the appropriate, the apt, the only image for a relationship that can be expressed, humanly speaking, in no other way. The bride metaphor rests, therefore, on two assumptions: first, that some kind of contact may be

²⁹ Transfertur ergo nomen aut uerbum ex eo loco in quo proprium est, in eum in quo aut proprium deest aut translatum proprio melius est; id facimus aut quia necesse est aut quia significantius est (Quintilian, Inst.8.6.5). See Lausberg, no.561.

made between God and the human soul and that it is a contact of love;³⁰ and second, that the only fitting way for human beings to describe this contact is through a metaphor of marriage. In this image *agape* (love directed to God) and *eros* (love directed to a human being) meet, though one cannot grasp precisely this meeting through discursive, normal speech. As we said above, in a culture where the idea of *eros* is large and associated with a love greater and deeper than mere sexual attraction, the metaphor of the bride and bridegroom of the *Song of Songs* works. It is both a powerful and an apt image of the love of Christ for the Church and the soul.

ALLEGORY

Allegory comes from the Greek “other” (ἄλλος) and “speak” (ἀγορεύω). The name indicates that it is a speech that says one thing but implies another.³¹ It is similar, therefore, to *metaphor* and may be defined as an extended metaphor or grouping of metaphors stretched out and woven into some form of narrative;³² The story of Cupid and Psyche, Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*, and the *Divine Comedy* are based on or include metaphorical personifications of abstract realities: virtues, vices, and other similar entities. These act like human beings in a narrative framework. In Prudentius, the allegorical figures are often straightforward – Humility unhorses Pride and then gloats over her. The metaphorical allegories of early Christian exegesis, however, are usually much more subtle and complex.

³⁰ In his critique of Karl Barth, Andrew Louth makes the point that if one cannot accept that there is “some capacity on the part of the creature to establish a point of contact with God,” then the *Song of Songs* can only be a poem about contact between human beings. Barth could not accept the possibility of such contact and so could not appreciate the *Song of Songs* as containing theological truth. See Andrew Louth, *Mary and the Mystery of the Incarnation: an Essay on the Mother of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1977) and Kingsmill, 3-4.

³¹ See the discussion in David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 3-7.

³² Lausberg, no.895; also, Quintillian, *Inst.*9.2.46 (Lausberg, 399).

The source of the complexity lies in the reality of the personages that tell the story, in the relation established between them, and in what happens to them. For example, the bare-bones story of the fall of Adam and Eve is about a woman who ate some forbidden fruit. This narrative, however, is a transparent base for another deadly serious drama about the fall of mankind from grace and happiness. There is a perceived tension between the literal story and the other spiritual account beneath the story, inherent in allegory as in metaphor. Yet it is not a simple tension between a literal base text and an allegorical interpretation or, on the other hand, between a fictitious story and a moral or metaphysical truth hidden within, as in so many myths. Adam and Eve are not mere abstractions; and the story of the fall is, in its spiritual reality, absolutely literal, according to traditional theology and exegesis. As the name *Adam* implies, Adam and Eve represent man and woman and their mysterious fall was a real primordial event. Biblical interpretation, therefore, as the Fathers saw it, must work out the true meaning of the story on multiple levels. The base text may be an historical narrative, a story, a prophecy, a metaphor, or some combination of these. Since for most of the early Christian exegetes the base texts could be fully understood only in the light of Christ, these texts were all subject to some type of allegorical or figurative reworking. The exegetes differed in the degree of allegory they found acceptable, but they all reworked the texts.³³

THE ALLEGORY OF THE *SONG OF SONGS*

In the Rabbinic and early Christian tradition, the *Song of Songs* was an allegory of love: love of God for Israel, love of Christ for the Church and the individual soul. The base text was a

³³ A discussion of the differences in approach, which have sometimes been labeled as Antiochene or Alexandrian, does not pertain to this dissertation.

story of betrothal, seeking, and finding. The Greek and Latin versions name the woman primarily “bride,” (νύμφη or *sponsa*). In three verses, which are repetitions with variation of the same theme (Sg.2:7; 3:5; 8:4), the woman is named ἀγάπη or *dilecta*: “Do not awake my *love*....” The masculine counterparts to feminine terms signifying “bride” do not appear; the man is consistently named ἀδελφιδός or *dilectus*. So it is interesting to note that the woman is a fiancée, while the man is in Greek “brother” (with a diminutive ἰδ added) or in Latin “beloved.” The couple appears to be betrothed and on the point of marriage, though the details are not given.

In the Old Testament generally, and in the prophetic books in particular, the relationship of God to Israel is often described in terms of love, courtship and marriage. The fidelity of God to the unfaithful Israel is a primary image of reproach. Israel is God’s adulterous wife, who plays the harlot by adoring false gods. A few examples out of many follow. The prophet Hosea is called by God to prophecy by personal example: “Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.” (Hos.1:2). Isaiah foretells the destruction of Israel in terms of shame and disgrace for the luxurious and seductive women of Zion (Is.3:19-26). Jeremiah inveighs in the name of God: “I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd harlotries, on the hills in the field. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean?” (Jer.13:27). In the *Lamentations*, Jerusalem is a wife forsaken (Lam.1:1-2,8-9,19), a virgin defiled (Lam.1:15;2:13). Ezekiel also presents God in his love for Israel as a jilted husband. He rescued her when he found her as an abandoned infant; he washed her, fed her, clothed her, adorned her and finally married her. She became a most beautiful queen, but enamored of her own beauty, she abandoned him for numberless lovers. In a transparent image of idolatry, she is said (at

16:20-1) to have sacrificed [to Baal] the sons and daughters she bore to God (See Ez.16:2-63).

One cannot read through these prophetic texts without sensing a poignancy beyond the fact of idolatry. They signify in metaphorical terms the tragedy and pain of broken trust.

While the prophets show the reality of the relationship between God and Israel, the *Song of Songs* shows the ideal: love as it was meant to be in Paradise and as it will be again in the greater Paradise at the end of time.³⁴ The gardens, the joy of the wedding guests, the beauty, and the luxuriance of nature all are images of the beauty of the lovers. All reflect their perfect love. And so, the *Song of Songs* is also seen as a vision of the “un-doing” of the Fall described in Genesis, where Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise.³⁵ The early rabbis debated whether to include the *Song of Songs* in the Hebrew canon of Scriptures. Rabbi Akiba is reported to have said, “All the Scriptures are holy, the *Song of Songs* is the Holy of Holies” (*Mishnah Yadayim*.3.5). Ellen Davis, Edmée Kingsmill, and others have drawn attention to the fact that at the time this discussion took place, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. In the Temple, the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant; it was the dwelling of God on earth. When the high priest entered once a year on the feast of the Atonement, he stood in the presence of God. Thus when Akiba, who belonged to a tradition of Jewish mysticism, called the *Song of Songs* the Holy of Holies, he may have been thinking of it as a spiritual counterpart to the lost Holy of Holies in the Temple. He seems to imply that through the *Song of Songs* one could still

³⁴ Kingsmill, 5-6.

³⁵ Kingsmill, 18; Davis 234-41. Both Kingsmill and Davis show the multiple and close literary ties between the *Song of Songs* and other Biblical texts, especially the Wisdom and prophetic literature. The *Song of Songs* was clearly conceived as a work *in relation* to the Scriptures.

come into the presence of God.³⁶ Exegetes also note that the *Song of Songs* was attributed to Solomon, who built the first and greatest Temple. Other allusions that would have reminded a contemporary Jewish reader of the Temple abound throughout the *Song*.³⁷

I have dwelt on this reconstruction of a Jewish and largely “pre-Christian” view of the *Song of Songs* because this understanding, or something like it, would have been received by the early Church. In the Gospel narratives, Christ refers to himself as the Bridegroom (Mt.9:15; Mk.2:19-20; Jn.3:29) and so invites the transfer of the imagery of the *Song of Songs* to himself and the Church. Paul understood the imagery perfectly; he develops at length the metaphor of the Church as the bride (Eph.5:21-32). Evidence of an association between the Temple of Jerusalem and Christ the spiritual Temple is also found in the New Testament. One striking example is the association Jesus himself makes between the Temple and his own body. In the Gospel of John, the Jews ask for a sign and Jesus replies, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn.2:19). John also comments that after the Resurrection the disciples remembered that Jesus had said this and it confirmed their belief in the Scriptures and in his words. Finally, the question came up again at Jesus’ trial. Witnesses testified that he had said he would rebuild the temple in three days (Mt.26:61; Mk.14:58), and this was used in mockery against him on the cross (Mt.27:40; Mk.15:29). We are dealing, therefore, with significant and deeply felt imagery that entered into the earliest tradition of the Church: Jesus, the Temple (as a figure of the Church), the Bridegroom.

³⁶ Davis, 240-1. See also Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor bible 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 92; also 152-161 on Jewish mysticism and the Shekinah in connection with the *Song of Songs*.

³⁷ Kingsmill, *passim*. Her study is based on the Rabbinical tradition as well as texts drawn from Jewish mysticism. See also Jacob Neusner, *Song of Songs Rabbah: an Analytical Translation* 2 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), v.1, 55; Jay Curry Treat, *Lost Keys: Text and Interpretation in Old Greek Song of Songs and its Earliest Manuscript Witnesses* (University of Pennsylvania, Doctoral dissertation, 1996), 2-7.

In varied contexts, Ambrose emphasizes both aspects of the imagery of the *Song of Songs* we have outlined here. (1) The *Song* represents an ideal love, in contrast to the prophetic invectives and to what he sees as the failed marriage of the Old Testament. (2) It represents a new order of spiritual, sacramental life symbolized by the nuptial bond between Christ and the Church. He develops these two aspects according to the image of the Church he has in mind. First, if he thinks of the Church as embracing the entire human race and spanning the whole range of history from the creation and fall to the present, he presents the bride of the *Song of Songs* as passing through a period of sin and infidelity. She is admonished repeatedly by the prophets and taught to long for the coming of Christ in the incarnation. The post-incarnation Church is repentant, yet she has been washed and made pure and beautiful, and so she is worthy at last of Christ himself.³⁸ Second, if Ambrose thinks of the Church as composed of gentiles gathered from the nations after the advent of Christ, he views this Church as the faithful bride, in contrast to the Synagogue who was unfaithful and so rejected.³⁹ Third, if Ambrose thinks of the Church as formed and sustained by the sacraments, he envisions the love of the bride and bridegroom of the *Song* as a fully realized love. It is the actual historical outcome of salvation history, a reality into which Christians are incorporated through baptism and in which they are sustained by the Eucharist. It is finally a reality which opens onto an eschatological fulfillment. The Church embraces time and eternity.⁴⁰ For Ambrose, therefore, the *Song of Songs* represents not just an ideal love between God and man but the full reality of the saving intervention of Christ. In contrast to the great stories of classical, pagan antiquity, which were often marked by

³⁸ See, for example, Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. 118.1*, *passim*.

³⁹ See Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. 118.2.9-15*.

⁴⁰ The *De Mysteriis* and the *De Sacramentis*, *passim*.

tragedy, this great love story of Christianity is one with a happy ending. I am not speaking here of theological truths of the Resurrection and eternal life, though clearly, as Paul says (1Cor.15:12-23), these are the basis for Christian optimism. I am thinking instead of Ambrose's attitude to the Christian story as represented by the *Song of Songs*. With his innate poetic sense, Ambrose understood the power of the happy ending, of what J.R.R. Tolkien names the *eucatastrophe*:⁴¹

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be 'primarily' true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed.⁴²

This reflection of Tolkien captures something of Ambrose's enthusiasm for the *Song of Songs*. It is an allegory, but it also expresses the primary truth of human existence: that mankind is made for the unbelievable happiness of an intimate and reciprocal union with Christ.⁴³ The Church dwells already in this union. There are persecutions in the present state. The final outcome, however, is certain, and the relationship between Christ and the Church is firmly established. One sign of Ambrose's thinking of the *Song of Songs* as the definitive *eucatastrophe* is that he brings the bride and bridegroom to actual marriage multiple times throughout his writings. Marriage is implicit, of course, in the *Song of Songs* itself, but Ambrose takes the imagery all the

⁴¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 81.

⁴² Tolkien, 84.

⁴³ *Ecce*, inquit, *iste aduenit* (Sg.2:8). adhuc ego emu quaero et ille iam uenit, adhuc ego suffragia capto, ut ueniat et ille iam proximus est. ego suscitari mihi caritatem cupio, ego me uulneratam caritatis puto et ad me plus caritas ipsa festinat. ego dixi "ueni," ille salit et transilit. ego rogo eum uenire cum gratia, ille gratiarum operatur augmenta et, dum uenit, incrementa gratiae secum uehit et ueniendo acquirit, quia studet etiam ipse suae placere dilectae (*Exp.Ps.118.6.6*); anima iusti sponsa est Uerbi. haec si desideret, si cupiat, si oret et oret adsidue et oret sine ulla disceptatione et tota intendat in Uerbo, subito uocem sibi uidetur eius audire quem non uidet et intimo sensu odorem diuinitatis eius agnoscit, quod patiuntur plerumque qui bene credunt. replentur subito nares animae spiritali gratia et sentit sibi praesentiae eius flatum adspirare, quem quaerit, et dicit: "Ecce iste ipse est quem requiro, ipse quem desidero" (*Exp.Ps.118.6.8*).

way to the end: to marriage, the contract, the wedding feast. I think that in Ambrose this dwelling on the *eucatastrophe* of the *Song of Songs* may derive from more than his fundamental understanding of the Christian life. It seems that it comes also from a sense that the Church was coming into its own in late fourth-century Milan.

A NOTE ON TYPOLOGY

As a general rule, allegory is an interpretation of a text; typology is an interpretation of historical events, generally speaking, of extra-textual reality.⁴⁴ Like metaphor and allegory, typology requires two complementary poles. The poles, though, are not a normal, proper meaning displaced by a metaphor or a personification of an abstract idea. In typology, one historical event is compared to another. The image behind the term *typology* comes from the stamp (τύπος) with which one strikes a coin or imprints a seal on wax. The striking instrument is the τύπος, or *type*, the imprint in metal or wax the ἀντίτυπος or *antitype*. The common Latin translation for τύπος is *figura*.⁴⁵ In a spiritual economy where Christ is the center of reality and of divine revelation, the events that precede his coming in the flesh (Old Testament) stand to the events of his incarnation (New Testament) as a foreshadowing or image stands to full reality. The same relationship holds between the events of the New Testament and the Christian Church, on the one hand, and the *eschaton*, Christ's final return, on the other. What comes before is the *type*, model, or figure that holds a pattern of the full reality still to come; what comes after, in the light of which the contours of the type are fully understood, is the full imprint or the *antitype*.

⁴⁴ Lausberg, no.900-901.

⁴⁵ Lausberg, 900; Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: a Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 16-7. See also 14-23 for a discussion of the terms used by Ambrose in his mystagogical catechesis and his exegesis.

Modern scholars have tried to maintain typology as an interpretive tool for Old Testament history, while rejecting allegory as an interpretive tool for Old Testament texts and metaphors.⁴⁶ The distinction is impossible to maintain and foreign to early Christian exegesis. In the Old Testament, history, metaphor, and allegory are inextricably bound together. For example, when Moses made a bronze serpent and raised it on high, so that the Israelites who had been bitten by real serpents might look at it and be healed, the historical fact is a figure of the crucifixion, but the bronze serpent is also a metaphor for Christ. One cannot interpret the scene satisfactorily without taking into account both the history and the metaphor.⁴⁷ The same is true of the manna in the desert, the rock from which water flowed, the prophetic images of God as shepherd of the people, and of Israel as the unfaithful wife. Finally, if one insists on a rejection of metaphor and allegory as interpretive tools, the *Song of Songs* is reduced to an expression of human sensual love.⁴⁸

Following the rabbinic tradition, early Christian exegetes were aware of the evocative power of the sensual images in the *Song*. This awareness elicited cautionary advice to their readers from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, though not from Ambrose. What is most striking,

⁴⁶G.W.H. Lampe and K.J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Chatham: W. and J. Mackay, 1957), *passim*. See also Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1959) for an exposition of some of the fundamental *types* of the Patristic tradition. At 57-65 he attempts a strict distinction between historical typology and what he calls moral allegory. While there is a conceptual difference between the two, maintaining the distinction eliminates an entire middle ground where strictly historical types, metaphor, and moral exhortation meet. Daniélou says, "It would be an entire abuse of language to include moral allegory with typology under the one heading of the spiritual sense, as opposed to the literal sense: typology is a legitimate extension of the literal sense, while moral allegory is something entirely alien: the former is in truth exegesis, the latter is not" (64). This "clips the wings" of much Patristic exegesis; if modern scholars do not consider allegorical interpretation true exegesis, the majority of the ancients did.

⁴⁷Melchizedek and the scarlet cord of Rahaab present similar difficulties. A strict interpretation of typology as referring only to historically verifiable connections between the Old and New Testaments requires a rejection of them as *types*. The early Christians, however, had no difficulty seeing in them prophetic images of Christ and his saving activity. Lampe finds himself obliged to reject the pervasive imagery of the Epistle to the Hebrews, because he cannot accept the typological, or allegorical if one prefers, interpretation of Melchizedek. See Lampe, 34-5.

⁴⁸This, of course, is how much of modern exegesis has interpreted the *Song of Songs*. See note 24 above.

however, is that, for the most part, the early exegetes left the love imagery in place. Their interpretations lifted the imagery to a spiritual level, without denying or rejecting the reality, beauty, and joy of the human love expressed in the *Song*. This is especially true of Ambrose, and I think this tells us something significant about him. As a result, early exegesis of the *Song* is – ironically – closer to typological interpretation of the Old Testament than it is to pure allegory. The base was not an historical event but rather the universal experience of human love, and upon this base Christ in his historical incarnation was seen as the central focal point of the exegesis. He was the ultimate reality that kept the allegorization of the *Song* within fitting and appropriate bounds. Again, this is not to say that exegesis of the *Song of Songs* was typological in the strict sense. It was not, since the *Song* was not an historical text. The exegesis of the *Song*, however, was more comprehensive than a strict distinction between typology and allegory can allow. The details of the *Song*, of course, might receive minute allegorical interpretation, especially where the Biblical text itself seemed to invite it. If, for example, the *Song* says that the bride's teeth are shorn ewes coming up from the washing, each bearing twins, and that her hair is a flock of goats descending Mount Gilead, no one should be surprised to find that a Christian allegorist took the bait.

CONCLUSION

The complex intertwining of images in the Old Testament narratives shows clearly that, although one may make a conceptual distinction between allegory and typology, in practice the two may not be separated without causing an impoverishment of the Biblical texts as the early Christians understood them. Yet the early exegetes understood that allegory and metaphor were

tools to be handled with care. They knew the rhetorical rules. They were well aware of the relation between image, thought, and language. Yet they held this complexity up to one fixed and utterly real standard, Christ, and to a lesser extent they held it up to a lower standard of the base meaning of the Scriptural text. So the enterprise was complex, but it was firmly rooted in extra-textual reality.⁴⁹ Metaphor and allegory were routes by which they thought they could arrive at a knowledge of the divine order behind the Scriptural texts and finally a knowledge of God and contact with him. The *Song of Songs* was one of the divinely inspired texts that showed them the possibility, the goodness, and the beauty of that contact.

As a divinely inspired text, the *Song of Songs* was considered to be a true revelation of God's love for mankind, brought to completion and perfection in the incarnation of Christ. As an allegory based on human love it expressed in the best, the apt, or the only way possible the love between God and man. The allegory worked. It succeeded, because for the early Christians *eros* and *agape* could meet. One cannot give a rational, discursive account of this meeting, yet it is something that mystics and poets of all time have understood; and Ambrose was both.

An interesting corollary comes from this understanding of the *Song of Songs* as a truth-bearing allegory of divine love. The early exegetes handled the allegory of the *Song* according to their theological and metaphysical principles. In order to clarify this point, let us return to Aristotle's example of the cup of Ares. The metaphor works because the elements that compose

⁴⁹ I am aware of modern theories of conceptual metaphor. As I understand, these theories grow out of a view that the reality of which we are aware as thinking, speaking individuals is wholly, or primarily, governed (or created) by language. Put simply, when we speak, do we reach an extra-textual reality beyond our speech, or is our experience a function of the language and metaphors we use? The ancients were well aware of the power of language, but for them language was a tool that reached an extra-linguistic reality outside of the mind. Even if reality was thought of as essentially intellectual, it was conceived of as something in which the human mind participated rather than something the human mind formed or created. See, for example, Novitz, "Metaphor, Derrida and Davidson," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.44, no.2, 1985, pp. 101-114; Zoltan Kovecses, *Metaphor: a Practical Introduction* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Lakoff and Hawkes (mentioned above).

the proportion are of equal status. Dionysus and Ares are both gods, and their cup and shield are equally emblematic. In the *Song of Songs* the proportion is more tenuous: the bride is a human soul or institution, the bridegroom is Christ. As man Christ fits the proportion on the same plane as the bride but as God he does not. The relation, therefore, between the bride and bridegroom will be worked out according to the way in which the exegete understands the relation between the human and the divine natures in Christ. For the pre-Nicene Origen, the relation is of one sort; for Ambrose it is of another. This is a subtle but real difference. The nature of the covenant that seals the love between the bride and bridegroom is also affected by the exegete's concept of spiritual perfection: is the bridegroom essentially a personal guide to perfection, revealing himself through the Scriptures (more like Origen's model), or is the ecclesial dimension essential to the working out of the covenant (more like Ambrose)? Finally, though the bride and bridegroom are the main characters in the *Song of Songs*, both are accompanied by friends and attendants. How these secondary characters are related to the bride and bridegroom is also affected by the theology of the exegete: are the attendants less perfect souls (more like Origen), or are they members of the Church (more like Ambrose)? These nuances will be played out over the course of this dissertation.

Finally, since a study of the *Song of Songs* in Ambrose places us in the logic of poetic metaphor and allegory, our analyses of his texts must follow the poetic, descriptive, and sometimes story-telling order of Ambrose's texts. This means that one does not find systematic, ordered presentations such as modern readers would prize. The order comes rather from the building up of images into a complex multi-layered picture. This is frustrating – at least it has been for me – but I am convinced that it is the essential challenge to a reading of Ambrose. His

genius lies in these images. He is a native poet, and one senses that he is most at home and his language is most beautiful when he is unraveling a poetic image. The habits of rhetoric also lie deep within him; even when engaged in philosophical argument, he never loses sight of his audience.

How do these habits of mind affect the organization of this dissertation? The most fundamental answer to this question is simply that one cannot impose a logical order on texts that do not proceed by logic. One must pay close attention to detail, take possession of the poetic imagery, and follow the conclusions Ambrose draws from them. His texts are rich and allusive; we cannot zoom in on some aspect of them and conclude “This is Ambrose,” since it will surely turn out to be only part of Ambrose.⁵⁰ Of necessity, therefore, I have stayed close to Ambrose’s texts, looking for clues and nuances. There is nothing irrational or illogical about Ambrose! Yet, his texts unroll in a way that is sometimes difficult to penetrate.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. Each part, as we said earlier, is dedicated to one major text of Ambrose.

Part one is an analysis of the *De Isaac vel Anima*. We begin (chapter one) with a brief review of modern scholarship on the *De Isaac*. Two points emerge from this review. First, there is no strong consensus with regard to the subject of the *De Isaac*. To the question “What is this

⁵⁰ An example of this may be found in J. Warren Smith, *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue: the Theological Foundation of Ambrose’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25. After pointing out rightly an ambiguity in Ambrose’s use of the terms *corpus* and *caro*, he continues with the statement that when Ambrose distinguishes between the soul and the body, saying that the soul is what we are and the body what belongs to us, he is always making a distinction between soul and the fallen ‘flesh’ in the sense in which Paul uses the word in Romans 7 and not a distinction between soul and body as such. This is going too far. He is stream-lining Ambrose’s thought in order to fit it into his (Smith’s) theological development of the role of baptism in the restoration of the pre-fallen integrity of body and soul. Without denying Smith’s point about baptism, we cannot constrain Ambrose to such consistency, especially when the distinction between what we are and what we have comes from multiple sources in Ambrose and from his reading of the well-known dialogue of Plato, *Alcibiades* 1.

treatise about?” answers abound. Second, there is also no agreement about the structure of the treatise. Basing my reflections on the work of Jacques Fontaine, Roman Jakobson, and others, I propose that we read the *De Isaac* as a poetic itinerary based on a layering of image and metaphor. Chapters two and three take us through this multi-level imagery as we follow the bride of the *Song of Songs* to her final goal, union with the highest Good.

Part two is an analysis of the *De Bono Mortis*. Since the treatise is a marvelous combination of serious argument about the right approach to death, rhetorical appeal, and philosophical challenge to certain sectors of his audience, our presentation of the treatise benefits from an examination of historical questions related to the text. Chapter one is a consideration of the background of the *De Bono Mortis*. This is largely a question of dates, so difficult in the case of Ambrose and his works. Two significant points emerge. First, Ambrose may have been older than we often suppose him to be when he wrote the *De Bono Mortis*. Second, the treatise itself falls into a group of Neoplatonic writings most likely composed in the mid-380s. In Chapter two we consider the environment in Milan in the 380s: the so-called Milanese Circle of philosophers, the audience to which Ambrose preached, the informal authority of Ambrose that extended far beyond the limits of his episcopal *persona* and that allowed him to be bold, daring even, and still maintain his position. As Philip Rousseau once remarked, Ambrose always “got it right” (in the sense that he always judged his adversaries and circumstances correctly. We look briefly at some of the crises Ambrose had to handle during his episcopal career, in order to have a better sense of him “getting it right.” The *De Bono Mortis* turns out to be yet another instance of bold but perceptive action on the part of Ambrose. Chapter three reviews the parameters within which Ambrose allowed himself to think like a Platonist: first, philosophy for him was subject to the

authority of Scripture, an authority that far outweighed – in time and importance – the authority of Plato. Second, Ambrose was fiercely loyal to the Roman understanding of the Nicene faith. This closed the door on any form of subordinationism inherent in Platonism. In Chapter four we take up the *De Bono Mortis*. One of the striking features of this treatise – the reason why it is included in this dissertation – is that the *Song of Songs* makes a surprise entrance into what is essentially a Platonic exhortation. The appearance of the *Song* colors the whole of the treatise in a manner typical of Ambrose. In order to see this scope of the treatise and the place of the *Song of Songs* within it, one must have an overview of the whole. I have given, therefore, a condensed version of the treatise, combining summarization with translation and condensing the 57 paragraphs (from the CSEL edition) into 13 divisions. I have provided detailed subtitles for these sections and inserted at appropriate places second tier comments that represent my own commentary and reflections on questions that arise during a reading of Ambrose's text. These are designed to facilitate a more organized and efficient reading of the treatise.

Finally, Part three is an analysis of Ambrose's *Expositio Psalmi 118*. The treatise as a whole is a long, verse-by-verse commentary on the twenty-two stanzas of the great psalm dedicated to the praises of the Old Law.⁵¹ The *Expositio* is the only one of the three treatises examined in this dissertation that may be thought of as an exegetical commentary. Section one, therefore, takes up the question of Ambrose's exegetical method. After a brief review of metaphor and allegory in relation to Ambrose's understanding of the *mysterium* of Scripture (Chapter one), we turn to his exegetical method. Since Origen was clearly a source for Ambrose's exegesis in general and of his treatments of the *Song of Songs* in particular, I compare

⁵¹ The treatise fills volume 62 of the CSEL edition. The treatise itself runs to 507 pages.

Ambrose's exegetical procedure with that of Origen (Chapters two and three). As it turns out, this comparison reveals much not only about Ambrose's use of Origen but also about his fundamental attitude to the *Song of Songs* and his pastoral approach to it in his church of Milan (Chapter four). All of this is amply verified in the commentary itself. Chapter five addresses the puzzle that underlies any examination of Ambrose's *Expositio*. It is the somewhat mysterious presence of the *Song of Songs* throughout the entire commentary. Verse 1:1 of the *Song* begins in stanza one of the commentary, and the last verse of the *Song* (8:14) ends stanza twenty-two. So Ambrose clearly intended a parallel. What motive might he have had for building up this double commentary? In section two (Chapters one through four) I analyze in detail the Prologue and five of the twenty-two stanzas. This choice of stanza follows the order of the *Song of Songs* as it appears in Ambrose's text and gives a sense of the commentary as a whole. Finally, in the conclusion to Part three, I offer what may be thought of as a pastoral reason, based on the texts of Psalm 118 and the *Song of Songs*, why Ambrose constructed a parallel commentary on both texts.

PART ONE
THE *DE ISAAC*

CHAPTER ONE

QUESTIONS OF STRUCTURE

THE *DE ISAAC* IN RELATION TO THE *DE BONO MORTIS*

These two texts are found together in the manuscript tradition.¹ Ambrose makes a textual link between them both at the end of the *De Isaac* and at the beginning of the *De Bono Mortis*. In the *De Isaac*, he traces the spiritual growth of the soul from baptism to death.² He describes the soul's progress within an historical context, the adult life of the patriarch Isaac and his marriage to Rebecca, and within a spiritual context, an extensive commentary on the *Song of Songs*. In the final paragraphs, Ambrose urges his readers to purify themselves so that when Christ returns they may rise with Him in glory. Then he adds, "Let us not fear death, therefore, since it is rest for the body; but for the soul it is either freedom or departure."³ In the context of the Christian preparation for eternal life, mere departure or escape (*absolutio* for ἀπαλλαγή) cannot be an adequate explanation of what happens to the soul at death. Ambrose signals a change of approach, however, by introducing this well known rhetorical and philosophical argument for death as a good,. More in the same vein does in fact follow in the *De Bono Mortis*. He begins that treatise by looking back to the *De Isaac*: "Since in the preceding book I assembled a certain

¹ See Schenkel, CSEL 32.1,v.2, LXXIII-VI.

² Ambrose appears to have delivered sermons on the patriarchs during Lent to catechumens (See Schenkel, 32.1, v.2, II; Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame (Indiana): University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 2-4 and *passim*; see also Gérard Nauroy, "La Structure du *De Isaac vel Anima* et la Cohérence de l'Allégorèse d'Ambroise de Milan," REL, 63 (1985), 216 n.31, 234.

³ ergo non timeamus mortem, quoniam requies est corporis, animae autem uel libertas uel absolutio. (*De Is.* 8.79.21).

discourse on the soul, I think it will be easier to compose something about death as a good.”⁴ The *De Bono Mortis*, therefore, is for Ambrose a sequel to and a completion of the *De Isaac*; his treatment of the soul in the *De Isaac* has prepared the way (*via facilior*) for a consideration of death as the end and culmination of a holy life. The *De Bono Mortis* complements the *De Isaac* in another way: it contains a commentary on the final verses of the *Song of Songs*, which are missing from the *De Isaac*. Together, the two treatises form a unified discourse on the soul and a complete, though informal, commentary on the *Song of Songs*.

A LACK OF CONSENSUS AMONG SCHOLARS

The *De Isaac* is the most widely analyzed of Ambrose’s texts. It has a particular appeal for scholars because it is relatively short; it is an exegetical study of an Old Testament patriarch, whose life is a type of New Testament events; it contains a double exegesis of *Genesis* and the *Song of Songs*; it shows the use Ambrose made of Philo, Origen, and Plotinus; finally it contains beautiful, lyrical passages that represent the best of Ambrose. In some ways this is Ambrose’s most classic and straightforward treatment of the *Song of Songs*. It is as close as he comes to a line-by-line commentary.

It seems that the *De Isaac* has been analyzed from every possible angle. The treatise, as Gérard Nauroy has pointed out, presents two difficulties: Ambrose’s exegetical method is difficult to understand and the overall structure is elusive.⁵ As a result, even after extensive

⁴ Quoniam de anima superiore libro sermonem aliquem contexuimus, faciliorem uiam putamus de bono mortis conficere aliquid. (*De Bono Mortis* 1.1).

⁵ “Le *De Isaac uel anima*, parfois considéré comme le chef d’œuvre de la spiritualité mystique d’Ambroise et comme un lieu d’interférence entre le didactisme parénétique du prédicateur et la *suauitas* poétique et hermétique de l’hymniste doit l’intérêt que les critiques lui ont portées ces trente dernières années à deux raisons majeures: l’une est liée à la *Quellenforschung*, l’autre aux problèmes d’exégèse et de composition que ce texte pose avec une acuité

research, fundamental questions remain: what is the unifying theme? How is the treatise divided? Was it composed as a single piece or has Ambrose “sewn” together a number of homilies and given that patchwork a title? And the title: is it *De Isaac vel Anima* or *De Isaac et Anima* and does it matter? The various scholarly answers to these questions have now formed a corpus of literature which more recent authors summarize at the head of their new contributions.⁶ To my mind at least, this lack of consensus indicates a problem of method. I would like to consider in more detail some of the questions raised by scholarly debate and then focus on questions of method as they apply to the *De Isaac* in particular. First, however, I would like to recall one of the general principles outlined in the introduction to this dissertation: Christ is the all-commanding central figure of the *De Isaac*. Since this treatise is concerned with the life of the soul and growth in holiness, Christ is the key to that life and growth. The fundamental structure of the treatise, therefore, places Isaac, his wife Rebecca, and the soul they represent in a relationship with Christ and the listener/reader is invited to enter into that relationship. The treatise is an exercise in holiness as well as a presentation of ideas.⁷

particulière.” Nauroy, *La Structure*, 211. Nauroy refers here to Jacques Fontaine, “Prose et poésie: l’interférence des genres et des styles dans la création littéraire d’Ambroise de Milan,” *Ambrosius Episcopus: Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della elevazione di sant’ Ambrogio alla cattedra episcopale Milano*, 2-7 dicembre 1974, ed. Giuseppe Lazzati, v.1 Milan: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (1976), 124-70.

⁶ See for example: Gerard Nauroy, “La Structure,” 213; Mechtild Sanders, “*Fons Vitae Christus*”: *Der Heilsweg des Menschen nach der Schrift De Isaac et anima des Ambrosius von Mailand*, Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1996, 16-19; Colish, 69-71.

⁷ Si ces homélies sont des « instructions », ce n’est pas au seul sens antique et intellectuel du *docere*, mais aussi et surtout au sens paulinien de l’édification de l’homme intérieur. Leur propos est d’entraîner les âmes des auditeurs au dialogue de la prière et à l’offrande spirituelle. Comme celle des poèmes, leur beauté n’est pas gratuite, mais fonctionnelle; de ces sermons d’Ambroise aussi, l’on pourrait dire ce qu’Horace avait dit de la fonction psychagogique des poèmes: « Non satis est pulchra esse ... , dulcia sunt, et quocumque uolent animum auditoris agunto. » (Ars Poetica, 99-100), Fontaine, “Prose et Poésie,” 152. See also Nauroy, “La Structure,” 224, 236.

THE SUBJECT OF THE *DE ISAAC*

The name would imply of course that the patriarch Isaac is the subject of the treatise, though the addition of a “anima” in a subtitle would seem to imply something more general or philosophical in tone. Most early manuscripts include a subtitle for the *De Isaac* as they include “et Vita Beata” for the *De Jacob*.⁸ In the case of the *De Isaac* some have “et anima,” and others “vel anima.” Augustine gives the subtitle “et anima.”⁹ Mechtild Sanders and Allan Fitzgerald consider the difference between “vel” and “et” to be significant.¹⁰ They both argue that the “et” in the title shows that Ambrose intended to make a distinction between the patriarch Isaac and “anima,” whether this refers to the soul of man in general (Sanders) or to Rebecca in particular (Fitzgerald). Perhaps if Ambrose had wished to make this distinction, he could have chosen a more distinctive title. Following Fitzgerald’s line of argument, it might have been: *De Isaac et Rebecca* or *De Isaac Animaque*, in which case a parallel would have been established between two like entities, Isaac and Anima. As it is, “et” is the most generic of connectors; it simply means that Ambrose is going to talk about two things, Isaac and the soul, or about one thing in different respects. Finally, one cannot argue from the title to the text. It must be the other way around.¹¹ We might take Augustine, therefore, as the closest and most reliable witness and conclude that “et” is the best choice. This has no effect, however, on the meaning of the title. “De Isaac *vel* Anima” is usually taken to mean something like: “On Isaac, or in other words, on

⁸ Schenkel speculates that the original may have had no subtitle (CSEL 32.1 v.2, XXVIII). The *De Jacob* comes with the subtitle *et Vita Beata*.

⁹ Augustine, *Contra Iulianum* 1.9, 44; 2.5, 12.

¹⁰ Sanders, 14; Fitzgerald, “Ambrose at the Well: *De Isaac et anima*,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 48 (2002), 79.

¹¹ In Tertullian we find “mortem hominis iusti vel pauperis” and in the opening line of the *De Isaac*: “...vel origo... vel gratia.” One of the postclassical uses of “vel” is as a non-adversative “et.” (See Blaise, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs Chrétiens*, 838).

the Soul.” This is a normal use of *vel*; it has the same meaning as Augustine’s “et”; and it fits the transition Ambrose makes from the *De Isaac* to the *De Bono Mortis* mentioned above: “Since in the preceding book I assembled a certain discourse on the soul....”¹²

A more difficult question arises over the significance of Rebecca: to what degree is this treatise about her? She comes into the text because she is Isaac’s wife, just as Sarah comes into the *De Abraham*. In her study of Ambrose’s patriarch treatises, Colish discusses the difficulty presented by the *De Isaac*.¹³ If Ambrose proposed to devote a treatise to each of the great Old Testament patriarchs, significant portions of the life of Isaac belong to the stories of his father and his son. His birth and sacrifice belong to the story of Abraham, his blessing of Jacob over Esau to the story of Jacob. So the events that belong to the story of Isaac alone are few: he marries Rebecca, digs wells, sojourns among the Philistines during a period of famine, and Rebecca gives birth to twins (Gen.24-26). She has a large role in the story told in Genesis. This would partly explain her significance in Ambrose’s account, but does she take center stage? Many scholars think she does as the historical base for the bride in Ambrose’s commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Gérard Nauroy proposes that Ambrose has, in part at least, filled in the gaps in the story from Genesis with thematic material from the *Song of Songs* to give an account of the spiritual growth of Rebecca, the bride of Isaac, just as Soul is the bride of the true Isaac, Christ.¹⁴ This may be the right interpretation. It derives in part from the teaching of Pierre Hadot.¹⁵ But to

¹² See ch.1, note 4 (above).

¹³ Colish, 69.

¹⁴ Nauroy, “La structure,” 226. In *Exégèse et Création Littéraire chez Ambroise de Milan: l'exemple du De Joseph Patriarcha*, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes (2007), 226, he softens this position. But see *Exégèse* 226, note 21.

¹⁵ See Solange Sagot, “La triple sagesse dans le *De Isaac vel anima*: essai sur les procédés de composition de saint Ambroise,” *Ambroise de Milan: XVIe centenaire de son election épiscopale*, ed. Yves-Marie Duval, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes (1974), 67-8.

consider the *De Isaac* primarily as a portrait of Rebecca, figure of the soul, bypasses a certain richness in the text. Ambrose gives us indications of this, to which I shall return later.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE *DE ISAAC*

Various principles of structure and divisions of the text have been proposed. To name a few, by way of example; (1) Solonge Sagot suggests three parts, one of which, the digging of wells, is wholly separate from the other two: the three parts would have been more or less “glued” together. Sagot does not mention this; but the verb Ambrose uses to describe his composing of the *De Isaac* is *contexo* (to join together, assemble, connect, link, compose), where the verb he uses in the same sentence for his composing of the *De Bono Mortis* is the more standard *conficio*.¹⁶ (2) A large group of scholars, represented by Dassmann and Colish,¹⁷ see the passage at 6.50, in which Ambrose describes the fourfold progress of the soul in the *Song of Songs*, as a key to the structure of the text.¹⁸ They divide the text differently – the divisions cannot be clearly defined – but they think that the four stages of spiritual growth in the soul as

¹⁶ See ch.1 note 4 (above). Since *contexo* may mean “compose” in the normal sense of the word, Ambrose may have used it here as a synonym for *conficio*; but it may also represent his editorial procedure of assembling and combining various homilies into a more or less unified written treatise for publication.

¹⁷ See Colish, 69-71 and her discussion of the *De Isaac* as a whole divided into four + three parts, 72-87; also Ernst Dassmann, *Die Frömmigkeit des Kirchenvaters Ambrosius von Mailand: Quellen und Entfaltung* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1965), 173-9. Sanders summarizes divisions of the text proposed by earlier scholars before giving her own, 74-83.

¹⁸ *Audiens hoc anima hausit mysteriorum ebrietatem caelestium et uelut soporata a uino et quasi in excessu uel stupore posita dicit: ego dormio, et cor meum uigilat. tum Uerbi praesentis lumine percussa, cum oculis requieuisset inflexis, excitatur a Uerbo. quartus autem hic iam processus est animae. primum etenim caritatis inpatiens et Uerbi moras non ferens rogabat, ut oscula mereretur, et meruit desideratum uidere, introducta quoque est in cubiculum regis. secundo cum mutua misceret adloquia, in umbra eius requieuit, et subito Verbum ei de medio sermone discessit, quaerenti tamen non diu abfuit, sed saliens super montes et transiliens super colles aduenit. nec multo post quasi capreolus aut ceruorum inulus, dum adfatur dilectam, exsiliuit et reliquit. tertio cum in cubili et noctibus, in ciuitate et foro et plateis quaesitum non repperisset, aliquando orationibus suis gratiaque reuocauit, adeo ut etiam propius uocaretur a Sponso. quarto ipsa iam ab eo dormiens excitatur, quamuis corde uigilaret, ut continuo uocem pulsantis audiret. sed moram passa dum surgit, quia uelocitatem uerbi non poterat comprehendere, dum aperit ostium, transiuit Verbum, et ipsa exiuit in uerbo eius et per uulnera requisitum, sed uulnera caritatis uix tandem inuenit et tenuit, ut postea non amitteret (Ambrose, *De Is.* 6.50).*

outlined at 6:50 indicate structural elements of the text. Ambrose begins 6.50 by saying that the stage the soul has now reached is the fourth. Then, he explains his statement by enumerating the other three. At the end of 6.50, he says, “I have given a succinct summary of the whole; now let us discuss each point.”¹⁹ One might expect “each point” (*singula*) to represent each of the four stages, but it could also introduce a discussion of each detail of the fourth stage. Ambrose launches right into an exhortation to his audience to act like the bride in the fourth stage: “Even if you are asleep, if only he knows the devotion of your soul, Christ comes and knocks on the door [of your soul] and says, ‘Open to me, my Sister’ (Sg.5:2).”²⁰ It would seem, therefore, that there is no necessary connection between the progress of spiritual growth one may find in the *Song of Songs* and a formal structure of the *De Isaac* summarized at 6.50.

(3) Sanders and Fitzgerald have moved from questions of formal structure and division to a consideration of recurring themes and the relationship between Isaac and Rebecca as an underlying source of unity. Sanders, after dividing the work into seven parts,²¹ analyzes various leitmotifs (the wells, light, grace, wisdom etc.) and shows that they all point to Christ as the single, highest principle of the perfection of the soul.²² Allan Fitzgerald proposes the relationship between Isaac and Rebecca as the underlying principle of unity for this “other-than-merely-logical” treatise.²³ In a sense, Fitzgerald has nailed the difficulty all of these analyses of the *De Isaac* fail to resolve. They seek logical structural order in a treatise that is built on other grounds and so multiply partial insights into the text but somehow miss the treasure. It seems to me that

¹⁹ ad summam haec compendioso sermone perstrinxi; nunc discutiamus singular (Ambrose, *De Is.* 6.50 end).

²⁰ etsi dormias, si modo deuotionem animae tuae nouerit, Christus uenit et pulsat eius ianuam et dicit: “aperi mihi, soror mea” (Ambrose, *De Is.* 6.51). *eius* here refers to the soul. The sense is that even if you are asleep, Christ will knock on her door, that is, the door of your soul.

²¹ Sanders, 95-8.

²² Sanders, 98 ff.

²³ Allan Fitzgerald, 82.

Nauroy, and to a lesser extent Sanders, come closest to the true order of the *De Isaac* by focusing on thematic and poetic structural devices, such as verbal resonances and inclusion.²⁴

THE POETIC FUNCTION AND THE LAYERING OF METAPHOR

If we are handed a poem we have never seen before, how do we approach it? If it is a long epic poem, our procedure may be more immediately analytical. Generally speaking, however, after a quick overview, we plunge in and read it through. We are on the look-out for cues and associations. We expect the poem to come alive, so to speak, in our hands. It is an event in which we and the poem join forces in order to give us knowledge and pleasure. The knowledge is not the conclusion of a discursive argument; it is some new insight, some new perception, or the memory of old insights reawakened. Even if the content of the poem causes sorrow, we still have a sense that we are better for having read it: there is a kind of satisfaction that we derive from our reading and from the taste of that sorrow. What I have just described is the kind of experience Aristotle brought to the writing of the *Poetics*. He details the different kinds of insight and perception: if pity and fear, tragedy and epic; if laughter at the incongruous (without pain), comedy. Then he goes on to divide the different genres of poetry by other criteria (medium, structure, parts). Yet his first principle is that *poiesis* is the art of representation; and viewed as a whole the poetic arts are modes of imitation.²⁵ I would like to propose that we read the *De Isaac* as a poem. Though it does not meet the expectations one would normally have of a poem: meter,

²⁴ Nauroy gives a number of examples of the use of words and phrases to mark sections of the text. Beginning a paragraph with an emphatic *talis* in connection with Isaac at both 3.7 and 4.17 reconnects Isaac with Rebecca after an interlude. The linking of verses from the *Song of Songs* with verses from the Genesis story referring to Isaac's wells (*fons*, *puteus*) joins the story of the bride and bridegroom of the *Song* to that of Isaac and Rebecca. There are also examples throughout the treatise in which Ambrose applies the principle of the threefold wisdom to texts from Scripture (see part three). See Nauroy, "La Structure," 226-7, 235, note 90.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a 16.

rhyme, or other common poetic figures, still it reads more like a poem than prose. The structure is based on the unfolding of metaphor, and, to a lesser extent, allegory; it is a love story that leads to marriage. Primarily, it is a representation of the deepest reality of the Christian life. Ambrose intends the *De Isaac* to come alive in our hands and show us how to enter into this reality by a kind of imitation of the bride of the *Song of Songs*. When, in the final paragraphs he lays aside the metaphors and describes his vision of the goal of the Christian life in philosophical terms, this causes a marked change of tone. The shift, however, is his guarantee for the poetic images, a clear statement of the goal to which they lead. In conclusion, the *De Isaac* is a meditative, performative text, a kind of *poiesis* that leads the reader beyond poetry to a final resolution or state that is best described using the philosophical language of Plato and Plotinus.

As a result of his investigations into the transformation of style and genre in early Christian authors, Jacques Fontaine concludes that Ambrose's style is marked by what he calls an "interference," a blending, of poetry and prose.²⁶ Elements we would expect to find only in poetry make inroads into his prose, and the theological ideas one expects to find in prose appear in his poetry. If I understand correctly, Fontaine attributes this blending in part to the central role of the Psalter in Ambrose's personal and literary activity. He also notes that Hilary and Ambrose were the only early Christian writers who wrote both prose and poetry. Yet where Hilary failed, in the sense that his hymns were unused and therefore lost, Ambrose succeeded in creating a new genre. Hymns we know with certitude to be his, and others either his or close copies, have been in continual use for over 1600 years.²⁷ For Fontaine, therefore, it is significant that Ambrose was

²⁶ Fontaine, "Prose et poésie" 124-70. See ch.1, note 5 (above).

²⁷ Ambroise de Milan, *Hymnes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1992). After meticulous analysis, Fontaine and his co-editors recorded 14 hymns as authentic ranging from certitude (based on citations by Augustine) to probable (based on internal stylistic criteria). See the Introduction, 11-16.

a poet, an orator, and an exegete; one might say that throughout his career he wrote and spoke his prose in part like a poet. The poetic aspects of his prose may be seen at many different levels, in rhythm, sound, in the extensive use of image and metaphor.²⁸ Ambrose understood the power of an image that is an immediate, vivid, yet ambiguous conveyor of reality. Because it embraces the whole of an idea in one moment but also invites the interpretive glance of the receiver, one appealing image may have more power to move and persuade than a whole treatise of well developed arguments.²⁹ We have seen a simple example of this appeal and invitation to interpret in Aristotle's metaphor from the *Poetics*. "The cup of Ares" adds nuances and poignancy to a description of war that a plain description could never bring: killing is what Ares always brings: warriors who kill are like men drunk on fighting and blood, war is a frenzy of destruction; the metaphor also spontaneously brings to mind whatever personal experiences one may have of Ares or Dionysus. The poet offers the image, the receiver decodes it and makes it his own.³⁰ Consequently, the metaphor yields an understanding that is profound but deeply personal and beyond the limits of discursive reasoning. Of course one may discuss and describe the metaphor and the effect it may have – this is one of the functions of literary criticism – but this discourse is not the same thing as the reception of the metaphor. To put it in philosophical terms, images teach, though there is an added dimension to them because they represent – to varying degrees –

²⁸ In part three of this dissertation we will see a striking example of Ambrose's use of poetic elements in his prose, in the prayer of the lost sheep, from stanza 22 of Ps.118.

²⁹ Augustine was sensitive to the persuasive sweetness (*suavitas*) of Ambrose's images and of his writing in general. In the *De doctrina christiana*, he comments on the image of the teeth of the bride, a baptismal image from the *Song of Songs* used by Ambrose, "Et tamen nescio quomodo suavius intueor sanctos, cum eos quasi dentes Ecclesiae uideo praecidere ab erroribus homines..." We will discuss this passage in greater detail in part three.

³⁰ Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, trans. Charles Segal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 38-9; by way of example: 69-76.

truth known by experience.³¹ So what they teach is delicate and often intimately tied to personal experience. The power of the image, therefore, lies both in the degree to which it evokes an experiential response and in the subtle ways in which it channels and transforms that response. We will return to this discussion in part three of this dissertation. For the present, I would like to suggest that a reading of Ambrose's *De Isaac* in terms of poetic metaphor, offered by Ambrose but received and decoded by the reader, gives us a key to the power and appeal of a text that seems baffling and disorganized, if one is looking for logical development. To taste, therefore, the beauty of the *De Isaac*, one must participate, at least imaginatively, in the images of Isaac and Rebecca and of the bride of the *Song of Songs*.

Fontaine bases his discussion of the blending of poetry and prose in Ambrose on the structural analysis of the Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson, and on the application of Jakobson's analysis to religious language by François Genuyt.³² I would like to review Jakobson's and Genuyt's analyses here because they give a clear idea of the *function* of rhetoric and poetry, as distinct from various rhetorical and poetic *genres* and also as distinct from the logical structure of discursive language.³³ A summary of Jakobson's classic division of communicative speech may seem like a digression; but it will give us a clearer understanding of Ambrose's procedure in the *De Isaac*. Before we begin, however, I would like to point out that Jakobson's division of communicative speech does not directly address the *content* of the communication; he is not

³¹ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448b 9-17; Thomas Aquinas, *In Libros Posteriorum Analyticorum Expositio*, Proemium, 6.

³² Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetry," *Style and Language*, ed. Thomas Ambrose Seboek (Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), 350-77; François-Marie Genuyt, "La polyphonie des langages religieux," *Lumière et Vie*, 22/113 (1973), 27-38.

³³ This is not to say that the logical structure is unimportant, but only that it is not the primary consideration here. Logic is essential to the message communicated; but the message as such is only one of the elements of communication under consideration here.

concerned with *what* is communicated but with *how* it is communicated.³⁴ His division of speech is twofold. He recognizes six *elements* of communication; each element has a particular *function*. Whenever we speak, we combine elements and functions; differences arise from the dominance of some elements and functions over others. His schema allows a certain classification of enunciations, though the separate elements and functions seldom appear isolated in real speech.

The six elements of communication are the *addresser*, *addressee*, *message*, *context* (or referent), *code* (the common language), and *contact*.³⁵ An *addresser* sends a *message* to an *addressee*, within a *context* understandable to the addressee. There is a *code* at least partially understood by both parties and some means of *contact* between them. Each of these elements determines a different *function* of language. If one element has priority, a corresponding function is emphasized. The functions correspond to the elements as follows: (1) the *emotive* (or expressive) function signifies the attitude of the addresser; (2) the *conative* function signifies the orientation of the addresser to the *addressee*; (3) the *poetic* function finds the optimum delivery for the message; (4) the *referential* function expresses the *context*; (5) the *metalingual* function explains or interprets the code; (6) the *phatic* function establishes contact between the addressor and the addressee.³⁶

ELEMENT	FUNCTION	SIMPLE EXAMPLES
addressor	emotive	Fantastic!, Oh Dear.
addressee	conative	Please, Thank you.

³⁴ For Jakobson, the process of accurate communication of data is covered by the *metalingual* function; that is, what linguistic terms do we use to make a statement of fact clearly understood, eg. does “rational animal” define or adequately account for “man”? In this article he is primarily concerned with what he calls “metalanguage,” language about language, as opposed to “object language,” language about extra-lingual reality (356). This is a study of communication through language, not a study of extra-lingual reality as such.

³⁵ Jakobson, 353.

³⁶ See Jakobson, 354-7. The examples that follow are mainly taken from everyday speech. One is from Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act 3, scene 2. Tone of voice also has much to do with the function of these phrases.

ELEMENT	FUNCTION	SIMPLE EXAMPLES
message	poetic	“Brutus is an honorable man.”
context	referential	It is raining <i>today</i>
code	metalingual	What do you mean?
contact	phatic	Hello. Well. un-huh!

Jakobson discusses some simple, often unconscious examples of poetic function, for example a short name before a longer one (“Joan and Margery”) may have a more pleasing shape than a long before a short (“Margery and Joan”). In general, the poetic function as Jakobson understands it, is the function of all verbal art. It focuses on the optimum configuration of the message to be delivered and as such it is a much broader category than poetry itself. Both poetry and rhetoric, as Aristotle, Cicero, and Ambrose knew them, are subsets of the poetic function. On the level of words it deals with sound, rhythm, meter, cadence, and other elements like these. On the level of ideas it chooses the right coordination of and juxtaposition of phrases, images, metaphor, and other rhetorical figures like these. In this sense, poetry or the poetic function is close to the Greek, specifically Aristotelian, idea of *ποίησις*, the art of using language to *make* a fitting and optimal representation.³⁷ Again, representation is a kind of knowledge; but it is experiential, non-discursive, and marked by an inevitable ambiguity.³⁸ The “cup of Ares” reveals something about war that a straight definition would not, though one cannot easily put that knowledge into an ordered discourse.³⁹

³⁷ For Aristotle the verbal, musical, and visual arts are all modes of imitation, *Poetics* 1447a 16. In the broadest sense, therefore, they are arts of making some sort of representation.

³⁸ “The mechanisms of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.” Jakobson, 371, citing William Empson.

³⁹ Aristotle defines a metaphor as a word transferred, i.e. a name belonging to one thing is applied to another, either because it is an apt fit or because there is no native, normal word for the object one wishes to name (See the General Introduction). One of the duties of the poet or rhetorician is to decide whether the metaphor is a good fit, i.e. does it tell us something about the word to which it is applied that is appropriate or necessary and not far fetched. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b 7-30; Lausberg, 561-2.

The notion of *poetic function* is a useful term for us because it crosses the traditional divide between rhetoric and poetry. Also, by separating the *function* of poetry from our expected notions of *genre*, it frees us, in a sense, to consider Ambrose's use of poetic elements in his prose. By nature and by education Ambrose was both rhetorician and poet to a high degree. His task as a bishop was to decode for himself and his audience the metaphorical language and the typological events of the Scriptures. He also inherited a large body of allegorical interpretations of Scripture from Philo and Origen. Sitting at his table, reading silently the sacred texts and commentaries on them, Ambrose was in his prime element. It is hard to imagine that none of this rubbed off on Augustine as he sat and watched. He did remember sitting and watching. For me, at any rate, reading Ambrose and trying to "absorb" him on the level of poetic image has been a revelation. This is where his genius lies; this is where he may be found.

Finally, I would like to present François Genuyt's application of Jakobson's principles of linguistic functions to religious language. His general argument is that a neglect of the poetic function renders religious and liturgical language lifeless and unproductive. His analysis of the poetic function sheds much light on Ambrose's procedure in the *De Isaac*:

The role of the poetic function, when it is dominant, is to develop to the full the metaphorical structure of language. Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable, property of poetic language. Not only does the poetic message produce a reduplication, even a multiplication of meanings, but it builds on a multiplication of context, addresser, and addressee.⁴⁰

Then he gives several examples. The first concerns us here, since it is related to the *Song of Songs*. Genuyt quotes a stanza from the *Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross and then provides a commentary:

⁴⁰ Genuyt, 36.

How gently and lovingly
 You wake in my heart,
 Where in secret you dwell alone⁴¹

Who speaks and to whom does he speak? The poet to his muse, the lover to his beloved, the soul in love with God, God who seeks the love of his people? All of these senses together, most likely, but none in particular. The poem has no private points of reference, no one to witness or question. It belongs to no one. It is made to be a dwelling for others.... Each may enter into it and bring his own points of reference. This capacity of the poetic discourse for multiple points of entry and exit, on many levels, makes it an appropriate structure for the expression of words that are both human and divine. Without this [poetic] function, one would not be able to grasp that human language may be at the same time the language of revelation.... The poetic function of language is at work beneath the surface (*souterrainement*) in Biblical texts, in parables, and prayers. It bursts forth into full light in the psalms, the prophecies, and in the *Song of Songs*. Thus, if religious poetry may be the subject of philosophical or theological interpretation, never can this interpretation rival the poem itself.⁴²

This paragraph from Genuyt is highly significant. First, he says that the stanza from the *Spiritual Canticle* has many possible interpretations. Who speaks to whom? He gives four possible answers and then says, “All of these together, most likely, but none in particular.” So the stanza may be – and probably should be – read on multiple levels at once. Second, the stanza “belongs to no one [in particular]. Each may enter into it and bring his own points of reference.” That is, not only should it be read on multiple levels, but it also stands as an invitation to the reader to enter into the imagery and to add his own personal level. Third, as a text with “multiple points of entry and exit,” it is “an appropriate structure for the expression of words that are both human and divine.” The poetic function helps one to grasp that “human language may be at the same time the language of revelation”; metaphorical, poetic language bridges the gap between the human and the divine. Fourth, if poetic language does bridge the gap, then those texts of

⁴¹ St. John of the Cross, “The Living Flame of Love,” *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Washington DC: ICS Publications (1991), 640, cited by Genuyt (in French), 36.

⁴² Genuyt, 36-37, my translation.

Scripture that function as “bridges,” whether through prayer, prophecy, or the description of personal relationship, would be preeminently poetic; the poetic function of language “bursts forth into full light in the psalms, the prophecies, and in the *Song of Songs*.” Finally, though “religious poetry may be the subject of philosophical or theological interpretation, never can this interpretation rival the poem itself.” Again, metaphor and poetry pass beyond the limits of discourse.

In conclusion, Ambrose understood well the role and the evocative power of the poetic function. This may be one of the primary reasons why he favored the *Song of Songs*, that most metaphorical and poetic book of the Bible, the sole function of which is to describe and create a relationship between the human and the divine. I think that this poetic sense is one of the most fundamental aspects of Ambrose’s character as a bishop and a writer. It is a key to an understanding of the *De Isaac* and a key also to our enjoyment of it. By staying close to the text, and letting the images speak, without marshaling them into a coherent and logical system, one may taste the true work of Ambrose. He offers a grid, so to speak, a rich, intriguing web of interpretation, surrounding the *Song of Songs*. One must enter into the web, read the text like a spiritual exercise in personal edification, without trying to dispel the inevitable ambiguities. For a fourth-century Christian this was a congenial task.⁴³

⁴³ My purpose is not to make comparisons between “them” and “us.” But I think that historians face a particular difficulty with Ambrose. His thought is so fundamentally poetic and he himself is so intent on the moral improvement of his readers, that those who read him not for his exhortations to virtue but for historical purposes, without necessarily accepting all of his moral premises and goals, find him dull and discouraging. It takes an effort of imagination to enter into his “game” and to play it on his terms. But if we do succeed in playing on his terms, we gain, if nothing else, a sense of the power and effect of rhetorical delivery (including the poetic function) in a fourth-century bishop.

CHAPTER TWO

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS I: THE PROGRESS OF THE BRIDE

1. ISAAC AND REBECCA

Ambrose begins the *De Isaac* with a recapitulation of the person and the early life of Isaac, which he had considered already in the *De Abraham*. Isaac is the reward given to the great man Abraham; he is a figure of the miraculous birth and passion of Christ. Since the name “Isaac” means *laughter*, and laughter is a sign of joy, the name designates both the figure of Christ (that is the patriarch) and the grace (Christ himself). For “who is unaware that he [Christ] is the joy of all who is the remission of sins for all and thus removes from fearsome death both the dreaded prospect and the mournful sorrow? That one, then, is named but this one is meant; that one is described but this one is prefigured.”¹ The patriarch, therefore, is both himself and a typological figure of Christ.

There follows a more detailed and circumstantial portrait of Isaac. He is the true heir for whose sake the handmaid and her son are exiled. Abraham sought a foreign wife for him. Genesis recounts that as Isaac awaited the arrival of Rebecca, he went out into the countryside (*campum*) to meditate.² The Vulgate has *ad meditandum* but Ambrose’s text read *abalienare*.

¹ quis autem ignorat quod is uniuersorum laetitia sit qui mortis formidolosae uel pauore conpresso uel maerore sublato factus omnibus est remissio peccatorum? itaque ille nominabatur et iste designabatur, ille exprimebatur et iste adnuntiabatur (*De Is.* 1.1. CSEL 32.1 v.2, 641.11-15). Henceforth, references to the *De Isaac* will be made by section number, followed by the paragraph number, as they are found in the CSEL. Where clarity requires more information, these reference numbers will be followed by the page number of the CSEL edition followed by the line number on that page. Unless indicated otherwise, translations are my own.

² Gen.24:63.

This is for Ambrose, as for Philo before him, a clue to the true Scriptural significance of Isaac in the fields. He is meek, humble, and gentle,³ as he prepares to meet Rebecca, who symbolizes patience. He has separated himself from carnal pleasures; he has raised up his soul, drawn it away from the body, and he has hoped in God. This is what it means to know that one is a true man, since only the one who hopes in God comes to a man's true stature. Playing on the similarity between *abalienare* and *translatus*, Ambrose associates Isaac with the figure in Genesis, Enos, which means man in Chaldean, the son of Seth and, according to Genesis, the first to hope in and call upon God.⁴ Isaac, therefore, as another Enos represents true man.

We have now the patriarch Isaac himself; we have Isaac as the representative of ideal manhood; the next sentence adds a third level to the image: "He is good, therefore, this true Isaac, as one full of grace and a fountain of joy, to which fountain Rebecca comes that she may fill her water jar."⁵ Remembering the associations made in the opening paragraph, we see that this *true* Isaac is actually Christ, full of grace and source of joy. Just as in the stanza from the *Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross, there were four possible interlocutors, so here there are three "Isaacs." All of them pertain to the imagery of the *De Isaac*; none may be set aside without losing the richness of the text. "Rebecca" also is multiple. Scripture says (Gen.24:15) that Rebecca, at home in her own country, "went down to the spring, and filled her water jar, and came up." She was approached by Abraham's servant, arrangements were made for the marriage, then they

³ Jesus Christ describes himself in these same terms ("mitis sum et humilis corde," Mt.11:29)

⁴ Gen.4:26; 5:6. Ambrose freely follows Philo in this passage. Cf. On Abraham 2.7; That the Worse is Wont to Attack the Better XXXVIII (138); Allegorical Interpretation III.14 (42.). Strictly speaking, Enos is the one who first hoped in God, Enoch his son is the one taken up. Ambrose knows the difference between the two (see *De Paradiso* 3.19). But he has conflated them: the father, whose name signifies "man" stands for both, in order to develop the idea that Isaac in his withdrawal and contemplation has come to true manhood. This is a kind of *synecdoche*. The sequence is *abalienare*, man/Enos, hope, *translatus*.. Before one assumes that Ambrose has misinterpreted Philo, or cannot read his Greek, or has forgotten some of the Genesis story, one should try to unpack the metaphors.

⁵ bonus igitur Isaac uerus utpote plenus gratiae et fons laetitiae. ad quem fontem ueniebat Rebecca, ut impleret hydriam (*De Is.* 1.2).

both returned to Isaac in Canaan (Gen.24:17-67). In a move we have already seen him make with Isaac and Enos, Ambrose condenses and abbreviates the story, in order to deepen and expand the imagery. First, though he does not say that Isaac and Rebecca met at a well, nevertheless, since Isaac as he walks in the fields is a spiritual well of grace and joy, Rebecca, says Ambrose, comes to this fountain, Isaac, to fill her jar. Second, just as Isaac is a transparent image of perfect manhood and of Christ, Rebecca also is an image of the soul and of the Church:

For Scripture says, “Going down to the well, she filled her water jar and she came up.” (Gen.24:16). So either (*vel*) the Church or (*vel*), if you like, the soul went down to the well of wisdom, that she might fill her water jar to the brim with the teachings of pure wisdom.⁶

Rebecca as a metaphor for the Church stems from early Christian tradition, from Origen in particular. We will discuss this image in detail later. Here Ambrose with *vel...vel...* seems to give us a choice: she is either the Church or the soul, or perhaps more appropriately both. Two lines down, after commenting that the Jews refused to draw water from the fountain as Rebecca had done, Ambrose links the fountain to God with a verse from the prophet Jeremiah: “They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water ” (Jer.2:13)

2. *DE ISAAC* 1.2b-3.6: THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION – AN INTERLUDE

Ambrose has mapped out the beginning of the story; he has introduced Isaac and Rebecca, established the multi-level metaphorical interpretation of them, and brought them to their first meeting. He leaves them now, in order to enlarge the horizons of the story. Paragraphs 1.2b-3.6 are an interlude framed by an inclusion based on a single verse from Scripture,

⁶ dicit enim scriptura quia *descendens ad fontem impleuit hydriam et ascendit* (Gen.24:16), descendit itaque ad sapientiae fontem uel ecclesia uel anima, ut totum uas inpleret suum et hauriret purae sapientiae disciplinas (Ambrose, *De Is.* 1.2)

Gen.4:63.⁷ The significant verb in this verse, as we said above, is *abalienare*; here it means to separate oneself. Ambrose had used this verb to describe Isaac in the fields, at 1.2, as he waited for Rebecca; after the interlude, at 3.6, he returns to Isaac where he left him still waiting for Rebecca. At 3.7 Ambrose says, “Such was Isaac as he awaited Rebecca,”⁸ and then he takes up again the thread of the story. By implication, the interlude explains more fully who Isaac was, the ideal man, in terms of the idea behind *abalienare*.

Ambrose begins by highlighting the difference between the Jews who had refused to draw water from the true well and the prophets who had come thirsting. David in particular had thirsted for the living God (Ps.41:1-2). He had come that he might slake his thirst with the abundance of divine knowledge and cleanse himself from the blood of folly by the flowing of spiritual streams (*De Is.* 1:2b). Ambrose equates the blood of folly with the blood to which the Old Testament Law refers at Leviticus 20:18, which forbids a man to have intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period. Taking his inspiration from Philo, he gives an allegorical interpretation of that law. “Woman” signifies pleasure, the enticements of the body.⁹ Though the interpretation is allegorical, the depiction is graphic; it is an earnest warning not to relax the vigilance that keeps the mind firm, rational, and in control. Losing control causes one to rush headlong into grave danger.¹⁰ The danger lies in something deeper than disordered behavior.

⁷ Nauroy, “La Structure,” 221.

⁸ *Talis erat Isaac cum Rebeccam aduenientem expectaret* (Ambrose, *De Is.* 3.7)

⁹ *De Is.* 1.2, 643.6; See Philo, *De Fuga*, 188-194. See also Philo, *The Creation of the World*, LVIX (165). Philo makes the mind man/Adam, the senses woman/Eve. The senses are won over first by Pleasure/the Serpent. Then they take their delights to the mind and enslave it. See also Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation III*, where the allegory of the fall is explained at length.

¹⁰ *itaque caue ne uigor mentis tuae coitu quodam corporeae uoluptatis inflexus emolliatur atque in eius omnis amplexus resoluatur et fontem eius aperiat, qui debet esse clausus et saeptus intentionis studio et consideratione rationis hortus enim clausus, fons signatus. namque mentis uigore resolute sensus se corporalis delectationis effundunt, perniciosi nimis et in adpetentiam plenam grauis periculi proruentes, quos, si mentis uiuidae considerata mansisset custodia, refrenasset, (De Is. 1.2).*

Ambrose does not spell it out, but he turns to general questions: why should we maintain such vigilance? Who are we? What does it mean to be human? The answers to these questions all reveal the significance of *abalienare*.

Ambrose begins with a pun on *tueor*: “And so, consider (*intuere*), O Man: who you are and to what end you maintain (*tuearis*) your well-being and your life.”¹¹ Then he continues with a reflection on the nature of man, derived from Plato, then from Scripture, and finally from general philosophical notions. He begins with Plato and the possibilities proposed by Socrates in *Alcibiades I*.130a: “is he [man] soul, or flesh, or a joining of the two?” The argument turns around these three alternatives. His first response, also based on *Alcibiades I*.129-30, is that “what we are is one thing, what we possess another; he who is clothed is one thing, his clothing another.”¹² Then, turning to the Scriptures, he argues that the true nature of man is his soul: some passages of the Scriptures refer to man as flesh (Gen.6:3), others refer to him as soul (Gen.46:26). If a man adheres to God he is named soul (Prov.11:25); if he is a sinner, he is named flesh (Rom.7.14ff.). But, Ambrose continues, Paul also spoke of both soul and flesh where he described the conflict within himself between that part of him that delights in the law of God and the other part that is under the sway of sin. Though Paul declared each part fighting within him “man,” he preferred to align himself with his soul rather than with his flesh. He declared that his soul, in which he preferred to exist, was held captive and dragged into sin and

¹¹ *Intuere igitur, O homo, qui sis, quo salutem tuam uitamque tuearis* (Ambrose, *De Is.*2.3).

¹² *quid est itaque homo? utrum anima an caro an utriusque copula? aliud enim nos sumus. aliud nostrum, alius qui induitur et aliud uestimentum* (Ambrose, *De Is.*2.3). This is a distinction that Ambrose uses in many places; he consistently defines ‘man’ as “soul,” the body is man’s possession. As in Plato there are three degrees: the soul (*nos*), the body (*nostrum*), and external possessions (*circa nos*). For a sampling of Ambrose’s texts and a discussion of the possible debts on Ambrose’s part to Plotinus and Basil, see Goulven Madec, *Sainte Ambroise et la philosophie* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1974), 320-23. Madec notes that all of these thinkers would have read the *First Alcibiades*. We will return to this question in part two.

he confirmed this when he said, “Oh, unhappy man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom.7.24). He wished to be freed from his body as from an alien enemy. Therefore, according to Paul the true man is his soul. Ambrose does not draw this conclusion just yet, however. He turns (at 2.4) to a quick survey of philosophical opinions about the soul, in order to reject them all: the soul is not blood, not a harmony, not air, not fire, not an entelechy, but a living being; for “Adam was made into a living being” (Gen.2:7), since it is the soul that gives life to and governs the senseless and lifeless body. Finally, Ambrose makes a distinction among men: some are more excellent than others. The more excellent man is the spiritual man who retains the image of God; whereas the man who loses it and falls into sin and material things (*materialia*) is “a man subject to vanity” (Ps.143:4).¹³

Before we continue this development I would make an observation. Though the *First Alcibiades* and various philosophical positions enter into the argument, they either set the stage or appear at the end as false opinions. The real argument is based solely on the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the distinction from the *First Alcibiades* between who man is (that is, his soul) and what he possesses (his body) is mainstream Platonism and fundamental to Ambrose’s thought. The conclusion, therefore, of this argument and of the interlude in general represents an essentially Platonic and Plotinian view of human nature. It also fits the ascetical ideal of separation implied by the term *abalienare* as Ambrose uses it. That he is thinking of this term in particular is confirmed by the conclusion of the interlude (3.6). This argument, like the whole interlude, is paradigmatic. If we needed one example of the synthesis in Ambrose’s thought of intellectual culture with Scriptural knowledge and authority, this could be it.

¹³ Literally: “similar to vanity.” Representative of modern versions: “Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow” (Ps.143:4).

In the final section (2.5-3.6), Ambrose appears to follow Plotinus (En.1.8.4).¹⁴ This is the first of four sections in the *De Isaac* where Ambrose seems to refer to Plotinus. Since in 1.8.4, Plotinus himself follows Plato's *Theatetus* (176-7), it is difficult to decide how directly he influenced Ambrose. This is the case, to varying degrees, with the other instances as well. We also do not know how Ambrose read Plotinus: whether directly, through Porphyry, or in handbooks and anthologies. Finally, it is difficult to distinguish between ideas Ambrose may have taken directly from Plato or Plotinus from those he could have appropriated from the ambient philosophical culture. I will consider these questions in greater detail in part two of this dissertation. In the *De Isaac*, I merely point out the similarities between Ambrose and Plotinus. In my opinion Ambrose read Plotinus directly, especially the first Ennead. Though his divisions were arbitrary, Porphyry tried to arrange the *Enneads* in something of a pedagogical order. The first *Ennead*, therefore, was the first course in Plotinus.¹⁵ It would not be surprising to find that Ambrose had read it. The parallels in the table below also show close ties in their thought with regard to (1) the nature of the soul, (2) the corrupting influence of evil, (3) the identification of evil with matter, (4) the flight of the perfect soul, and finally (5) the need to flee evil, not the legitimate activities of life on earth.

AMBROSE	PLOTINUS
1. By nature the soul is most excellent (2.5, 14)	In itself the soul is not evil or, again, it is not wholly evil (1.8.4.6-7)
2. For the most part, it becomes liable to corruption by means of its irrational part, so that it inclines (pres.) towards the pleasures of the body and wantonness; it loses its hold on the	Whence comes evil in the soul? The irrational part of the soul is susceptible of evil, that is a lack of measure: excess and defect. From this come unrestrained

¹⁴ See Pierre Hadot, "Platon et Plotin dans trois sermons de saint Ambroise," *Revue des Etudes Latines*, 34, 1956, 202-220.

¹⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 121-2.

AMBROSE

right measure of things, it is deceived in its reasoning (2.5, 15-7)

3. Habitually inclined (past pt.) towards matter, it is glued to the body (2.5, 18)
4. The perfect soul turns away from matter. It flees and rejects whatever is unmeasured, mobile, evil; neither does it see nor does it approach the corruption of that earthly decline. It looks to the divine and flees earthly matter (3.6, 644.21-645.3)
5. But flight does not mean to abandon the world but to be in the world, to hold firmly justice and sobriety: to renounce vice not the use of the [legitimate] elements [of life].

PLOTINUS

wickedness... and false opinion (1.8.4.7-13)

The soul is in a body, which has matter; the reasoning part of the soul is darkened by matter and inclines towards it (1.8.4.14-21).

The perfect soul, then, inclined towards intellect, is always pure and turns away from matter and neither sees nor approaches anything undefined and unmeasured and evil. And so it remains pure wholly determined by Intellect (1.8.4.25-7)

For flight, says [Plato], is not to abandon the earth, but while being in the world, to be just and holy, with wisdom," according to the meaning of what he said, it is necessary to flee evil (1.8.6.10-13).

Some scholars see this section as a digression, a poorly inserted element. Yet Ambrose is setting the stage here for the drama contained in the rest of the treatise: if the mind is unstable, it is because man is in the balance, so to speak, between two alternatives: to be a corrupted soul glued to matter (2.5) or to be a perfect soul, attached to God, fleeing from and rejecting all that is immoderate, changing and deadly (3.6). And this is what it means to be a perfect man, like Isaac was as he waited for Rebecca.¹⁶ References to the conflict between the soul and the flesh (1.2 – 3.6) and the necessity to detach oneself from the pleasures and pursuits of the body occur again

¹⁶ Colish, 77. She thinks it would have been more logical for Ambrose to have inserted this section at 4.30 after the episode about the wells. If it were a logical philosophical discourse, or only that, she might be right. But if it is a story, a building up of scenes and images, according to the "logic" of the poetic function, then this arrangement is fine. Ambrose brings Isaac and Rebecca together three times, at the end of 1.1, at 3.7, and finally at 4.17(end)-18. Each encounter is more intense than the previous one, with a digression in between. This is excellent story telling technique. The reader is asked to make the connection between the Rebecca scenes and the intervening material. Rebecca comes into the story only one other time, at 6.55, but here she is brought in as an example not as a protagonist.

and again throughout this interlude and the treatise as a whole. For Ambrose this detachment, *abalienare*, is the indispensable foundation for spiritual progress.¹⁷

3. *DE ISAAC* 3.7: THE ARRIVAL OF REBECCA

At 3.7, Ambrose resumes the story of Isaac. At 1.2 he had concluded his first discussion of what it means to be a true man with the words, “Bonus Isaac verus....” Here he summarizes the second with “Talis erat Isaac....,” a recapitulation, prepared by a second reference to Isaac’s *abalienare*, or contemplative walk in the countryside in the preceding paragraph.¹⁸ Isaac is a man who possesses the firmness of character and virtue required for the spiritual journey that begins now with the commentary of the *Song of Songs*. This is a major turning point in the *De Isaac*. Nauroy speculates that this paragraph may be a joiner between a first section or sermon, more philosophical in tone, inspired by Philo and a second, inspired by Origen, based on the *Song of Songs*.¹⁹ There may be a joining here. Perhaps the change from Philo as a source of inspiration to Origen indicates two different homilies, though one cannot really argue from a shift in symbolism to a more or less awkward suture between Philo and Origen. Part of the difficulty lies in the shift from the man Isaac (a symbol of Christ the bridegroom) who waits for Rebecca (a

¹⁷ See, for example, 3.7; 4.11,13,16,34; 5.46; 6.51-2; 7.60-1; 8.78-9.

¹⁸ 3.6, 646,9-10. See also Nauroy, “La structure,” 221-222.

¹⁹ Nauroy, “La structure,” 222-224. Though Nauroy admires the subtlety and depth of Ambrose’s thought, he must account for what appears to be a switch in metaphor. First (at 1.2), Isaac represents Christ in relation to Rebecca as the Church or the soul. But at 3.7 Ambrose says that Isaac is the soul waiting for the bridegroom. It is as if Nauroy asks, “So what do we do with Rebecca?” His solution is to suggest that Rebecca may be Christ, a gender switch, or better, she may be Wisdom. This would hark back to an image of her from Philo, but there is no mention of wisdom in the present passage. Wisdom *is* mentioned at 1.2, but there Isaac is the fountain from which Rebecca draws a pitcher full. At 3.7 Ambrose does say that Isaac sees the mystery of Christ (*mysterium Christi*) as he sees Rebecca coming to him. Nauroy is trying to make the metaphors consistent and logical, but it would be better to let the images speak as a polyphony of metaphor with different strands weaving together into a rich and beautiful, if not linear and logical, whole. Isaac need not stand for Christ in every section of the *De Isaac*. As we shall see below, even St. Paul represents the bride of the *Song* for Ambrose.

symbol of the Church), to a new register in which Isaac's soul is the bride (*vel anima patriarchae*; 3.7, 646.26) who longs for the presence of the bridegroom. The reader who wishes to keep all the metaphors consistent might conclude with considerable unease, as does Nauroy, that if Isaac is the soul then Rebecca must symbolize the bridegroom. First, Ambrose would never go so far as to reverse gender specific images; in an age where gender roles were clearly defined, he is free, as Bernard of Clairvaux would be after him, to apply the metaphor of the bride to the soul of Isaac; but supposing him to make Rebecca an image of Christ with respect to Isaac is a modern anachronism. Second, Ambrose says that Isaac beholds the mystery of Christ (*videns mysterium Christi*); then in a phrase parallel to this one Isaac marvels at Rebecca (*videns Rebeccam venientem*). She brings with her vessels of gold and silver like the Church (*tamquam ecclesiam*). So the mystery and Rebecca/Church are parallel, not necessarily the same. Nowhere does Ambrose say that she symbolizes Christ. Third, this complex layering of images is ambiguous, but this is an essential mark of the poetic function. There is no reason why Isaac cannot on one level represent Christ, but on another represent the soul. Following is a translation of 3.7:

Such was Isaac, as he waited for the arrival of Rebecca, preparing himself for a spiritual union. For she came endowed already with heavenly mysteries, she came bringing with her magnificent jewels for her ears and hands, since through listening and [good] works the beauty of the Church shines forth: to whom, as we observe, it is fittingly said: *Be as thousands of thousands, and may your descendants possess the cities of their enemies* (Gen.24:60). The Church, therefore, is beautiful, who has acquired sons out of enemy nations. But this [passage] may also be applied to the soul, who has mastered the passions of the body and turned them to the duties of virtue; fighting back against her rebel impulses she has made them obedient to herself. And so, either the soul of the patriarch (*vel anima patriarchae*) beholding the mystery of Christ and beholding Rebecca coming with vessels of gold and silver like the Church with people from the nations, [and the soul of Isaac: *mirata*; feminine] marveling at the beauty of the Word and his mysteries, says:

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”; or Rebecca herself, beholding the true Isaac, that true joy, true gladness, desires to be kissed.²⁰

The first thing we notice in these paragraphs is that Ambrose offers several possible interpretations of the meeting of Isaac and Rebecca, without giving any indication that he favors one over the others; all seem appropriate. Later, at 4.17, in reference to the verse from the *Song of Songs* (1:9) where the bride is compared to the horses and chariots of Solomon, he says that in the *De Isaac* he has undertaken to speak about the bride as soul, whereas in his commentary on Ps.118, he had spoken about her as Church.²¹ This statement may be taken as some indication of his purpose throughout the whole of the *De Isaac*. Here, at 3.7, however, it is clear that even if one may receive greater emphasis, both are present. For both Isaac and Rebecca there is a double typology.

Rebecca is introduced as a type of the Church. This is the traditional interpretation found in Origen, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Hilary.²² There are two aspects of Rebecca that fit the metaphor: (1) she arrives bearing earrings symbolizing faith and bracelets symbolizing good works and (2) she gives birth to twins who struggle in the womb, that is, two peoples, two

²⁰ Talis erat Isaac, cum Rebeccam aduenientem expectaret praeparans se copulae spiritali, ueniebat enim caelestibus iam dotata mysteriis, ueniebat magna secum ornamenta aurium et manuum ferens, eo quod auditu et operibus emineat ecclesiae pulchritudo, cui recte dictum aduertimus: *esto in milia milium, et semen tuum possideat aduersariorum ciuitates*, decora igitur ecclesia, quae ex inimicis gentibus filios adquisiuit, sed potest hoc etiam ad animam deputari, quae passiones corporis subigit et ad uirtutum officia conuertit repugnantesque motus sibi oboedientes efficit, ergo uel anima patriarchae uidens mysterium Christi, uidens Rebeccam uenientem cum uasis aureis et argenteis tamquam ecclesiam cum populo nationum, mirata pulchritudinem Uerbi et sacramentorum eius, dicit: “osculetur me ab osculis oris sui” uel Rebecca uidens uerum Isaac, uerum illud gaudium, ueram laetitiam desiderat osculari (3.7-8). CSEL 32.1,v.2, 646.16-647.18.

²¹ CSEL 32.1,v.2, 4.17, 654.17-19.

²² The only remaining section from the chapter on Isaac in Hilary’s *De Mysteriis* describes Rebecca as the Church. This account is consistent with Ambrose’s portrait: duplicem habet figuram coniugii et partus et in coniugio ecclesiae typum praefert: camelas, id est gentes Christo subditas, potat; fidei auditum per innaures docet; armillas manuum ostendit boni operis ornatus; de nuptiis interrogata consociandorum Christo more respondit, ut ad uisum perueniat; de domo patris egreditur ostendens, quia, nisi renuntiauerit quis uitiis et concupiscentiis, Christi seruus esse non poterit; duas gentes duos populos signat... (Hilaire de Poitiers, *Traité des Mystères* ed. Jean-Paul Brisson (Paris: Cerf, 1947), 108-9 and notes).

nations, Jews and pagans (the enemy nations referred to here), the Synagogue and the Church. And since the passage referring to enemies may refer to the victory of the soul over the vices and weakness of the body, Rebecca may represent it as well. Isaac has already been shown to be a figure of Christ and a true man, that is a soul removed from the body and pleasures of the flesh, as he prepares himself for marriage. Here, at 3.7, when Isaac and Rebecca meet, Ambrose explodes, so to speak, the symbolism. He presents two possibilities. As with the stanza from the *Spiritual Canticles*, both are intended. 1) “The soul of the patriarch” beholds the mysteries of Christ, as he gazes at Rebecca, the Church. He turns to the Word marveling at his beauty (revealed in his mysteries), and says, “Let him kiss me...” 2) Rebecca, when she gazes at Isaac, recognizes in him the true Isaac, Christ, the one and only true source of joy and gladness (*verum illud gaudium, veram laetitiam*) and desires to be kissed. These two interpretations are each introduced by *vel* (either... or... but without imposing the nuance of two incompatible choices). Both Isaac and Rebecca, therefore, are cast into the role of the bride of the *Song of Songs*. Each beholds at their meeting the bridegroom that is Christ and longs to be kissed by him.

It seems to me that taking the phrase “*vel anima patriarchae*” at face value, so that Isaac himself participates in the mystery both of the bride and the bridegroom, in different senses, has added a certain richness, depth, and interest to the treatise. For Ambrose every Christian soul, whatever the sex or station in life stands as the bride before the bridegroom, Christ. Thus, at 4.11, in his commentary on the line from the *Song of Songs*, “The King has introduced me into his chamber,” he uses Paul as an example of the bride:

Blessed is any soul who enters the secret recesses. For rising up from the body, she has withdrawn herself from all things and she seeks the divine within herself and searches how she may pursue him. When she has grasped him, passing beyond and above intelligible things, in him she is strengthened and by him she is nourished. Such was Paul,

who knew that he had been seized and taken up into paradise, but whether taken up out of the body or taken while in it, he knew not. His soul, however, rose up out of his body; she drew herself away from the vital parts and bonds (*viscera et vincula*) and lifted herself up and [Paul], having become alien to himself, held ineffable words within himself, which he heard but was not allowed to tell.²³

This is the second passage in the *De Isaac* inspired by the *Enneads* of Plotinus. It is similar both to Ennead 4.8.1, the famous passage where Plotinus describes his ascent into union with Intellect,²⁴ and – before the fact – to Augustine’s well-known ecstasy at Ostia, also inspired by Plotinus, through Porphyry.²⁵

From 3.7 to the end of the *De Isaac* Ambrose gives a more or less running commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Having established the figurative grid, he launches into the commentary with confidence that his readers will be able to follow the layered imagery. I would like to analyze several passages that show Ambrose’s approach and the richness of the text.

But before we continue with Ambrose’s development of the *Song of Songs*, we should take a last look at the anchor for the metaphors and allegories of the *Song*. It is and remains throughout the *De Isaac* the literal Genesis story of Isaac and Rebecca. For Ambrose they are not merely allegorical figures. Each is presented as an historical character participating in a real marriage. This is the indispensable historical foundation for the imagery from the *Song of Songs*. It also fits Ambrose’s overall scheme of showing the ancient historical precedent for the realities

²³ beata anima quaecumque ingreditur penetralia. nam ea insurgens de corpora, ab omnibus fit remotior atque intra semetipsam diuinum illud si qua insequi possit scrutatur et quaerit. quod cum potuerit comprehendere, ea quae sunt intellegibilia supergressa in illo confirmatur atque eo pascitur. talis erat Paulus, qui sciebat se raptum in paradysum, sed siue extra corpus raptum siue raptum in corpore nesciebat. adsurrexerat enim anima eius de corpore et se a uisceribus et uinculis carnis abduxerat atque eleuauerat, factusque a seipso alienus intra semetipsum tenuit uerba ineffabilia, quae audiuit, et uulgare non potuit, 4.11: *alienus* is a verbal echo of *abalienare*, said of Isaac at 1.2; cf. *De Is.* 4.15-16 and 6.51-56. See also Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, 25-6, notes 5 and 6 on the Plotinus as a source for this passage.

²⁴ See Hadot, “Platon et Plotin,” 205 and Perre Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality 1. Plotinus and Porphyry,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 240.

²⁵ Hadot, “Plotinus and Porphyry,” 248.

of the New Testament. This explains why from time to time Ambrose returns from his commentary on the *Song of Songs* to an episode in the life of Isaac and Rebecca as it is recounted in Genesis, the digging of wells for example, and Rebecca giving birth to twins. Not only is change of scene an essential part of good storytelling, but the return to Genesis is like a touchstone that authenticates the spiritual allegory of the *Song of Songs*. The story of the bride's searching for the bridegroom is no mere myth. It represents the full reality of the truth of which the whole of the Old Testament, hence the lives of Isaac and Rebecca, is the historical figure. It seems to me that Ambrose needs no further justification for the shifts in the *De Isaac* between the allegory of the *Song of Songs* and the periodic return to the Genesis story.²⁶ Ambrose's development of Isaac digging wells is both an historical and an allegorical narrative, inasmuch as the physical wells must have a spiritual meaning.²⁷ As it turns out, they "contain" the triple wisdom of Solomon. We will look at this passage in detail in part three.²⁸

4. *DE ISAAC* 3.8-9: THE KISS

In 3.8, he leaves for a while any explicit mention of Isaac and Rebecca and begins his commentary on the *Song of Songs* in earnest. Though Isaac and Rebecca are not mentioned,

²⁶ Nauroy sees the description of Rebecca at 4.17 ("talis animae..." with "redimicula"), clearly referring back to the description of Isaac and Rebecca at 3.7 ("talis erat Isaac... with Rebecca's jewels) as an inclusion, a key passage of the treatise, signaling parallel portraits, 1.1-3.7 of Isaac and 3.7-4.17 of Rebecca. If this is the case, we must reread the passage from 3.7 to 4.17 as referring specifically to Rebecca. This is too much to ask. The text cannot be "shrunk" to fit. There is a parallel between 3.7 and 4.17. But it is a parallel of the complement of history and allegory. Of course there are ties between the two, but these do not create a univocal narrative. See Nauroy, "La Structure," 225-226.

²⁷ Ambrose remarks: "Quis haec legens terrena magis quam spiritalia opera esse arbitretur? (4.21).

²⁸ Solange Sagot analyzes in depth the episode of the wells and the triple wisdom of Solomon Ambrose evokes there. But after her brilliant analysis, she concludes that the inconsistencies she finds are insurmountable and that we cannot conceive of the *De Isaac* as a whole, but rather a loose conglomeration of beautiful, inspiring, but more or less unrelated writings gathered together for publication. (See 110-113). Sagot also reminds us that in the period of Ambrose and Augustine, compositional practice was not the same as it is for us (113). Various attempts have been made to reply to Sagot. Gerard Nauroy ("La Structure") may be the only one to have succeeded.

nevertheless, the character of *abalienare* which Ambrose has developed so carefully and applied to Isaac – the soul, separated from the body, free from vanity and pleasures of the flesh, ready for flight – is presented as the condition of the bride as she waits for the kiss of the Bridegroom:

So then, what is this “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”? (Sg.1:2) Either you may think of the Church hanging in suspense for many ages as she waits for the coming of the Lord, long promised by the prophets. Or you may think of the soul, who is vexed – raising herself up from the body and withdrawing from a life of luxury, as well as from fleshly delights and pleasures and freed from the anxiety of worldly vanities, by now she has long yearned for an infusion of the divine presence and the grace of the saving Word – she is vexed and afflicted that he comes so late. And so, as if wounded by love, and unable to endure his delays, she turns to the Father and asks that he send to her God the Word, and she gives the reason why she is so impatient, saying “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Sg.1:2). She seeks not *one* kiss, but many kisses, that she may assuage her desire. For she who loves cannot be satisfied by one miserable kiss, she requires many....²⁹

All of the requirements Ambrose outlined in the interlude are met: elevation from the body, withdrawal from the world and the flesh, freedom from anxious worry caused by vain occupations, and finally habitual desire for God: the bride is marvelously pure and passionate. Up to this point, Ambrose has presented the characters and laid out the spiritual conditions under which the bride and the Bridegroom of the *Song of Songs* may meet. On the general principle that one can only describe well something of which one has some experience, I think we can say that Ambrose, the reserved and urbane Roman senator, has lifted the veil here on his own view of the interior Christian life. It is not only a life of wisdom gained from the Scriptures and of

²⁹ quid est igitur: osculetur me ab osculis oris sui? considera uel ecclesiam iam diu promisso sibi per prophetas dominico aduentu, per tempora multa suspensam, uel animam, quae eleuans se a corpora, abdicatis luxurie atque deliciis uoluptatibusque carnalibus, exuta quoque sollicitudine saecularium uanitatum, iam dudum infusionem sibi diuinae praesentiae et gratiam uerbi salutaris exoptet, commacerari, quod sero ueniat, et adfligi, et ideo quasi uulneratam caritatis, cum moras eius ferre non possit, conuersam ad patrem rogare, ut mittat sibi deum uerbum, et causam, qua sit ita inpatiens, declarare dicentem: “osculetur me ab osculis oris sui.” non unum osculum quaerit, sed plura oscula, ut desiderium suum possit explorare; quae enim diligit non est unius osculi paritate contenta, sed plura exigit,... (*De Is.* 3.8). Origen’s presentation of the opening scene of the *Song of Songs* is behind this development, though Ambrose has recast it into simple, straightforward allegorical terms. This clarity is in contrast to Origen, for whom the literal level of the story is already an allegory. See Origen, *Ct. Cant.*, opening paragraphs.

initiation into the mysteries of Christ through the Church. It is also a life of reciprocal love between the Word and the soul. We will see this theme again in the course of the dissertation.

But there is more. His discussion of the opening line - “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” - culminates in what may at first seem, from the pen of a bishop, like an astonishingly frank description of the sensual kiss. Ambrose had a much larger comfort zone in this area than Jerome or Augustine. In the excerpt that follows, he first describes the kiss of the Word as a gift of interior light: the Spirit of divine knowledge and understanding enlightens the soul, and the soul receives this foretaste of nuptial love with joy and exaltation. Then he goes on to describe the lovers’ kiss (one would have to be quite impassive not to be moved by this beautiful description). Then, after having reminded his audience of the pleasures of kissing, he concludes: the delight (*iucunditas*) of the divine kiss is greater and richer than the joy (*laetitia*) of every physical pleasure. The point here is that the literal meaning of the relationship of the bride and the bridegroom, that is sensual love, is important for Ambrose. It is not just a necessary starting point from which to ascend as quickly as possible onto a spiritual plane; rather it is a permanent and indispensable base for his moral and mystical teaching. His goal is to create an interior response, an attitude, within the reader. It is a subjective interior sense that is both an intellectual understanding and an emotional joy and challenge. It is the decoding of the metaphor in the hearts of his audience, something like: “the love of the Word is not a real kiss but it is as *like* a kiss as love can be between God and the soul; all the joy and happiness of a kiss belong to that love and more.”

This is the kiss of the Word: the light of holy knowledge and understanding. For God the Word kisses us when he enlightens our heart and that highest part of a man, with the Spirit of divine knowledge. With this knowledge the soul receives a nuptial pledge of charity and, glad and rejoicing, she says: *I opened my mouth and I drew in the Spirit (lit. I*

panted; Ps.118/9.131).³⁰ For the kiss is that by which lovers cling to each other and drink, as it were, the sweetness of interior grace. By this kiss the soul adheres to the Word of God, through which the Spirit of the One kissing her is poured into her, just as those who kiss each other are not satisfied with a light touch of the lips but appear to pour their spirits into each other. Showing, therefore, that she loves not only the beauty of the Word and his countenance, but all his interior delights, she adds to the request for kisses: “For your breasts are good beyond wine and the fragrance of your perfumes are beyond all aromatic spices.” (Sg.1:2-3) She asked for the kiss; the Word of God poured himself wholly into her and bared to her his breast, that is his precepts and the teachings of interior wisdom, and he exuded the sweet fragrance of his perfumes. Captivated by them, she says that the joy and exaltation of divine understanding is richer than the joy of every carnal pleasure.³¹

Ambrose has no fear of evoking memories or echoes of sensual delight in his readers in order to show them that the love of God is true love and far better than human love. His commentary on verses from the *Song of Songs*, both in the *De Isaac* and in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*, remains close to the everyday realities of life: temptation, sin, ordered and disordered love, and to the fundamental realities of salvation. Here he is not writing for an inner circle or a special group, but for all Christians. In the sentence following the passage translated above he says: “For in the Word, the fragrance of grace and the remission of sin is emitted, which, diffused throughout the whole world has filled all things, like a perfume poured out and emptied, because among all men, it has wiped clean the grievous filth of sin.”³² Earlier, after he described the bride as longing for many kisses, he brings in the example of the sinful woman who crashed Simon’s

³⁰ hoc est enim osculum uerbi, lumen scilicet cognitionis sacrae; osculatur enim nos deus uerbum, quando cor nostrum et ipsum principale hominis spiritu diuinae cognitionis inluminat. quo anima donata caritatis pignore nuptiali laeta atque ouas dicit: *os meum aperui et duxi spiritum*. (*De Is.* 3.8)

³¹ osculum est enim, quo inuicem amantes sibi adhaerent et uelut gratiae interioris suauitate potiuntur, per hoc osculum adhaeret anima deo uerbo, per quod sibi spiritus transfunditur osculantis, sicut etiam ii qui se osculantur non sunt labiorum praelibatione contenti, sed spiritum suum inuicem sibi uidentur infundere. ostendens itaque non solam speciem uerbi et uultum quendam, sed omnia eius interiora diligere adiungit ad osculorum gratiam: quia bona inquit ubera tua super uinum et odor unguentorum tuorum super omnia aromata. illa osculum poposcit, deus uerbum se ei totus infudit et nudauit ei ubera sua, hoc est dogmata sua et interioris sapientiae disciplinas et unguentorum suorum dulci odore fraglauit. quibus captiua dicit uberiores esse iucunditatem diuinae cognitionis quam laetitiam omnis corporeae uoluptatis. (*De Is.* 3.8-9)

³² adspirat enim in uerbo odor gratiae et remissio peccatorum, quae in totum diffusa mundum omnia tamquam exinanito repleuit unguento, quia per uniuersos grauis conluuies deteresa uitiorum est (*De Is.* 3.9).

dinner party and began to weep over Jesus' feet, wash them with her tears, anoint them, and cover them with kisses. Here it is the woman who does the kissing, but Christ acknowledges her kisses and sends her away in peace.³³

5. *DE ISAAC* 4.13-16: DARK BUT BEAUTIFUL

In the Biblical book of the *Song of Songs*, after she is introduced into the chamber of the bridegroom, the bride says to the daughters of Jerusalem that she is dark but beautiful. She tells them, "You should not gaze at me because I am dark; the sun has not shone on me. The sons of my mother have fought against me; I have not tended my own vineyard."³⁴ Then, she turns to the bridegroom and asks, "Where do you rest with your flocks at noon?" He replies, "If you do not know yourself, Oh beautiful among women..." or in other versions he says, "If you do not know that you are beautiful among women, go out in the tracks of the flocks and feed your goats in the tents of the shepherds."³⁵ (*Sg.*1:5-8).

In the *De Isaac* Ambrose gives a spiritual paraphrase of the text:

The soul knowing that she has become dark through her association with the body, says to other souls or to those heavenly powers, guardians of the holy ministry, " 'Do not gaze at me because I am dark, for the sun has not looked upon me. The sons of my mother have fought against me' (*Sg.*1:5-6). That is, the passions of the body have fought against me; the pleasures of the flesh have discolored me. Therefore, 'the Sun of Justice has not

³³ denique illa in euangelio sic probata est, quia *non cessavit*, inquit, *osculari pedes meos et ideo remissa sunt ei peccata multa, quia dilexit multum* (*Lk.*7:44-50), (3.8, 647.20); in the *De Poenitentia*, Ambrose mentions this woman again but applies – with a slight touch of humor – to Christ this verse from the *Song*: "Let her kiss me..." We will look at this passage in part three.

³⁴ This is the LXX translation of *Sg.*1:5, which Ambrose consistently follows. The Hebrew text, followed in part by Origen, and entirely by Jerome, has "for the sun has looked down upon me (and so rendered me swarthy).

³⁵ This paragraph is a brief paraphrase of the *Sg.*1:5-8. In addition to the LXX and the Greek translation of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotien, Ambrose also consulted various Vetus Latina texts, of which he appears to have had several at his disposal. He generally had greater confidence in the Greek texts than in the VL; he also made his own translations from the Greek. See Solange Sagot, "Le « Cantique des Cantiques » dans le « De Isaac » d'Ambroise de Milan: étude textuelle et recherché sur les anciennes versions latines," *Recherches Augustiniennes*, XVI, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes (1981), 3-57.

shone upon me,’ and so, now a widow and bereft of his protection, I have not been able to maintain my devotion and full observance. This is the meaning of: ‘I have not guarded my own vineyard’ (Sg.1:6), since I have brought forth thorns rather than clusters of grapes, that is, sin instead of fruit.”³⁶

And, as she speaks of the Word, she is enlightened by his splendor. So she turns to him and asks, “Where do you pasture your flocks and where do you rest at noon?” Ambrose does not develop here the imagery of the bridegroom/shepherd tending his flocks, but instead gives a few short examples of the mystical image of “noon” as an hour of light and conversion: the hour when Joseph was revealed to his brothers, when Paul was converted, and in the hour in the *Song* when the bride turned to the Word. Ambrose continues:

She complains that she is forsaken and that she is destitute; once wealthy, she has become poor. She used to be in abundance through the gift of his favors, but now that the riches of the divine presence have been denied her, she has begun to be in want. And so she begs to be taken back rather as a mercenary, she who used to claim for herself the favor of a more precious union. The Word of God answers her, “ ‘Unless you know yourself, beautiful among women,’ you who complain that you are forsaken, unless you know yourself, unless you repent of your fall, unless you show me your firmness of your devotion, unless your faith and your sincerity increase, your complaints will be of no avail.” Or, he may reply, “ ‘Unless you know yourself’: that you are beautiful, unless you guard the beauty of your nature, and the pleasures of the body do not overwhelm you and impediments do not hold you back, the nobility of your more excellent nature will be of no avail. Know yourself, therefore, and the beauty of your nature; and go forth [behind the flocks of the shepherds].”³⁷

³⁶ eadem tamen anima cognoscens se corporis societate fuscata dicit ad alias animas uel ad illas caelestes et adpositas sacro ministerio potestates: *nolite aspicere me, quoniam offuscata sum, quoniam non est intuitus me sol. filii matris meae pugnaverunt aduersum me* (Sg.1:5-6), hoc est in pugnaverunt me corporis passiones, carnis inlecebrae colorarunt; *ideo mihi sol iustitiae non refulsit*. quo uiduata praesidio, deuotionem meam et obseruantiam plenam seruare non potui. hoc est enim: *uineam meam non custodiui* (Sg.1:6), quia spinas et non uinam adtuli, id est faciens peccata pro fructibus (*De Is.4.13*).

³⁷ queritur ergo quod derelecta sit, quod destituta sit pauper ex diuite; abundabat enim munere gratiarum, sed egere coepit, ubi diuinae praesentiae sibi copia denegata est, et ideo uel quasi mercennaria haberi postulat, quae ante sibi pretiosioris copulae gratiam uindicabat. cui respondit Uerbum dei: *nisi cognoscas te, decora inter mulieres* (Sg.1:8). quae querens quod relecta sis, *nisi te cognoscas*, nisi te paeniteat lapsus tui, nisi intentionem deuotionis adprobes, nisi fides tua et sinceritas augeatur, querella nihil proderit. aut sic: *nisi cognoscas te* quia decora es, nisi puritatem naturae tuae serues et corporis te inlecebrae non demergant nec impedimenta detineant, nihil tibi creaturae melioris nobilitas suffragabitur. Cognosce igitur te et naturae tuae decorem et exi quasi exuta vinculis. (4.14-16).

There are Biblical resonances in this passage which no serious Christian in Ambrose's day would have missed. First, from the New Testament, the bride is likened to the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). She, like the younger son of the parable, squanders her gifts and like him she begins to be in want. The phrase found in the Gospel story and in Ambrose is the same: *egere coepit*.³⁸ Further, the prodigal son asks to be received back by his father not as a son but as one of the hired hands (*unum de mercenariis*; Luke 15:19). In Ambrose's text the bride asks to follow the bridegroom's flocks as a hired servant (*mercenaria*), since she too has fallen from a more exalted state. Finally, when the prodigal son becomes desperate he comes to his senses (*in se autem reversus*; Luke 15:17). This is much the same as coming to know oneself, the counsel, and the Delphic maxim, given by the bridegroom in Ambrose's text. Second, the bride echoes key passages from the Old Testament in which the prophets liken Israel worshiping strange gods to an adulterous and abandoned wife. This is the failure of love, recognized by the prophets, and reversed by the *Song of Songs*. In Isaiah 62, which foretells the final restoration of Jerusalem, the key word is *derelicta*. (Is.62:4,12; cf.60.15). Ambrose describes the bride as *derelicta* and *relicta*. In the introduction, we discussed Ezechiel 16, where God complains of the folly and infidelity of Israel, his wife whom he had rescued as a foundling, raised, married, and endowed with every gift. When she turns into a harlot, he abandons her, who had once boasted an esteemed and precious marriage. Both in Ambrose's text and in Ezechiel, she receives from the bridegroom a severe reproof, though not utter rejection, and in the end, when she repents, he takes her back.³⁹

³⁸ Luke 15:14; *De Is.* 4.14, 652.21.

³⁹ See also Isaiah 54:4-14.

Since Ambrose is often said to be heavily indebted to Origen, I would like to compare briefly Ambrose's and Origen's treatment of this passage. In his first homily on the *Song of Songs*, Origen says that the bride is dark because she still retains traces of sin, but beautiful because she has repented and is in the process of becoming light; eventually she will be radiantly white with light.⁴⁰ She tells the daughters of Jerusalem they should not be surprised at her hue: the sun has shone on her in full radiance and the excess of light she did not receive as she should have has burned her. In an aside, Origen turns to the audience and warns them to be careful lest they be both black and ugly, because they have neither confessed their old sins, nor given up the acquiring of new sin.⁴¹ He makes a distinction between those listening to his homily and the bride. She represents the church, who has been attacked by her brothers, namely persecutors such as the apostle Paul before his conversion. Pure and spotless, but harassed, she has had the care of many vineyards with no time for her own. Paul after his conversion is an example of this; in several passages from his letters he refers to his care for all the churches and his willingness to suffer loss for their gain.⁴² In response to her query about his resting place, the bridegroom says: "Either know yourself, that you are the beautiful spotless Church, or fail and accept the consequences, namely to go out behind the flocks and pasture goats (as opposed to sheep) by the tents of shepherds. You will not find yourself with the sheep, nor with me, the shepherd of the sheep. For Origen's bride the alternatives are stark.

⁴⁰ *Who is this that comes up all white, leaning on her kinsman (her beloved) ?* (Sg. LXX, 8:5). See Origène, *Homélies sur Le Cantique des Cantiques*, Sources Chrétiennes 37 bis, ed. Dom Olivier Rousseau, O.S.B., trans. Jerome (Paris: Cerf, 1966), nos. 6-9, pp. 86-98.

⁴¹ Origène, *Homélies sur Le Cantique* no. 9, p. 98.

⁴² "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." 1Cor.9:22. See also 2 Cor. 11:28.

Origen's interpretation is similar in his commentary.⁴³ But here he elaborates at greater length and with differences of detail. For example, if one takes the bride to represent the Church, she has for mother the heavenly Jerusalem, the sons of the mother who fight her, actually who fight "in" her, are the apostles, who clear her of false teaching; the vineyards over which she is now placed are the Old and New Testaments, and her own vineyard is earlier philosophical knowledge which she has abandoned for the faith. Origen gives two other possible interpretations, but his general conclusion is that it is praiseworthy for the bride to have abandoned her own vineyard in order to keep the vineyards of the knowledge and teachings of divine realities (*sensuum scilicet ac dogmatum divinorum*).⁴⁴

For Origen there is an elaborate hierarchy of the souls who believe in Christ, surrounding the bridegroom.⁴⁵ Closest to him is the bride, the one and the unique, then come the sixty wives, then the eighty concubines, then the maidens without number (cf. Sg.6:8), who are all in the royal city but not in the palace, then the sheep of the bridegroom's flocks, and finally, the companions; these last are shepherds who tend those sheep who do not belong to the bridegroom. The goats are at the back of all the flocks, destined for the bridegroom's left-hand. As in the homilies, the bride must learn to know herself. Otherwise, she must tend the goats.⁴⁶ There are two ways in which the bride must come to know herself: she must learn what are her natural or acquired dispositions (*in affectibus*) and what she is in essence (*in substantia*).⁴⁷ The knowledge of what she is in essence is the deeply speculative knowledge, such as Origen sought in the

⁴³ Kommentar zum Hohelied, in Origenes Werke, bd.8, in Rufins und Hieronymus Übersetzungen, ed. W. A. Baehrens, Leipzig: Hinrichs (1925), 113-135.

⁴⁴ Baehrens, 134.7.

⁴⁵ Baehrens 134.30-135.23. This hierarchy is based on the verse: *There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number. One alone is my dove, my perfect one* (Sg.6:8-9).

⁴⁶ Baehrens, 142.5-6.

⁴⁷ Baehrens, 143.4-5.

Scriptures and spoke of in the *Peri Archon*. He raises an objection: it may seem just to reject a soul who has not the first, moral, knowledge but should those who attain the first but cannot reach the second also be rejected? His reply is simply that the bridegroom speaks [in the *Song of Songs*] neither to the queens, nor to the concubines, nor to the maidens, but only to the one. To whom much is given much shall be required. The humble, on the other hand, receive mercy.⁴⁸

In their commentaries on this passage from the *Song of Songs*, Origen differs radically from Ambrose. Where Origen constructs an elaborate hierarchy, which only the privileged few (teachers and ascetics) may ascend, Ambrose applies to the bride the images of the prodigal son and the Old Testament harlot; he mentions the distinction between sheep and goats in order to encourage the bride to govern her unruly desires of the flesh, not to classify her. In the sections following the one we have translated, he describes the companions of the bridegroom not as distant, ambiguous shepherds, who care for the souls farthest from the bridegroom, but simply as those who know how to govern and care for the flocks (4.16). Ambrose preaches to the whole church, not to a select few. All are invited to think of themselves as the bride. They must, of course, embrace a morally upright and spiritual way of life. Ambrose is a determined adversary of “the flesh,”⁴⁹ but he understands instinctively the realities of normal human life “in the flesh,” as well as the mercy and goodness of God. Without lowering his standards, he has considerably expanded the possibilities for spiritual progress and inclusion in the metaphor of the *Song of Songs*. This breadth of vision is a reflection of his own personality but also of the needs of his church at Milan in the 380s. The treatises on the patriarchs, in general, appear to have been

⁴⁸ Baehrens, 149.1-19.

⁴⁹ In addition to the passages we have already discussed, see for example the lyric “calling of the bride” at *De Is.* 5.47, 671.5-672.7.

destined for catechumens or the newly baptized; there are in fact indirect but clear references to baptism in the *De Isaac*.⁵⁰ But the use of the imagery in the *Song of Songs* as a Christian myth of conversion and perfection through the desire for and the enticements of love – a deeply Platonic vision to which all may bring personal associations of one sort or another – is all-pervasive in the works of Ambrose. I think this optimism, the willingness to invite all Christians into the embrace of the bridegroom, Christ, is one of the salient characteristics of Ambrose’s pastoral approach, one that endeared him to generations of Christians for centuries to come.⁵¹ The embrace of the bridegroom requires a sincere conversion and firmness of purpose, but not a redefinition of one’s life through an indefinite spiritual ascent. As we saw in the parallel passages from Plotinus and Ambrose (in the interlude), both men envision the virtuous life to require self-mastery in the world rather than flight.

6. *DE ISAAC* 4.31-37: “MY BELOVED COMES...”

In this section of the *De Isaac*, Ambrose comments on the following verses from the *Song of Songs*:

Behold, he (my beloved) comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle, or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.” (*Sg.*2:8-10)

He notices first that the bridegroom does not simply come, when the Church seeks him. Rather, he comes leaping (*saliens venit*); he leaps upon the mountains (the souls with greater grace) and bounds over the hills (souls of lesser grace). Or the passage may be taken to recapitulate Christ’s

⁵⁰ *De Is.* 5.48, 672.16; 6.53, 677.21-22; 8.75-76, 10-19.

⁵¹ At *De Is.* 5.43-44 the daughters of Jerusalem marvel to see even Eve, once condemned to the depths of Hell for her sin, ascending on the arm of Christ, now holding onto the Tree of Life, fragrant with the perfumes of prayer that ascend to God like incense.

work of salvation by virtue of his twofold nature, human and divine. As he writes this passage of the *De Isaac*, Ambrose thinks of Ps.18.5: “He comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man (*gigans*) runs his course with joy.” There is some divergence between versions of this verse, but the psalmist appears to have been thinking of the sun.

Christians referred the verse to Christ in his incarnation. We will discuss this further below:

With a bound Christ came into the world. He was with the Father, he came into the Virgin, from the Virgin he leapt into the manger. He was in the manger and at the same time he shone resplendent in Heaven. He descended into the Jordan, ascended onto the cross, descended into the tomb, rose from the tomb and sat at the right hand of the Father. Whence, like a young deer, who thirsts for fountains of water (Ps.41:2), he came down to Paul and shone brightly about him and then he leapt over the holy Church, which is named *Bethel*, which means ‘House of God’ (cf.Gen.28.20-2); for the calling of Paul is strength and stability for the Church.⁵²

He comes, therefore, looking through the windows,⁵³ which signify the prophets, through which the Lord looked at the human race before he came down (*descendit*); and even now when a soul searches diligently for him through the Scriptures, she hears his voice; she sees him leaping towards her, that is hurrying forth and running, bounding across those who, due to the infirmity of their heart, cannot grasp his strength and virtue. She sees him looking at her through the enigmas of the prophets. Finally, he says to the soul, “Arise (*exsurge*), my love and come.” That is arise (*exsurge*) out of the pleasures of the world, arise (*exsurge*) from terrestrial affairs and come to me. Come up above the world, come to me for I have conquered the world. Come near, already you are lovely with the beauty of eternal life, now you are a dove, that is meek and

⁵² Apud patrem erat, in uirginem uenit et ex uirgine in praesaepe transiliuit. in praesaepe erat et fulgebat e caelo, descendit in Iordanem, ascendit in erucem, descendit in tumulum, surrexit e tumulo et sedit ad Patris dexteram. inde quasi in latus ceruorum, qui desiderat ad fontes aquarum (Ps.41:2), descendit ad Paulum et circumfulsit eum et exiliuit super ecclesiam sanctam, quae est Bethel, quod dicitur domus Dei (cf.Gen.28:20-2); Pauli enim uocatio ecclesiae firmitudo est (*De Is.* 4.31).

⁵³ The following paragraph is both a paraphrase and a translation of *De Is.* 4.32-35. Some of the details and digressions have been left out.

gentle, now all full of spiritual grace. Already winter has passed, that is, the Pasch has come, forgiveness has come, the remission of sins has come.⁵⁴

The charm, the *suavitas*, of this passage of the *De Isaac*, so full of movement and desire, would not easily be forgotten by those who heard or read it. This is Ambrose at his best.

Whatever personal reflections his congregation may have taken with them after hearing this sermon, they would have remembered the leaping and bounding of the bridegroom: Christ from the Father into the world and back again to the Father. They would also have remembered the mutual desire of Christ for the soul and of the soul for him. The leaping down and back is a visual image of the Incarnation, as we said, but also an image of the equality of the Son with the Father, that is of the full humanity *and divinity* of Christ. It was an image of considerable pedagogical impact.

There is no way for us to know which came first, but Ambrose composed a poetic counterpart to this section of the *De Isaac*. It is the fifth strophe of one of his best loved hymns, *Veni Redemptor Gentium*.⁵⁵ It is a Christmas hymn, a lyrical profession of faith. The second part of the hymn is built around the verse(s) from Ps. 18, quoted above, which describe, on the literal level, the rising and setting of the sun, the running of its course through the sky by day. Here is the version found in the LXX and the Vulgate: “In the sun he set up his tabernacle and like a bridegroom going forth from the bridal chamber (*thalamum*) he rejoiced like a giant to run his course.” Following are strophes 4-6 of Ambrose’s hymn:

⁵⁴ This is a summary of *De Is.* 4.34-5.

⁵⁵ See *Ambroise de Milan: Hymnes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 263-303. Fontaine considers the first strophe to be authentic and gives the hymn the title: *Intende Qui Regis Israel*. Fontaine may well be right, but it is better known by the first line of the second strophe. This hymn is still used in the Latin Liturgy and is found in modern vernacular hymnals, translated into German by Martin Luther and into English by William Reynolds.

Procedat e thalamo suo,
pudoris aula regia,
geminæ gigas substantiæ
alacris ut currat uiam.

Egressus eius a Patre,
regressus eius ad Patrem ;
excursus usque ad inferos,
recursus ad sedem Dei.

Aequalis aeterno Patri,
carnis trophæo cingere,
infirmi nostri corporis
uirtute firmans perpeti.

Let him come forth from his bridal chamber
the royal hall of purity
a giant of double nature
eager to run his course

He goes forth from the Father
He returns to the Father;
He sallies forth to Hell,
He hasten back to the seat of the Father.

Equal to the eternal Father
Gird [yourself] with the trophy of flesh
and make firm the infirmities of our body
with everlasting strength.

The images of movement down to earth and back up to the Father, of haste, and the desire of the bridegroom coming forth from his chamber are all in the hymn, as they are in the *De Isaac*; the hymn is an allusive reminder of the larger commentary. Note the repetition of *ex-* and *re-* and the gradation from *gressus* to *cursus*. This hymn presents a most powerful, beautiful, and easily memorized image of the Nicene theology of the Incarnation and the program of salvation through the Incarnation. A measure of the significance of this hymn is given by the use Pope Celestine made of it, and the authority of Ambrose, against the Nestorians at the Council of Rome, in 430.⁵⁶

In paragraphs 4.35-7 Ambrose associates the coming of Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection, with the description of Spring in the *Song of Songs*. The bride sees the bridegroom peering at her through the lattices (Sg.2:9). For Ambrose, these are the prophetic books of the Old Testament. The bridegroom gently invites and entices the bride out by describing the advent of Spring and then says, “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is comely” (Sg.2:14).

⁵⁶ Fontaine, *Hymns*, 270.

Ambrose interprets: the rock represents the fortress of the passion and the bulwark of faith (4.37, 664.1-2): “This soul receives good pledges of love.”⁵⁷

7. *DE ISAAC* 4.38-7.59: THE ADVANCE OF THE BRIDE

At 6.50 Ambrose recapitulates the stages of growth for the bride. In chapter one, we mentioned that these four stages have been taken by scholars as clues to the organization of the *De Isaac* as a whole. At 6.50, as we said, Ambrose announces that he will proceed with a detailed account of what he has just summarized; but it is unclear whether he refers to all four stages or to stage four only. A quick look at the Scriptural citations in the notes to Ambrose’s text shows that the detailed account is of stage four only. This is a significant point because in the Biblical poem itself, there are two similar advances for the bride. They have much in common, and so are easily conflated, but they differ in intensity. Ambrose follows these two advances and sees the differences between them as signs of the bride’s growth in holiness. The first advance in the *Song* is from 2:9-3:4: the bridegroom comes leaping like a gazelle; he invites the bride to come forth through the lattices (section 6 above); they are united in the beauty of Spring, but then the bride finds herself alone again at night; she rises and calls for the bridegroom but there is no answer; so she goes out through the city looking for him; she passes the watchmen, who do not know where he is; but finally just after passing them she finds him. This entire sequence has rich spiritual overtones. After this first re-finding, the Biblical poem presents the first section of praises of the bride and the garden sequence: the bride is a garden

⁵⁷ accipit haec anima bona pignora caritatis (*De Is.* 4.37 end). See also the parallel development of this theme in *Exp. Ps.* 118.6.5-34.

enclosed, a sealed fountain; she prepares a beautiful feast of flowers and spices for the bridegroom. Ambrose covers this first advance in the *De Isaac* from 4.31-5.49.

The second advance is found in *Song of Songs* 5:2-6:13. Again, the bride is alone at night; the bridegroom knocks, she has removed her clothing and so delays a moment in rising to open the door; she hears his hand on the latch and gets up to open but finds he has gone; she goes out again looking for him; this time the night watchmen find her, they beat, wound, and strip her. The daughters of Jerusalem then ask her why her beloved is so special. She praises him; and she also seems to know where he may be found. Eventually she finds him pasturing his flocks among the lilies (6.3). The bridegroom praises the bride and gives her a privileged status: “there are sixty queens and eighty concubines and maidens without number, one alone is my dove, my perfect one.” (Sg.6:8-9). Ambrose covers this second advance in sections 6.51-7.62.

Here is a brief summary of Ambrose’s interpretation of the second advance. The bridegroom comes seeking the bride. She, the soul, has taken off the bonds of the body/flesh and cannot remember how to put them on again. So she misses him, though she sees his hands through the door, that is his works. She rises to open and follow the works; this is a first sign of progress. She rises up out of the body to go searching for him, another advance. She makes herself an alien to her body and follows his word.⁵⁸ Ambrose’s term here is *peregrinus* (foreigner), but the idea is the same as *abalienare*. She meets the watchmen, who wound and strip her. Yet since she no longer has any association with evil, they can take nothing essential from her; she suffers no loss because she has nothing to hide. By searching for him, she has aroused the bridegroom’s love for her. She finds him in the lilies, and he praises her for her

⁵⁸ ἀλλὰ τὸ κεκαθάρθαι ἀφαιρέσεις ἀλλοτρίου παντός (En.1.2.4, 5-6). For the references to Plotinus En.1.2.4 in this note and the following I am indebted to Dr. Matthias Vorwerk.

perseverance and perfection (7.57): she is “beautiful as Jerusalem” (Sg.6:4). Ambrose has this high – Plotinian – praise for her: “She has borrowed from the Word the brightness of his light, as she turns all her attention ever towards him.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ fulgorem de uerbi lumine mutuata, dum id semper intendit (*De Is.*7.57). cf. En.1.2.4: οὐκ ἄρα εἶχεν αὐτὰ [realities seen and perceived] οὐδ’ ἀναμιμνήσκειται; ἢ εἶχεν οὐκ ἐνεργοῦντα, ἀλλὰ ἀποκείμενα ἀφώτιστα· ἵνα δὲ φωτισθῇ καὶ τότε γινῶ αὐτὰ ἐνόντα, δεῖ προσβαλεῖν τῷ φωτίζοντι... τάχα δὲ καὶ οὕτω λέγεται ἔχειν, ὅτι ὁ νοῦς οὐκ ἀλλότριος καὶ μάλιστα δὲ οὐκ ἀλλότριος, ὅταν πρὸς αὐτὸν βλέπη (En.1.2.4, 22-7).

CHAPTER THREE

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS II: THE PERFECTION OF THE BRIDE

8. *DE ISAAC* 7.60-7.61: SEPARATION FROM THE BODY

Throughout the *De Isaac* Ambrose has taken a stand against the body. At 7.60 he gives us some interesting philosophical reasons – concerning the question of evil – for his mistrust of it and all that is connected with it. This is the third passage in the *De Isaac* where Hadot and Courcelle have seen Plotinus as a source. The textual parallels are there, though not in such blocks that one can say that the text of Ambrose is a copy of that of Plotinus. His definition of the Good is probably an exception. Much more striking and intriguing is that the two men *thought* so much alike. However Ambrose may have come into contact with Plotinus, he certainly absorbed many ideas that were similar, if not identical. Hadot has laid out the parallels side by side; I will not reproduce them here because in this instance seeing the parallels is not as helpful as thinking about the similarities and differences in thought.¹ Ambrose's 7.60-1 corresponds to ideas Plotinus presents in passages from En. 1.8.8, 1.8.1 and 1.8.2; with possible additions from 1.8.13 and 15. For both Plotinus and Ambrose the essential *sine qua non* of moral perfection is interior spiritual separation of the (higher) soul from the body,² a process ideally begun in this life, and consummated in the next, if one is wise or if one is the bride of the *Song of Songs*. This passage from the *De Isaac* is a significant prelude to the *De Bono Mortis*, in which

¹ Hadot, "Platon et Plotin," 206-7.

² cf. En.1.1.10.

Ambrose will argue that physical death is a good. It was also significant for Augustine and is quoted by him in his polemic against Julian, in order to argue that evil is an absence of good.

Finally, I think this passage gives a “snapshot,” so to speak, of Ambrose assimilating Neoplatonism and reconfiguring it to the economy of Christianity.

Vices that come from matter obscure the grace of the soul. Ignorance and concupiscence are illnesses of the soul (*Timaeus* 86b), but [though they come from matter] they apply, or are attributed, more to form than to matter. Flesh pertains to matter; ignorance and concupiscence to form. So why is the flesh accused, when such great faults are in the form? Because form can do nothing without matter: the form of the axe does nothing without matter. For what would concupiscence be if the flesh did not inflame it? It is cold in the elderly and in children, since in these the body is infirm; it burns in the young, in whom the vigor of the body is intense.³

Both Plotinus (1.8.1,1-18) and Ambrose argue that vices come from matter. They raise the objection that ignorance and concupiscence seem to come from form rather than matter. Using the same classic example of the axe blade, they both reply that form without matter does nothing harmful: the form of the axe cannot cut without iron. Plotinus goes on to conclude that matter is the cause of evil in the soul. Ambrose does not take that step; he does not attribute any reality whatsoever to evil as such. Instead, he sees it only in terms of privation of good. Plotinus also sees evil mostly in terms of privation, but not wholly; there is something there that is like a limit of reality, which nevertheless “kicks back” into the realm of the real and the good, causing things, which are form in matter, to go terribly wrong. Ambrose on the other hand has a divinely revealed idea of the universe, which allows him to circumscribe and resolve the question of evil into the absence of good, through the entry of sin into the world. I do not mean to imply here that

³ materialia autem uitia animae obumbrant gratiam. ignorantia et concupiscentia animae sunt aegritudines (*Tim.*86b), sed ad speciem quam ad materiem magis referuntur. materia est caro, species est ignorantia et concupiscentia. cur igitur caro accusatur, cum tantae sint in specie labe? quia nihil species potest sine materia. denique nihil species securis sine materia facit. quid enim esset concupiscentia, nisi eam caro inflammaret? friget in senibus, pueris quoque, quia in his corpus infirmum est: ardet in adolescentibus, quibus uis corporis feruet (*De Is.*7.60, 685,2-12).

Ambrose thinks he has all of the answers to the problem of evil, but only that this is not his primary concern here. In the context of the *De Isaac* he is explaining the source of perfection for the soul, who is the bride of the *Song of Songs*. A few lines down, he brings into his explanation the perfect quotation from the *Song* as a Scriptural verification of the philosophical condition of this perfect soul. In terms of Plotinian parallels, Ambrose backtracks to En.1.8.1, end, and 1.8.2, beginning, to indicate the place of evil in the divine economy and to give the definition of the Good, in the context of which evil may be understood.

Evils arise, therefore, out of the good. For there are no evils, except those that are privations of good. Through evils, however, it happens that goods appear in greater relief. So [1] the lack of good is the root of evil and [2] evils are understood through the definition of the good, since it is through the order and knowledge of the good that evil is discovered.⁴

In 1.8.1 Plotinus sets out the question: where do evils come from. He then lays out the method one should follow in order to answer the question. First, one must ask what is the nature of evil. The answer to this question will allow one to see the causes and effects of evil and to determine whether or not it even exists. Plotinus does not answer these questions fully until later in the *Ennead*. He suggests here that since evil seems to be some sort of privation of form, and since opposites may be known by the same kind of knowledge, one should be clear about the nature of the good, and from this one may begin to get an idea of the nature of evil.

Then, in 1.8.2 Plotinus defines the good and explains the relation of the Good to the other two primary hypostases, Intellect and Soul. Ambrose's purpose in the *De Isaac* is not to investigate the nature of good and evil as such, but, again, his goal is to describe the state of the

⁴ ex bonis igitur mala orta sunt; non enim sunt mala nisi quae priuantur bonis. per mala tamen factum est, ut bona emerent. ergo indigentia boni radix malitiae est et definitione boni malitia deprehenditur, quoniam per disciplinam boni malum repperitur (*De Is.* 7.60, 685,12-16).

perfect soul. So he simply makes the statement that evil is a privation of the good (for his purposes this is sufficient); and since it is a privation, it may be discovered through a knowledge of the opposite, the good. Then he gives a definition of the good that is essentially that of Plotinus but with an un-Plotinian shift.

The Good is in need of nothing, it is sufficient for itself; measure, perfection, and finality are attributed to it by all. In it all things are established; on it all things depend. This is the nature of the Good, which fills the mind; around it the pure soul turns. She perceives it⁵ within herself and [thereby] perceives God, she abounds in all good things, and so she says, “his mouth is most sweet and he is all desirable” (Sg.5:16).⁶

After defining the good, Plotinus makes a metaphysical statement about the three primary hypostases: the Good fills Intellect, and Soul dances (*choreuo*) around Intellect. Soul looking at what is within herself contemplates God through Intellect (1.8.2.21-5). In a move that may have annoyed some Neoplatonists, Ambrose uses Plotinus’s terms, he follows him closely, but transfers Plotinus’s metaphysical statement about the nature of the universe to the level of the individual soul and God. Plotinus, of course, sees the individual soul as participating in the contemplation of Soul, but the Universal Soul is of no interest to Ambrose. The quotation from the *Song of Songs* that follows puts the authoritative seal of Scripture on his description of the Good. He is “all desirable.” Plotinus had described the Good as King over all kings and more than (beautiful, *ὑπέρχαλος*). It would be grossly naïve to say that Ambrose just copied out passages here and there from Plotinus without understanding the full import. Ambrose

⁵ The Latin has *hoc*. This refers back to *bonum* not *mens*. But it also corresponds to the neuter τὸ εἶσω αὐτοῦ of Plotinus (1.8.2.24).

⁶ bonum autem nullius eget, sibi abundat, mensuram et perfectionem, finem quoque tribuit omnibus, in quo uniuersa constant et de quo omnia pendent. haec boni natura est, quae mentem replet. circa hoc uersatur anima pura, hoc intro perspicit et deum cernit, bonis omnibus abundat. unde et ait: *fauces eius dulcedines et totus desiderium* (Sg.5:16) (*De Is.* 7.60-1, 685,16-686,1). Ambrose makes a clear distinction here between soul (*anima*) and mind (*mens*). The distinction is derived in part from the Greek philosophers and from Paul (1Thes.5:23); see part 3, sect.1, ch.2, notes 32-3. The question is: does Ambrose dwell on the distinction here in order to bring Plotinus into his text? Or, does he use Plotinus because he thinks that Plotinus had real, though partial, insight into human nature?

understood Plotinus and found him useful. Yet I cannot help thinking Ambrose had other reasons for alluding so clearly to Plotinus's universe, and then changing it. We will return to this consideration in part two.

In the final section Ambrose continues to reproduce Plotinus, who says that the blessed life of the three hypostases is “the life of the gods” (*Phaedr.*248a). There is no evil there; and if things had stopped there, evil would never have existed. Then he quotes the second letter of Plato, which says that God is the author of all good (καλός) things and all of them belong to him. The same sentences are in Ambrose reversed.

God is the author of all good things and indeed the things that exist all are his. Evil has no place there and if our mind remains in him, it knows no evil. The soul, therefore, which does not remain in God, is herself the author of her own evils. So she sins: the soul that sins, she herself will die.⁷

Finally, Ambrose concludes that the soul who does not remain in God is fully responsible for her fall and eventual “death”—we should see a veiled allusion to the image of the vine and the branches in Jn.15:4-10, where the verb “remain” (*maneo*) occurs ten times; either remain a branch or be cut off and die. At 1.8.13, 22 Plotinus also says that a soul entrenched in evil will die, in the way that souls can die. Neither Plotinus nor Ambrose endorse total dissolution as a possibility for the soul.

9. *DE ISAAC* 8.65-8.79: THE VICTORY OF THE BRIDE

Before discussing the victory of the bride, I would like to take stock of where we are in the development of the *De Isaac*. In the paragraphs following 7.61, Ambrose makes his way

⁷ omnium enim bonorum auctor est deus et quae sunt eius profecto omnia sunt. nusquam illic malum et, si in illo nostra mens maneat, malum nescit. anima igitur quae in deo non manet ipsa sibi auctor malorum est, itaque peccat, anima autem quae peccat ipsa morietur (*De Is.* 7.61, 686,1-6).

more or less through the verses of the *Song of Songs*, from 6:10 to 8.6. Significantly, he skips 7.1-5; these verses contain praises of the body of the bride, and Ambrose saves his commentary on them for the *Expositio Psalmi 118*. What are his reasons? Perhaps he has placed such emphasis in the *De Isaac* on the soul of the bride, it would seem awkward and pointless to turn now to her body. I think the primary reason is, as we said earlier, that he focuses on the individual soul in the *De Isaac* and on her advance to perfection, where in the *Expositio Psalmi 118* he turns his attention more to the Church. If the body of the bride represents the perfect bride of Christ without (spiritual) spot or wrinkle (Eph.5:27), it is easier and more fitting to detail the beauty of her body as a metaphor for aspects of the Church. For example, her belly is a heap of wheat surrounded by lilies; for Ambrose this is a transparent image of the Eucharist. A third insight into Ambrose's reticence in the *De Isaac* may come from the funeral oration for Valentinian II. As long as the Christian is alive and seeking holiness, he or she is still *in via*. Once the threshold of death has been crossed, the situation changes. In his funeral oration for this young and unfortunate emperor, Ambrose makes a striking application of all the praises from the *Song of Songs* to the body and soul of Valentinian. He uses the bride's praises of the bridegroom for his dead body and then addresses the praises of the bridegroom for the bride to his living soul beyond the grave. After the break at Sg.7.1-5 Ambrose continues his comments on most of the verses through 8.6. The *Song of Songs* itself, however, ends at 8.14. Verses 8.7-12 will find their way into the final stanza of the *Expositio Psalmi 118*. The last two verses, 8.13-14, also play a central role in the *De Bono Mortis*.

Though Ambrose never loses sight of the bride in this final section of the *De Isaac* – until the last two paragraphs – comments about her are interspersed with passages devoted to

questions only indirectly related to the *Song of Songs*. The bride now is perfect, though she must still undergo temptations. She lives for others, she has set the Lord as a seal upon her heart, and she cultivates a love strong as death (8.6).⁸ As we said earlier, one particularity of Ambrose's approach to the *Song of Songs* is that he brings the bride and bridegroom to marriage. He must specify that they are married, since no verse of *Song* indicates as much. At the end of 8.72, therefore, Ambrose assures us that they are now man and wife. These final paragraphs are extremely rich in imagery and Scriptural references. I can imagine Ambrose's friend, Irenaeus, or his priest, Horontianus, spending hours pouring over this text, slowly drinking in the images, the exhortations, the allusions to Scripture. The "juice" from the text and the rich import of the Scripture verses come out of such a slow and thoughtful reading. In the interest of time, however, I would like to discuss three particular "moments" from the final paragraphs of the *De Isaac*. The first is the palm of victory awarded to the bride by the bridegroom; the second is an excursus on the fire of divine love: the wings of fire; the third is Ambrose's final discourse on the ascent of the soul, this time in plain philosophical language without the metaphor of the bride and bridegroom.

At Sg.6.12, the version of the *Song of Songs* Ambrose followed has, "posuit me currus Aminadab" (*an unstated subject* made me a chariot of Aminadab). The verse is problematic; the LXX seems to imply that her soul is the subject; or that, without the soul realizing it, she was made a chariot of Aminadab [the verb may be middle or passive]. Modern versions have significantly modified the verse. Ambrose makes the subject Christ himself. He has been speaking of the temptations that fall upon the faithful and says that:

⁸ Ambrose gives this verse to the bride in the *De Isaac*, though it usually belongs to the bridegroom.

As if with the reins of his mercy, like a good driver (*rector*), he recalled him [Peter] from his fall. Our good driver, therefore, is Christ and this is why the soul says, “He has made me a chariot of Aminadab.” So the soul is the chariot that carries the driver. If the soul is a chariot, she has horses, either good or bad.⁹

The chariot of Aminadab invariably brings to mind, Ambrose’s at least, the myth of the chariots from the *Phaedrus* (246a-248b). In Ambrose’s retelling, the good horses easily prevail, because the chariot is perfect; they are the four cardinal virtues. Ambrose mentions the presence of four bad horses: anger, concupiscence, fear, and injustice; but these do not significantly figure in this story. The driver incites the good horses – under his sweet and gentle yoke¹⁰ – to the heights and so leads the bride/chariot to victory (8.67). This is Ambrose’s improvement on the *Phaedrus* myth. It is one more example of his appropriation of the classical tradition into a new Christian idiom. Varied references to the myth continue throughout the rest of the *De Isaac*. When the chariot arrives safely at the “place of the palm,” the Good Driver is filled with admiration for his chariot/bride and says, “How beautiful and sweet you have become, my Love, in your delights. Your stature is like that of the palm tree.” And she replies, “I said, I will come up to the palm.”¹¹ Ambrose concludes the scene in classic Ambrosian fashion with an explanation of the metaphor, “palm,” and an exhortation to follow the bride:

But indeed charity itself is the palm; for charity itself is the fullness of victory, for “the fulfillment of the Law is charity” (Rm.13:10). Let us run, therefore, that we may obtain [the prize](1Cor.9:24). Let us run that we may win. He who wins goes up the palm and

⁹ et tamquam suum misericordiae suae frenis ut bonus rector reuocauit a lapsu. rector ergo noster est Christus. ideoque ait anima: *posuit me currus Aminadab* (Sg.6:12). anima ergo currus, qui bonum rectorem sustinet. si currus est anima, habet equos uel bonos uel malos. boni equi uirtutes sunt animae, mali equi passiones corporis sunt. bonus ergo rector malos equos restringit et reuocat, bonos incitat. boni equi sunt quattuor: prudentia, temperantia, fortitudo, iustitia; mali equi iraeundia, concupiscentia, timor, iniquitas. (*De Is.*8.64-5).

¹⁰ Mt.11:29 at *De Is.*8.66 ff. Ambrose spends some time describing the flight under the guidance of the Good Driver and so gives some of the “flavor” of the original myth. He explains the meaning of the name “Aminadab” and cites other verses from Scripture, among them the verses from 2Kg.2:11-2 where Elijah is taken up to Heaven on a chariot of fire.

¹¹ In the *Song of Songs* itself, the implication is clearly that the bridegroom will climb the palm tree to claim its fruit. Here Ambrose takes liberties with the text, in order to fit it into the victory scene.

eats its fruit. He who wins, no longer runs but is seated, as it is written: “He who conquers, I shall grant him to sit with me on my throne, just as I have conquered and sit with my Father on his throne.” (Rev.3:21)¹²

10. *DE ISAAC* 8.77: WINGED FIRE

The last half of Sg.8:6 is another difficult passage. The entire verse reads: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes (or in the LXX: sparks, wings) are flashes (sparks, wings) of fire, a most vehement flame.” In the LXX the term is *περίπτερος*. As an adjective, this means “flying around.” Applied to fire, it means “sparks.” It is also used of a single row of columns surrounding a structure. The neuter plural, as in the LXX, could, therefore, be translated as “wings,” Ambrose’s translation. This fits perfectly the imagery he has already drawn from the *Phaedrus* myth and it allows him to transition into the last paragraphs of the *De Isaac* based on the ascent of the soul as described by Plotinus in En.1.6. He pauses for a moment, though, at 8.77 to dwell upon and savor at length a whole series of Scriptural references to fire and wings or tongues of fire. He begins by referring back to sg. 8.6 and summarizes it thus: “Charity, therefore, has death; charity has zeal, and charity has wings of fire.”¹³ Then he presents fifteen examples of the use of the term “fire” in Scripture. Since it is a commanding Scriptural image, significant both as a sign of divine revelation and of deep emotion, the effect is like a spiritual exercise, in which the reader of this paragraph may take a moment to look at a panorama of

¹² sed etiam ipsa caritas palma est; ipsa est enim plenitudo uictoriae; *plenitudo enim legis caritas est* (Rm.13:10). curramus ergo, ut comprehendamus: curramus, ut uincamus. qui uicit ascendit in palmam et manducat fructus eius, qui uicit iam non currit, sed sedet, sicut scriptum est: *qui uicit, dabo ei sedere mecum in sede mea, sicut et ego uici et sedeo cum patre meo in sede ipsius* (Rev.3:21).

¹³ itaque et mortem habet caritas et zelum habet caritas et alas ignis habet caritas (*De Is.*8.77). Again, this is Ambrose’s paraphrase of the verse: “for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame” (Sg. 8:6).

Scripture from this one thematic viewpoint. Scripture is the repository of all truth, one reads it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets, and continues to speak through the canonical books of the Bible. So whatever associations have a basis, even verbal, in the sacred text may be legitimate, and perhaps unexpectedly fruitful, readings. At 8.77, the references to fire are as follows:

1. Love is strong as death... its wings are wings of fire, a most vehement flame (Sg.8.6).
2. God appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush (Ex.3:4).
3. For Jeremiah the gift of God is like a fire in his bones, he cannot bear it (Jer.20:9).
4. The wings of fire which fly through the hearts of the saints to purify and probe, this fire the Lord Jesus sent down upon the earth (Lk.12:49).
5. This same fire caused the hearts of the disciples to burn on the way to Emmaus (Lk24:32).
6. Paul saw fire shining around him on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:3).
7. The Holy Spirit descended in flames of fire on Pentecost (Acts 2:2).
8. Enoch was taken up to Heaven on wings of fire (Gen.5:24).
9. Elijah was taken in chariots of fire with fiery steeds (2Kg.2:11).
10. God led the Israelites out of Egypt in the pillar of fire (Ex.13:21).
11. The seraphim had fiery wings who touched the lips of Isaiah with a burning coal to purify him (Is.6:6).
12. The sons of Levi were purified by fire (Mal.3:3).
13. John the Baptist testifies that the Lord Jesus will baptize in Spirit and fire (Mt.3:11).
14. David wished that his heart and his reins might be burned with fire, he who knew that the fiery wings of charity were not to be feared (Ps.25/26:2).
15. The three Hebrews in the fiery furnace did not feel the blaze because the flame of charity was cooling them (Dan.3:50).
16. Christ said of Jerusalem: "How many times I would have gathered your sons as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Mt.23:37). No fire here but wings.

It is likely that ruminating on all of these images produced a kind of fire in the hearts of

Ambrose's readers. It is a classic instance of what O'Keefe and Reno call intensive reading:

"The church fathers were intensive readers ever on the lookout for hints and signs amid the

tinest details of the text.”¹⁴ Their intensive reading strategies may be placed under three headings: *lexical* (addressing questions of text, versions, translations), *dialectical* (the reconciliation of contradictory or incongruous elements of the text, often by finding the deeper meaning behind the surface text), and *associative* (probing the connections between words, images, phrases).¹⁵

What do such associations achieve? It is difficult to say just how and why the human mind is capable of responding so synthetically to the use of words. It seems almost second nature for a reader to move from word to word, image to image, and in so doing construct an interpretation that does not “explain” the text, but rather illuminates or organizes it. Just as the words of a crossword puzzle cross and, in crossing, provide decisive clues about what comes next, so the words and images of texts cross and lead the reader forward toward the construction of associations only latent and potential in the material at hand. This building up of crossing links is the basic goal of the associative strategy.¹⁶

A reader brings to his perusal of a sacred text such as the Scriptures the assumption that the associations created by the joining of words, images, or phrases carry the revelation of divine truth. As we said in the discussion of metaphor and allegory, one cannot necessarily define this revealed truth by means of discursive reasoning. Nevertheless, it is something deeply understood. If Christ himself is the center and goal of Scripture, then we would expect this deep understanding to lead us in some way to Christ. This is another route of ascent for the soul.

Perhaps we may say that Ambrose’s build-up of Biblical events and images all associated with each other by wings and fire has two functions in the *De Isaac*. First, this treatise is about divine love, the Christian alternative to Platonic *eros*. The verse that inspired the series is taken from the culmination of the *Song of Songs*, it represents the intensity and the absolute

¹⁴ O’Keefe and Reno, 46. See also the helpful remarks of Gérard Nauroy, “L’écriture dans la pastorale d’Ambroise de Milan: les sens de l’Écriture, les formes et styles de l’exégèse: mimétisme biblique,” *Ambroise de Milan. Écriture et esthétique d’une exégèse pastorale*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 247.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 47-9.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 49.

exclusiveness of the love that unites the soul with God. The string of associations shows that this fire of love has driven the major events of salvation history and that it continues to do so; we, the readers, are invited to enter into that movement. Second, on a broader level, this gathering of images around “fire” keeps the Phaedrus myth on the horizon and prepares for the final paragraphs of the treatise. The wings of love are a fitting metaphor even for a philosophical account of the ascent of the soul to the highest good.

11. *DE ISAAC* 8.78-9: THE GOOD BEYOND ALL GOODS

The last two paragraphs of the *De Isaac* are in a different style from the rest. Ambrose makes extensive use of Plotinus to recapitulate his message in philosophical language. Pierre Courcelle has given a detailed exposition of the parallels between Plotinus and Ambrose. He has also commented at length on the adjustments Ambrose made to Plotinus’s text in order to bring it in line with the truth of Christianity.¹⁷ There is no need to reproduce that detail here. Also, in part two of this dissertation we will examine in detail Ambrose’s use of Plotinus and his attitude towards Neoplatonism. I would only like to point out that the parallels are not just a “cut and paste” operation; they reflect a real understanding of Plotinus and a sympathy for his thought on the part of Ambrose. One sign of this is that he has used Plotinus to construct an ordered text of his own in which he continually reworks the text of Plotinus to take it in the direction of the Christian, Nicene Trinity.¹⁸

Why appeal to Plotinus? And what happened to Isaac and Rebecca and the bride and bridegroom of the *Song of Songs*? These are organizational questions one is tempted to ask. Part

¹⁷ Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, 1968), 107-17.

¹⁸ I will show some examples below.

of the answer comes from the fact that Ambrose is transitioning from the language of metaphor, which he has used in the *De Isaac* – where even the name of Isaac invites and reflects this procedure – to the language of philosophy in preparation for the *De Bono Mortis*. I think also that Ambrose intends to give the clearest picture he can of what it is like to be united to God. This is the ultimate goal and while the images of the courtship, love, and desire of the bride and bridegroom are useful as a necessary metaphor for the love of God and the soul, they speak to us more about the desire we should have for union with the Good than they do about the possession of it. With the help of passages from one of Plotinus’s best known and loved *Enneads*, 1.6.5-9, Ambrose tries to take things one step farther.

He begins by exhorting to the Christian soul to take the wings of fire and use them to make the ascent. Following Plotinus, he usually refers to God as “the Good” (neuter singular):

Let us, therefore, take up these wings that like flames reach for the heights. Let each one divest his soul of her more sordid clothing and as gold by fire, let him rub her clean of mud. So the soul is purified like the finest gold. For the beauty of the soul lies in sincere virtue and her truer loveliness lies in the knowledge of higher things. And from this it follows that she may see that Good, upon which all things depend; though it itself derives from no one. There she lives and receives understanding; for that highest Good is the source of life. From it charity and desire are enkindled in us. To approach it and be united to it is delight. For the one who does not see, it is desirable and for the one who does, it is present within. The [soul], therefore, despises all else, but cherishes this [good] and delights in it.¹⁹

Anyone in Ambrose’s audience acquainted with Plotinus would recognize him in these lines.

¹⁹ Sumamus igitur has alas, quae sicut flammae ad superiora dirigant. exuat unusquisque animam suam inuolucris sordidioribus et quasi aurum igni adprobet deteram luto, sic enim purgatur anima ut aurum optimum. pulchritudo autem animae sincera uirtus et decus uerior cognitio superiorum, ut uideat illud bonum, ex quo pendent omnia, ipsum autem ex nullo. eo igitur uiuit atque intellectum accipit, uitae enim fons est summum illud bonum, cuius nobis accenditur caritas et desiderium, cui adpropinquare et misceri uoluptas est, quod ei qui non uidet desiderio est et qui uidet inest, ideoque alia uniuersa despicit, hoc mulcetur et delectatur (*De Is.*8.78).

Later, following Plotinus, Ambrose exhorts the Christian to flee to his true Fatherland, where our Father is. Plotinus then asks, “But what is this flight?” Ambrose will ask the same question a few lines down and he will quote Plotinus’s answer word for word; but first he adds the idea that the Father is our *creator* who made us and that the heavenly Jerusalem is there also, who is our mother (8.78 end). This is one instance where Ambrose redirects Plotinus into a Christian idiom. Another that is subtle but striking comes in 8.79 towards the end. Ambrose is still following Plotinus; but where Plotinus speaks of “God and the Beautiful,” Ambrose substitutes “the Lord and what is good.”²⁰ He also substitutes “Good” for “Beauty” and “mind” for “Intellect” when in Plotinus these could represent two separate hypostases.²¹

That good is known to us, “nor is it far from each of us; for we live, have our being, and move in it; we are of its stock” (Acts.17.27-8), as the apostle signified to the gentiles. It is the good we seek, the only good. For “no one is good, except the one God” (Mk.10.18; Lk.18.19). This is the eye that sees that great and true beauty: unless the eye is healthy and strong, it cannot look at the sun, neither can the soul look at the good unless she is good. Let him become good, therefore, whoever wishes to see the Lord and what is good. Let us be like this good and let us act according to it and do good. This is the good, that is above every act, above every mind and intellection. It is what remains forever and to it all things turn, “in whom dwells the fullness of divinity” (Col.2.9) and through it all things are reconciled in it (cf.Rom.5:10; 2Cor.5:18).²²

²⁰ See *De Is.* 8.79, 699,9. Elsewhere Ambrose names “the good” *illud bonum*. Here he calls it *quod est bonum*; this seems to depersonalize it.

²¹ Courcelle, *Recherches*, 116. But note the *intellectum* in the quotation below. Ambrose infers that we perceive the Good through the mind, as opposed to the whole soul. This would seem to indicate that the distinction between soul and mind is operative here also.

²² cognitum igitur nobis est illud bonum *nec longe est ab unoquoque nostrum; in ipso enim uiuimus et sumus et mouemur; ipsius enim et genus sumus* (Acts.17:27-8), ut apostolus gentiles posuit significare. ipsum est bonum quod quaerimus, solum bonum; *nemo enim bonus nisi unus deus* (Mk.10.18; Lk.18:19). hic est oculus, qui magnum illum et uerum decorem intuetur. solem nisi sanus et uigens oculus non aspicit, nec bonum potest uidere nisi anima bona. fiat ergo bonus qui uult uidere dominum et quod est bonum. huius boni similes simus et secundum id operemur quae bona sunt. hoc est bonum, quod supra omnem operationem est, supra omnem mentem atque intellectum. ipsum est quod semper manet et ad ipsum conuertuntur omnia, *in quo habitat plenitudo diuinitatis* (Col.2:9), et per ipsum reconciliantur omnia in ipsum (cf.Rom.5:10; 2Cor.5:18) (*De Is.*8.79, 699,1-15). Note: the neuter gender becomes awkward after the quote from Col.2:9, since this is a clear reference to Christ, but Ambrose gives no indication of how to interpret here the *per ipsum* and *in ipsum* that follow.

Finally, Ambrose adds a Christian alternative to Plotinus that he calls a fuller definition, closer to the truth. The term he uses is *plenius*. This implies that the following argument is fuller, better, more complete than the one given by Plotinus:

And that we may define the nature of the Good more fully, The Good is life, since it remains forever, giving life and being to all things; for the source of all life is Christ: of whom the prophet said, “We shall live in his shadow.” (Lam.4:20) Now indeed, our life is hidden in Christ; but when Christ appears, our Life, then we also shall appear with him in glory.” (Col.3:3)²³

Ambrose admires Plotinus and sees him in some respects as a philosophical guide. He would say that although the nature of the universe as a whole is different from what Plotinus envisioned, Plotinus nevertheless had real insight into the nature of the human soul, as well as into the route one must take in order to make an ascent to the Good. Though some would disagree, Goulven Madec in particular, I think Ambrose is deeply committed to Neoplatonism as a philosophical explanation of reality, though, as Simplicianus later told Augustine, Plotinus had only half of the truth.²⁴ Ambrose must carefully supply, therefore, the missing half.

²³ at ut plenius definiamus quid sit bonum, uita est bonum, quia semper manet dans uiuere et esse omnibus, quia fons est omnium uitae Christus de quo ait propheta: *in umbra eius uiuemus* (Lam.4:20); nunc enim *uita nostra abscondita in Christo est; cum autem adparuerit Christus, uita nostra, tunc et nos cum illo adparebimus in gloria* (Col.3:3) (*De Is.*8.79, 699,15-21).

²⁴ Augustine, *Conf.*8.2; see also *Conf.*7.9.

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

In the *De Isaac* Ambrose writes about the progress of the Christian soul towards union with Christ, who as God has all the attributes of the Platonic and Neoplatonic highest Good. The *De Isaac* is the first of a two part series; it considers the soul in life, the *De Bono Mortis* considers the soul as she passes through death into a definitive higher life. A brief review of the literature on the *De Isaac* reveals that many attempts have been made to find a logical structure for what sometimes looks like a protean text. Jacques Fontaine, with Gérard Nauroy after him, has proposed that poetry broadly understood as poetic figure and language in prose: the *poetic function*, is key to an appreciation of Ambrose's texts in general and of the *De Isaac* in particular. Ambrose is a born poet, he thinks in terms of metaphor and linguistic representation. He writes the *De Isaac* as a *poiesis* in the Aristotelian sense, an invitation to his readers to enter into the images of the bride and bridegroom of the *Song of Songs* and to think about the transformation of their own personal lives after the pattern of what they see in the bride. The underlying structure of the *De Isaac*, therefore, is a meditative itinerary following the bride as she advances towards and attains perfect union with God. At the end of the treatise Ambrose describes the end of the bride's journey with a philosophical definition of the Good – removed as far as possible from poetic metaphor – in order to indicate to his readers without ambiguity the goal of their reading of the *De Isaac*. He turns to Plotinus as the most articulate guide, but he carefully grooms the text of Plotinus, in order to fit it into a Christian vision of the highest Good.

In addition to this linear structure, there is a vertical layering of typological image and metaphor. This is another essential element of the *poetic function*. As we saw in the stanza from the *Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross, the relation proposed between addressor and addressee is multi-layered. There are four layers in the *Spiritual Canticle*; one may focus on one or other of the layers; but all belong to the poetic invitation to the reader to enter in and draw insight and understanding from this rich tapestry of representation.¹ Ambrose also builds up a rich tapestry of representation. First, he places the bride and bridegroom of the *Song of Songs* within the general context of the Old Testament story of Isaac and his marriage to Rebecca. They are for the present treatise the indispensable historic foundation for the ascent of the bride to the equally historic, incarnate but divine bridegroom. Ambrose enters into his subject from the solid approach of marriage, and even the sensual kiss; this is a poetic entrance any in his congregation could understand and find useful for reflection. In addition, Isaac is identified with perfect manhood and with Christ, Rebecca with the Church and the soul, and finally both are identified in different ways at different times with the soul as the bride of the Word. Like the other patriarchs and their wives, Isaac and Rebecca are fundamental historical paradigms for the unfolding story. Through the historical events of their lives they prefigure and embody the spiritual realities Christians are now called to live. As counterparts, therefore, to the bride and bridegroom of the *Song of Songs*, Isaac and Rebecca also have a poetic, spiritual message, summarized by Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians (5:31-3): whoever lives out married life with

¹ See chapter one, notes 42-43 and the quotation from Genuyt to which these notes refer. Following is the pertinent section of Genuyt's text: "Who speaks and to whom does he speak? (1) The poet to his muse, (2) the lover to his beloved, (3) the soul in love with God, (4) God who seeks the love of his people? All of these senses together, most likely, but none in particular. The poem has no private points of reference.... Each may enter into it and bring his own points of reference. This capacity of the poetic discourse for multiple points of entry and exit, on many levels, makes it an appropriate structure for the expression of words that are both human and divine."

fidelity and grace may enter into the mystery of the *Song of Songs*. The layering of images works in many directions at once.

Thus, Ambrose's project is simpler and more profound than one might think. He is not delivering a formal, philosophical discourse on the soul, though at the end he has recourse to philosophy, as also in the *De Bono Mortis*; nor does he give a line-by-line exegetical commentary on Genesis or on the *Song of Songs*. Instead, he moves between the texts and the layers of meaning in order to bring his readers by whatever entry into the rich and profound spiritual reality of ascent to the Good that is Christ. The bride is the mirror Ambrose holds before his readers, so that they may look at themselves and see what they were made to be and how they may acquire the perfection of life and love that is the goal of every Christian life.

Though I would not want to push the parallel too far, I think that Ambrose uses the *Song of Songs* in a way similar to the use Stoics and Neoplatonists made of the traditional stories and myths found in Homer, for example. Is it too much of a stretch to say that the bride of the *Song* is like Psyche? Of course there are enormous differences between any story based on the Scriptures and the pagan myths. First, the content symbolized by the story is radically different from pagan content. The bride of the *Song of Songs* represents the human soul or the Church in an economy of salvation no pagan author could ever have imagined. Second, the Christian God so loved the soul that he became flesh that she might love him. No pagan or Platonic myth could ever have envisioned that. However, speaking of the way in which a story might be used, as an allegory of spiritual truths, I think there is a similarity. I also think that this is one reason why Ambrose – who by his education was wholly conversant with the stories of classical antiquity and probably

knew the use the philosophers had made of them² – turned naturally to the *Song of Songs* as a means by which to present the deepest truths of the Christian spiritual ascent. Again, the bride is in a real sense more than a story because she stands as a paradigm of true holiness, true love, and true life in Christ. The fact remains that Ambrose could have written a treatise on the virtues, or the *threefold wisdom of Solomon* (4.27), which later theologians developed into the three ways of the interior life.³ Instead he chose a beautiful, appealing picture of Christian beauty, love and desire of the soul for Christ, the Word. Finally, if this half of the image resembles the Platonic principle of *eros* as the fundamental incentive for the soul to make the ascent to higher reality, the other half is the unbelievable “happy ending,” unique to Christianity: the Word also desires to unite himself to the soul he came to save. One of the significant aspects, therefore, of the story of the *Song of Songs* is this reciprocal love. This may be one reason why Ambrose takes pains to marry the bride and bridegroom. Another element of the Christian version of *eros* that Ambrose develops in the *De Isaac* is the bridegroom’s role in the seeking of the bride: he is guide as well as goal. Whatever one’s interior dispositions may be, one comes away from a reading of the *De Isaac* with the awareness that the Christian life is essentially a love story: the stakes are high, but the bridegroom is never far away and the ending may be happy indeed. Ambrose has exploited the power of images to the full in order to form a Christian consciousness in his congregation on the deep level of the human experience of love. Again, the metaphor works by being like human love but not quite: it is the same but different, like love, only more so.

² In the *De Bono Mortis* Ambrose refers to just such a story, the birth of Cupid from the Symposium, based on mythology, retold by Plato and then by Plotinus.

³ For a review of the origins and development of the idea of the three stages of the spiritual growth of the soul, see Sagot, “La triple sagesse,” 80. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, *The Presence of God: a History of Western Christian Mysticism*, v.1, New York: Crossroad (1991), 117-128.

From the preceding reflections it is clear that for Ambrose the *De Isaac* was not only a richly layered metaphorical text, but also, in Frances Young's use of the term, a *performative* text.⁴ What does this mean? Young makes an interesting comment to the effect that the reader of an allegorical text prolongs the allegory when he applies it to himself: "all reading of texts which involves entering the text-world, appropriating the perspective of the text, or reading ourselves into the text, is in some sense allegorical."⁵ Apparently, Ambrose wrote out many of his works in response to requests from those who heard his sermons: they wanted something to read over at leisure, to "ruminate."⁶ This rumination is devotional reading. The goal is to taste truths buried, sometimes deeply, in the Scriptural texts and to be intellectually and morally formed by them. In his exposition of Ps.118, Ambrose says:

The words of the heavenly Scriptures are good pastures, in which by daily reading we are fed, in which we are refreshed and restored, when we taste the words that have been written or assiduously ruminate on those we have heard in a discourse (*summon ore libata*).⁷

This is the age old practice of philosophical exercise, or of *lectio divina*, which in the fourth century was viewed as an ideal occupation for educated Christians in general.⁸ A few

⁴ Frances Young, 191, 209, 263. Young also reminds us (77) that since the ancients read out loud, the reading of a Biblical text was even on this elementary level a performance. The reader of the *De Isaac*, therefore, would declaim the text in some way and taste all the more the honeyed sweetness of the text itself, for which Ambrose was famous. ⁵ *ibid.* 191.

⁶ Nauroy, "L'Écriture," 253-4.

⁷ Bona etiam pascua verba sunt scripturarum caelestium, in quibus cotidiana lectione pascimur, in quibus recreamur ac reficimur, cum ea quae scripta sunt degustamus vel summo ore libata frequentius ruminamus. His pascuis grex domini saginatur (*Exp.Ps.118* 14.2).

⁸ See Pierre Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique* 3e ed.rev.(Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1993), 59-74. The poets Paulinus of Nola and Prudentius were both contemporaries and friends of Ambrose. Both cultivated an assiduous reading of the Scriptures and Paulinus recommends it to his friend Jovius, as the basis – instead of the classical myths – and source of inspiration for their poetry. See Paulinus of Nola's poem 22, a letter to his friend Jovius, and Prudentius' Preface and Epilogue to his poetry.

generations later, St. Benedict would give it a formal name and incorporate the practice into his Rule for monks.

In *lectio divina*, there are two separate procedures to consider: that of the reader and that of the writer. Of course, one may ruminatively read any type of text; but in general, in *lectio divina* one reads for self improvement. When something in the text seems significant for any reason, one stops to ponder what in the passage is particularly striking. So it is a deeply personal practice and one that proceeds slowly with time allowed for associations to be made, digressions followed in case something significant lies in that direction. This is serious reading. It may be highly speculative, but normally it leads to a practical, philosophical, or theological conclusion. It seems to me that Ambrose has reproduced something like this reading procedure in his writing style. He is recording for others his method of devotional reading as well as the content. For example, paragraph 8.77 on the “wings of fire” is probably the fruit of his own personal musings on the image of “fire” in the Scriptures; he more or less jotted them down in the *De Isaac*. This also was a pattern for his readers to follow.⁹ When Augustine sat in silence and watched Ambrose, he was struck by the intensity with which Ambrose read: “Who would dare be a burden to one so intent?” (*Quis enim tam intento esse oneri auderet?*) (Conf.6.3). Augustine remembered this silent scrutiny.¹⁰

⁹ Reading any early Christian author can be a challenge. But, based on my own experience, the difficulties with Ambrose can be acute. This is because he often seems to be writing something closer to poetry than prose. The associative techniques we naturally bring to poetry need to be applied to his texts. Most of us, however, need to read him rather quickly for information. It is a frustrating dilemma, but it may be one contributing factor to a relative neglect of Ambrose in modern studies. He is too monolithic, too labyrinthine, too difficult to follow from beginning to end.

¹⁰ *cor intellectum rimabatur* (Conf.6.3) See Conf. 7.20-1 for one instance of Augustine’s eventual fervor in his approach to the Scriptures.

I would like to mention one final consideration here. The *De Isaac* is clearly a treatise meant for Ambrose's congregation at large. Yet we have reason to think that before his episcopal election Ambrose himself would have stood in just such a congregation as his. The Milanese would not have made a bishop out of a provincial governor who had no knowledge of or regard for the Scriptures, especially in an urban milieu where the number of educated Christians, as far as we can tell, was rather high.¹¹ Like many of the dignitaries to whom he preached, Ambrose belonged within an intellectual tradition that esteemed the Scriptures as the divinely inspired word of God and read them seriously. Ambrose intended his many subtle and partial allusions to Scripture and his altered references to Plotinus to be picked up by his listeners and readers. Nor did he intend the spiritual message of the *De Isaac* for the ears of virgins and ascetics alone. So the *De Isaac* reflects a high level of intellectual and cultural formation in Ambrose's church but, in addition, genuine commitment to a Christian spiritual life.

¹¹ Augustine gives precious indications of this milieu in his *Confessions*. One thinks of Ponticianus, who recounted to him the life of St. Anthony, and the young men in the imperial service mentioned there who read the life in a book, found in a house outside of Trier (Conf. 8.6). In this passage, Ponticianus also tells Augustine that there is a monastery outside the walls of Milan under Ambrose's jurisdiction.

PART TWO
THE *DE BONO MORTIS*

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF THE *DE BONO MORTIS*

The *De Bono Mortis* is a companion piece to the *De Isaac*. Where the *De Isaac* considered the soul's progress in this life, the *De Bono Mortis* considers the transition of the soul through death to a definitive union with God in the next life. Where the *De Isaac* was a poetic itinerary centered around the bride of the *Song of Songs*, the *De Bono Mortis* is primarily a philosophical treatise in which Ambrose shows that death is a good for all men, for the virtuous and wicked alike. He presents arguments based on the classical philosophical traditions found in Plato and Plotinus, but also on Cicero, Epicurus, and the classical tradition in general; he gives Christian interpretations of these views by means of texts and examples from Scripture. On the surface the *De Bono Mortis* appears to be a straightforward, rather unoriginal presentation of classical philosophical material. Ambiguities arise, however, which suggest that more is attempted here than meets the eye. First, one finds relatively little mention of the resurrection of the body. Ambrose had clear and well developed ideas about it.¹ Why does one of the central dogmas of Christianity relating to death receive little emphasis in his treatise on it? Second, why would a Christian teacher insist on the advantages of death even for those living in sin? Third, why does Ambrose focus so intently in this treatise on a point of contention among Christians and Platonists: who derived his wisdom from whom, Christ from Plato or Plato from Christ? A

¹ See the second half of *De Exc. Frat.* 2, CSEL 73, n. 50-104 (pp.275-307); on the resurrection of the body in particular: 88 (297).

nexus of questions surrounds this deceptively simple treatise on death. Finally, Ambrose makes an abrupt transition from an exhortation, inspired by the *Phaedo*, to flee the passions that bind us to the flesh, to an exhortation to virtue under the metaphor of the painted walls of a city, and then to a commentary on the garden scenes from the *Song of Songs*.² A first reading of this passage seems like a breathless and confusing transition into new territory, even in the context of fourth century exegesis, where fluidity and connections of mere detail abound. We saw Ambrose in the *De Isaac* making a mosaic of imagery by piling up references to Isaac and Rebecca, the bride and bridegroom, wings of fire, and then a philosophical consideration of the Good. All are intended to build up a complex, multi-layered movement towards Christ in the hearts of his audience. The connections are not always obvious but Ambrose expects his audience to be up to the task. Something similar happens in the *De Bono Mortis*, though the initial transition is more abrupt.³

This last point – the apparent lack of coherence in the middle of the *De Bono Mortis* – brings up other questions. The most obvious is this: if Ambrose expects a high level of audience participation in his treatise, of what are they to take note when he transitions to the garden of the *Song of Songs*? On a more fundamental level, though, if for Ambrose verses from Scripture may enter into virtually any discussion and play a definitive role, what would this tell us about Ambrose and his audience? At first sight, it looks like homiletic exegesis taken to an extreme. In a discussion of the relation between Scriptural commentary and homily, Philip Rousseau offers

² *De Bono Mortis* 5.17-19.

³ The enumerative “list” compilation of images is one mark of the jeweled style. See Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). Roberts says that in late antique poetry “The seams not only show they are positively advertized.... These are precisely the qualities the poets aim for” (3). This is similar to the qualities of Ambrose’s style mentioned above. See also Roberts’ discussion of the poetry of Paulinus of Nola, 133-4. Style comes from a cultural milieu and has audience expectations. There is more going on here, however, than merely a question of style.

an insightful reminder: “The real danger is that the frozen form that exegetical texts might now retain will blind us to the fluid endeavors that lie behind them.” He later adds: “it is the task that is important, not the document (as we have it).”⁴ So, again, what is Ambrose doing here in the *De Bono Mortis*?

The questions raised here indicate, to me at least, that Ambrose has an agenda in the *De Bono Mortis* that reaches far beyond the immediate content of the treatise. As with any text that touches on questions of deep significance to an author and audience in a given period, the assumptions and preoccupations of that period are the inevitable backdrop for the text. It is appropriate, therefore, to probe the signs of these assumptions and preoccupations in the text, in order to come to a better understanding of the author’s purpose. It is a daunting task that takes me into territories that far surpass the confines of one dissertation. One such territory is the question of Ambrose’s use of Plotinus: did Ambrose read him directly or was it through Porphyry or some manual? When he “quotes” Plotinus, is it really Plotinus or some other text that either bears a general resemblance to him or contains him embedded in new material? As an intermediary source one might think of a Greek Patristic writer whom Ambrose could have read. These are extremely difficult questions I do not have the expertise to answer fully. Nor does the historical record allow a wholly satisfactory answer since, to mention only one problem, we have lost a large part of the texts of Porphyry. One thing is clear, however: whatever Ambrose’s source may have been, he *thought* in many ways like Plotinus, though he took great pains to “Christianize” what he received from him. Also, as we saw in Part I, the parallels between Ambrose and Plotinus are real and sustained in a number of passages, primarily but not

⁴ Philip Rousseau, “Homily and Exegesis in the Patristic Age: Comparisons of Purpose and Effect,” in *The Purposes of Rhetoric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Alberto Quiroga (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2013), forthcoming.

exclusively, from the first *Ennead*. In part one we looked at En. 1.8; 1.2.4; 1.6. There are similar parallels between the *De Bono Mortis* and En. 1.1 and 1.7 and between the *De Jacob* and En. 1.4. Finally, two other passages from Plotinus of particular interest may be added. En.3.5 is an reinterpretation of Plato's myth of Eros and a discussion of the role of myth in general. En. 4.8.1 is a biographical description of Plotinus's ascent to the level of intellect, an interesting text especially, as we saw in part one, in connection with Paul's ecstasy and ascent into the "third Heaven" (2Cor.12:1-4). Since Porphyry advertised by his arrangement of the *Enneads* the first as a point of entry, a beginner course, into the teachings of Plotinus, there is no compelling reason to think that Ambrose did not read the first *Ennead*. I operate on this assumption throughout this dissertation. I also assume that a significant portion of Ambrose's audience, the portion he wished to reach, had also read the same philosophical texts as he had. Milan in the 380s was a cultural center of importance. There are many signs of this, which we will examine later, and signs that Ambrose himself belonged to this cultural elite. So he could in fact reach an audience capable of reading his text of the *De Bono Mortis* in depth and capable of picking up the multiple messages contained within it.

In general, I think the *De Bono Mortis* may be read on two tracks. The first is the obvious route for the Christians in Ambrose's congregation who would hear the sermons that are thought to be the foundation for this treatise and/or read the edited text as a salutary admonition both on God's mercy in the providence of death and on the need to prepare well for the moment of individual death.⁵ Some would also appreciate the fact that Ambrose handed on to the Christian

⁵ Monica, the mother of Augustine, is a stellar example. Augustine says that in Ostia shortly before her death she engaged in a discussion with some of his friends on the contempt of this life and the goodness of death (*de contemptu vitae huius et bono mortis*). Had she read or did she have in hand Ambrose's *De Bono Mortis*? (Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.11). Augustine also says that Monica hung on Ambrose's words during his homilies

community the traditional elements of the *consolatio*.⁶ But beyond this first track there appears to be a second: it is an urbane, yet provocative challenge to the more philosophically minded of Ambrose's contemporaries. These would have been Christians, catechumens (who, like Marius Victorinus, delayed baptism indefinitely),⁷ and pagans interested in Platonism and Neoplatonism.⁸ Ambrose's rallying cry was the standard quip that Plato got his wisdom from Moses, though the real challenge was an intense and thoughtful reflection on the itinerary of spiritual ascent for a Platonist who was also – or could be – a Christian. That Ambrose as bishop would reach out to these members of his audience seems fairly obvious. One might also ask if in

(*Conf.* 6.1end). She is an example of the intelligent and capable laity in the audience, who listened carefully and then went home and thought about what the bishop had said. Ambrose's Milanese friend Irenaeus also pondered the bishop's sermons, asked questions, and sought answers he could think on at home after church. From Irenaeus we have an example of someone jotting down his questions and sending them off across town to the bishop for further clarification (*Ep.* 63). See also, Philip Rousseau, "Homily and Asceticism in the North Italian Episcopate," *Chromatius of Aquileia and his Age: Proceedings of the International Conference held in Aquileia 22-24 May, 2008*, ed. Pier Franco Betrice and Alessio Peršič (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 145-61. Maximus of Turin expected his faithful to ruminate on the *sermo Dei*, as one of the daily activities in a well ordered home (151). One can only come to the mystery of Christ by penetrating the secret meaning of the Gospel. So if one does not know how to read, one may find help in the conversation of a holy man (154). The point is that listening to the Scriptures in Church is a bare minimum. In his *Exp.Ps.118*:1,11, 12,15, Ambrose complains that the target of his homiletic advice neither listens to the Scriptures in Church nor reads them at home (*domi*).

⁶ The genre of the *consolatio* addresses the loss of loved ones, exile, or some other sorrow. It could take different forms, the most common being philosophical treatises or essays, such as the *De Bono Mortis*, or letters of consolation (also sections of funeral orations or poetry). There are traditional themes that properly belong to a *consolatio*: philosophical principles concerning death; sympathy, exhortation, eulogy; arguments such as all must die, death brings release, time heals, the deceased was only 'lent', one must always be prepared for what comes to all, grief is normal but not to be prolonged (OCD). Ambrose's letter (*Ep.* 8) to Faustinus on the death of his sister is a *consolatio*, a Christian version of the standard themes: consolation for the bereaved is not joyous but still necessary; death comes to all; those left behind need you: think of your nephews and nieces; though your sister is saved by her merits and faith, pray for her; you cannot bear not seeing her, but the Apostle says, henceforth we know no man according to the flesh (2Cor.5:16); if the body dies, it will rise again; your sister is a new creation through grace in Christ; it is said to her soul, "Your youth is renewed like the eagle." (Ps.102:5); why lament the dead when they have already been reconciled to the Father through Christ?

⁷ See Augustine, *Conf.* 8.2: Ambrose's correspondent, Bellicius, may be another example (*Epp.* 9, 67)

⁸ In the following discussion, I would like to use the term "Platonist" to refer to the entire philosophical tradition inaugurated by Plato, to which Plotinus and Porphyry subscribed. The modern distinction between "Platonist" and "Neoplatonist" correctly identifies differences between the earlier and later philosophers. For a study of fourth century men of letters, who were not philosophers but who nevertheless had an interest in philosophical matters and subscribed to the intellectual custom derived from Plato, it is helpful to think of the continuity of the tradition at large. This is clearly the sense of Augustine's term "libri Platoniorum" in *Confessions* 8.2: See also the comments of Pierre Hadot, in his introduction to the *Colloque Royaumont*, reprinted in *Plotin, Porphyre: Etudes Neoplatoniciennes* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1999), 31.

the 380s at Milan, Ambrose had a particular reason for challenging the Neoplatonists. What, then, did Ambrose hope to accomplish? In order to answer the questions raised here and in the preceding paragraphs, we need to reassess the context out of which the *De Bono Mortis* came to be. In the following chapters, therefore, I will look at the background leading to the composition of the treatise, the environment in which it was produced, and the Christian parameters of a Platonic treatise on death. Then, I will analyze in depth the *De Bono Mortis*.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE DE BONO MORTIS: A QUESTION OF DATES

Although numerous attempts have been made to clarify the chronology of Ambrose's life and works, serious uncertainty remains. Dates proposed both for his birth and for the composition of his treatises cannot be corroborated by sufficient circumstantial or textual evidence. As a result, widely differing interpretations of Ambrose's life, character, and pastoral activity, based in part on divergent chronologies, have succeeded one another in recent decades.¹ Shifts in interpretation and re-evaluation are, of course, a normal part of the process of historical reconstruction. In the case of Ambrose, however, there is an uncommon difficulty. As Yves-Marie Duval so aptly put it, "Long beyond suspicion because he was revered, over the last century

¹ See Yves-Marie Duval, *L'extirpation de l'Arianisme en Italie du Nord et en Occident*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS611, Ashgate, 1998, XI "Sur quelques études récentes concernant Ambroise et l'arianisme occidental," 2-3. Duval's conclusion is that without engaging in unfounded hagiography, historians would do well to look for coherence in his episcopacy and in his writings. He notes that in a number of instances, the assessments Ambrose makes of a political or religious event could be verified independently by his contemporaries. This does not mean that Ambrose did not have his particular interpretation of the events, but it does mean that he cannot have wholly falsified them. The Council of Aquileia is a case in point. One of the questions here is how much weight do we accord the *Scholia* of Palladius? Duval thinks that McLynn should not make them his principal source, without taking seriously other sources as well. This is reasonable, since the *Scholia* are hostile to Ambrose (5-6). We will look more closely at Aquilaea later. Duval gives further examples in the same vein. He is reacting to a tendency he sees in authors like McLynn to imply, without actually saying so, that Ambrose was incapable of motives higher than self-serving, political survival and gain. For example, McLynn implies that Ambrose was preparing his own cult as a saint when he prepared a place for his own burial (37). This is a groundless assumption, especially since senators prepared their tombs and bishops were often buried in churches. Duval notes: "Une mausolée, peut-être; un martyrium, non." There may of course have been elements of self-aggrandizement; no one says there were not. Duval's point is: was there nothing more to Ambrose than that? The implication one derives from McLynn, whether or not he intends this result, is that there was not. There is a delicate balance to be maintained here. In this article, Duval runs through a number of events in Ambrose's life that benefit from a judicious and objective reappraisal.

Ambrose has been a target for all sorts of attacks.”² Part of the explanation for this lies in Ambrose’s character: the Roman senator turned bishop generated a kind of monumental presence, an informal authority, which – as we mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation – seamlessly developed into hagiographic accounts of his life. This presence has proven difficult to penetrate by admirers and detractors alike. As a result, something like an intellectual impasse has developed in studies of Ambrose. Whatever one may think of him as a person, however much or little one may like him, a careful reconsideration of chronology and a critical rereading and reappraisal of his writings is the way through this impasse.³ I have tried to stand back and take a fresh look at the *De Bono Mortis*. It seems to me that the results are astonishing.

AMBROSE’S DATES:

Three dates are proposed for the birth of Ambrose: 339⁴, 333⁵, and 340.⁶ These dates are based in part on two texts from Ambrose. The first is a statement by Paulinus in the *Vita*, that Ambrose was born (at Trier) while his father was “in the administration of the prefecture of Gaul” (*posito in administratione praefecturae Galliarum patre eius Ambrosio natus est Ambrosius*). One might argue that nothing in this brief notice indicates that Ambrose senior was actually praetorian prefect but only that he was on the staff. Even so, the general consensus is

² Or, longtemps insoupçonné parce que vénéré, Ambroise est, depuis un siècle, la cible de toute sorte d'attaques (Duval, 1998, XI, 3). See the lists of conflicting interpretations in Colish, 5-9; Sanders, 7-11.

³ Two recent additions: Hervé Savon, *Ambroise de Milan* (Paris: Desclée, 1997); John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (New York: Longman, 1999).

⁴ Palanque, 480-482; Dudden, 2, McLynn, 32:

⁵ Paredi 1994, 18; Andrew Lenox-Conyngham, “Ambrose and Philosophy,” in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: essays in tribute to George Christopher Stead* ed. Lionel Wickham et al. (Brill, New York, 1993), 116; O. Fallaer, *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, 59 Jahrgang, 39 Hefte, 25 September, 1938, 1370; Cesare Pasini, *Ambrogio di Milano: azione e pensiero di un vescovo* (Milan: Edizione San Paolo, 1996), 19-20.

⁶ Hervé Savon, *Ambroise de Milan* (Paris: Desclée, 1997), 31.; Giuseppe Visonà, Cronologia Ambrosiana, in *Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera*, 25 (Milano: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2004), 15.

that Ambrose Senior was the praetorian prefect of Gaul.⁷ There is actually a lacuna in the list of prefects in Gaul under Constantinus between the Summer of 337 and the Spring of 341. This text would seem to fill the void; at least, scholars have proposed that Ambrose's father may have been prefect during this period, sometime before 341.⁸ The second text is letter 49(59) to Severus, bishop of Naples, in which Ambrose gives two significant but ambiguous indicators.⁹ First, he says that he is in his fifty-three years old. Second, he mentions that he is surrounded by the storms of war and the uproar of all sorts of anxieties (*bellorum procellis in medio versamur omnium molestiarum freto*) and set upon by barbarian uprisings, or perhaps by foreign invasions (*obiecti barbaricis motibus*).¹⁰ Is he referring to the invasion of Italy by a Roman army, containing Barbarian and Arian troops, under the usurper Maximus in 387 or to the threat of Alaric's invasion in 392 or to the invasion of the other usurper Eugenius in 393-4? Only in 387 was there an actual invasion while Ambrose was residing at Milan; in 392 the crisis was averted and in 393-4 Ambrose left Milan before Eugenius arrived. Still, Milan in the late fourth century was in sufficient danger from the northern border to make almost any date appropriate for Ambrose's rhetoric in letter 49, especially since in this letter he is contrasting his own environment of unrest to the peace and security of the shores of Campania.

⁷ T.D. Barnes, "Imperial Chronology: 337-350," *Phoenix* 34.2, 1980, 160-66; see 161, note 5; Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: the Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 190.

⁸ Savon, *Ambroise*, 31.

⁹ I follow the numbering of Ambrose's letters found in CSEL 82.2, ed. Otto Faller, rev. Michaela Zelzer (Vienna, 1990). The CSEL number is customarily given first followed by the Maurist, PL, number in parentheses.

¹⁰ Ep.49.3. Nos autem obiecti barbaricis motibus et bellorum procellis in medio versamur omnium molestiarum freto et pro his laboribus et periculis graviora colligimus futurae vitae pericula. Unde de nobis propheticum illud concinere videtur: *Pro laboribus vidi tabernacula Aethiopum* (Hab.3:7a). 4. Etenim in istius mundi tenebris, quibus obumbratur veritas futurae perfectionis, cum ad annum tertium et quinquagesimum iam perduxerim in hoc corpore situs, in quo tam graves iam dudum sustinemus gemitus, quomodo non in tabernaculis Aethiopum tendimus et *habitamus cum habitantibus Madian?* (Hab.3:7b; cf. Ps.119:5) Qui propter tenebroso operis conscientiam diiudicari etiam ab homine mortali reformidant. *Spiritalis enim diiudicat omnia, ipse autem a nemine diiudicatur* (1Cor.2:15). CSEL 82.2, ed. Zelzer. See also her notes at XXX and 55.

Giuseppe Visonà, the compiler of Ambrose's chronology for the Italian edition of the complete works, gives 340 as the more likely date and 333/334 as a second possibility.¹¹ He proposes two arguments for the 340 date. First, in his *Vita*, Paulinus says that when bishops would come to the house to visit his mother and sister, already a consecrated virgin, and the women would kiss the bishop's hand, the young Ambrose would offer his hand also to be kissed, since, he said, he too would be a bishop some day.¹² Visonà says that the story is probably true because Paulinus could have heard it first hand from Ambrose's sister Marcellina or from the sister of her companion, still living in Carthage at the time of Paulinus's writing. But, he continues, this scene reflects the behavior of a thirteen or fourteen year old, not a young man of twenty. Since Marcellina received the veil sometime between December 25, 353 and January 6, 354,¹³ Ambrose must have been born in 340.¹⁴ This argument cannot be considered conclusive for two reasons. First, because, depending on the context, an older youth might have made such a jest and, second, because, as far as we can tell from contemporary legislation, it is highly likely that Marcellina was considerably older than the legal age for marriage when she received the veil from Pope Liberius in 353/354.¹⁵ If, as the evidence indicates, Marcellina received the veil at about the age of 25, she would have been born around 327-8. If we say that Ambrose was born in

¹¹ Giuseppe Visonà, *Cronologia Ambrosiana, Tutte le Opere di Sant'Ambrogio*, 25 (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2004), 15-20.

¹² Paulinus, *Vita*, 4.

¹³ Visonà, 20-21.

¹⁴ Visonà, 19.

¹⁵ See René Metz, *La Consécration des vierges dans l'église romaine: étude d'histoire de la liturgie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 88-93 and 105-112: Metz cites evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries for a distinction between two classes of virgins: 1) young women who have embraced the *propositum virginitatis* but who are not, or not yet, consecrated by the bishop and 2) those who have received the *consecration* with the veil at a public Liturgical ceremony (88-93). Although the documentation available from the fourth century does not indicate a uniform practice, young girls were allowed to make a private vow. The time of probation before receiving the veil appears to have been either until the age of 25 (Council of Hippo, 393) or until the age of 40 (imperial legislation, 458). See Metz, 105-112:

339 or 340, there would have been a gap of eleven or twelve years between the two siblings. Nothing in the sources would support such a large difference in age between them. It would seem more likely, on the basis of the evidence, that Ambrose was born earlier in the 330s. Further, since a life of consecrated virginity would normally begin by a private vow of virginity followed by a period of probation, and Paulinus mentions only a vow, not a veiling, Ambrose could well have been thirteen or fourteen when he playfully offered his hand.

Vasconà's second argument is taken from Hervé Savon,¹⁶ who bases his estimate on a comment made in the *Scholia* on the Council of Aquileia. Here Ambrose is addressed in the second person: it is said that Palladius has been a bishop "for a longer period of time than your dissolute and filthy years" (*lascivos sordidosque tuos excideret annos*). The next sentence specifies that after eleven years of presbyterate, one of the bishops [Palladius] had been "at the time" (*tunc*) a bishop for thirty-five years. If "dissolute and filthy years" applies to the entire length of Ambrose's life before his baptism and if *tunc* refers to the moment of his baptism and election, then he was thirty-five in 374 and born in 339/340. It is possible that these calculations are correct, but neither of these premises are verifiable. First, in the preceding paragraph the scholiast has called Ambrose names which hardly imply an end to the "dissolute and filthy years": *malitiosus*, *blasphemosus*, *negator fidei*, *revoltus*, *turbulentus*, *noxius*, and so on. Then, in the following paragraph (120), he recalls with reproach the irregularities of Ambrose's episcopal election and ordination. Second, this section of the *Scholia* refers back to the Council, in the past tense and gives no indication of relative time: there is no way of knowing whether the *tunc* at 116.3, refers to the time of Ambrose's baptism or the time of the Council. Since the rest of the

¹⁶ Hervé Savon, *Ambroise de Milan* (Paris: Desclée, 1997), 31.

paragraph deals with events that took place at the Council, the obvious reading, without adding any assumptions to the account, is that *tunc* refers to the Council in 381. This is a polemical argument, coming from an enemy. It is too vague and too vitriolic to refer specifically to the length of Ambrose's life as such. It more probably refers to the fact that Palladius has been an upstanding, irreproachable bishop for thirty-five years, during which time Ambrose has been a nasty layman or a dissolute layman/bishop, irregularly elected by the laity.¹⁷

The conclusion of this re-examination of the texts is that we do not know for certain when Ambrose was born. Although 339 is often repeated without question by historians in the wake of Palanque and Dudden,¹⁸ others either move towards the earlier date or leave the question open.¹⁹ In fact, much in Ambrose's life makes better sense, if we allow him another 5 or 6 years before his election. Though we obviously cannot argue to the earlier date on the basis of this "better sense," recognizing that 339 or 340 are hypothetical birth dates at best opens the door to the possibility that Ambrose was about 40 at the time of his election. This is a normal age for election to the episcopacy; it allows for a more mature Ambrose, less of a prodigy/quick learner than has been assumed. A seasoned veteran of the imperial service, he could be counted upon to undertake a largely uncharted career as head of a divided Christian church in an imperial city.

¹⁷ Duval points out that neither Rufinus nor Paulinus mention the clergy in connection with Ambrose's election. This seems to add weight to the Scholiast's reproach and also explains Ambrose's reluctance to accept ordination, until the emperor had ratified the choice, *Ambroise*, 249. If any weight is to be given to years and dates here, one might argue that if Palladius had been a priest for 11 years and a bishop for 35, he has been in sacerdotal orders for 46 years. This could plausibly be near Ambrose's age in 381 and it would not solve the difficulty of the "dissolute and filthy years."

¹⁸ McLynn, 32; Moorhead, 20; Charles Kannengieser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: the Bible in Ancient Christianity*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1045; J. H. W. G. Liebeschütz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 57.

¹⁹ Cesare Pasini, *Ambrogio di Milano: azione e pensiero di un vescovo* (Milan: Edizione San Paolo, 1996), 20; Michaela Zelzer, CSEL 82:2, Prolegomena, XXX, note 22; Michaela Zelzer, "Zur Chronologie Der Werke Des Ambrosius. Überblick über Die Forschung Von 1974 Bis 1997," *Nec Timeo Mori: Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant' Ambrogio*, ed. Luigi F. Pizzolato and Marco Rizzi (Milan: Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1998), 85.

His success would indicate that he had acquired the credentials and experience to understand the nature and risks of his position and to maintain it. In 374 he looked like the right man at the right time to fill a difficult vacancy, in some ways like Nectarius in 381 at Constantinople, though no one, not even Ambrose, could foresee the outcome.²⁰

On a more theoretical level, with regard to Scripture, Ambrose's command of it is thorough and impressive. One does not acquire this kind of expertise over night, even with much study and the help of a Simplicianus. If, on the other hand, Ambrose spent a number of years standing in the congregation listening to the kind of sermon he himself would deliver as bishop, and studying Scripture as he clearly expected his hearers to do, he would have acquired the indispensable basis on which to build his deft handling of difficult passages and associations between the Old and New Testaments.²¹ With regard to philosophy, a careful reading of the *De Bono Mortis* shows that Ambrose had an integrated grasp of the ideas that are fundamental to a Platonic view of life and death.²² The important point here, as in the case of Scripture above, is that his ideas and his use of Plato and Plotinus have the kind of ease and integration that represents a long acquaintance, regardless of the precise sources from which he drew his knowledge. Scholars have rightly focused on Ambrose's sources; but the other somewhat neglected half of the question is: how well did he assimilate them? How did he think? Lenox-Conyngham asks whether Ambrose might have known Marius Victorinus and/or others like him in Rome.²³ Such an early introduction to philosophy is possible if Ambrose were born around 333-335 and it

²⁰ See the discussion of Aquileia below.

²¹ See Nauroy, "L'Écriture dans la pastorale de s. Ambroise," 264-65. Also, note that in the *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, Augustine says that normally a catechumen of liberal education has already familiarized himself with much of Scripture before presenting himself for baptism (Cat. Rud. 8.12).

²² A number of modern scholars consider Ambrose anti-philosophical, due to his harsh rhetoric against pagan philosophers. Goulven Madec, whom we will discuss later, is the most recent, if not the most extreme.

²³ Lenox-Conyngham, 117-18.

would help to account for the integration of Platonism into Ambrose's thought and his continued interest in it at Milan where, though the "cercle milanaise" may not have been as developed as Solignac thought,²⁴ there were nevertheless others who shared the same interests. In any case, Ambrose seems to have known Simplicianus, a friend of Marius Victorinus, well before his election.

Finally, moving back the birth date would fit well – though there is no necessity here of course – with circumstances in Milan itself. In the *Vita*, Paulinus mentions five subterfuges by which Ambrose hoped to stave off an episcopal ordination, one of which was a plan to retire from public life in order to devote himself to philosophy (*Vita*, 7.3). Was this merely a stock element in a literary *topos* or did Ambrose really intend it? In several places Ambrose says himself that he did in fact try to avoid the ordination. He does not specify what he saw as an alternative, but he was serious about it.²⁵ Both Pierre Courcelle and Yves-Marie Duval address this question.²⁶ They both argue in different ways to the same affirmative conclusion. Courcelle in particular looks at Ambrose's expression *philosophiam profiteri* ("to profess, or make a profession of, philosophy") in the context of Augustine's discussions of this phrase. Under the influence of Augustine, Paulinus would not have used this expression haphazardly; without Augustine, he might not have used it at all. Philosophy in this context would have represented some degree of familiarity with Plotinus and Porphyry and this opens interesting possibilities for the present study of the *De Bono Mortis*. First, Ambrose knew whom and what he was fighting

²⁴ See the discussion below.

²⁵ *Quam resistebam ne ordinarer!* (Ep.14 (63).65,CSEL 82:3, 269). See also *De Officiis* 1.1 ; *De Poenitentia* 2:8.

²⁶ *Tunc ille turbatus revertens domum philosophiam profiteri voluit* (Paulinus, *Vita*, 7.3). See Yves-Marie Duval, "Ambroise, de son élection à sa consecration," *Ambrosius Episcopus*, ed. Giuseppe Lazzati (Milan: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1976), 243-283, esp. 263-272; Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur Saint Ambroise : « Vies » anciennes, culture, iconographie* (Paris : Études Augustiniennes, 1973), 9-16.

when as a bishop he engaged the Neoplatonists. Second, though I cannot guarantee every instance, by and large Ambrose combats “philosophers” and not “philosophy.” Third, one does not do the kind of philosophy of which Ambrose speaks in isolation; his serious intention to devote himself to it gives some indication that there was after all something of a Milanese Circle, or perhaps Christian and pagan circles. Finally, we find at Milan a striking example of the kind of philosophical life Ambrose might have embraced in Manlius Theodorus, who had also had a brilliant career in the imperial service and would return later to become consul in 399; he was a Christian, had a sister living the life of a consecrated virgin (later buried in the basilica *Ambrosiana*), and he lived in retirement near Milan devoting himself to philosophy.

DATES FOR THE *DE BONO MORTIS*

It is generally held that Ambrose composed his treatises out of material gathered from his sermons.²⁷ He leaves numerous traces of the original oral delivery in the redacted treatises, and some scholars have interpreted these as signs of hasty editing.²⁸ Others, more sympathetic, though not considering these traces a signs of hastiness, still use them as markers for the compilation of sermons. For example, Palanque argues that the first book of the *De Abraham* is composed of two sermons. He bases this judgment on the break between paragraphs 31 and 32. Paragraph 32 begins: “We spoke (*diximus*) of Abraham’s devotion and faith, of his prudence,

²⁷ Jean-Rémy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l’empire romaine* (Paris: Boccard, 1933), 435 ff.; Gérard Nauroy, “L’Ecriture dans la pastorale d’Ambroise de Milan” in *Ambroise de Milan. Ecriture et esthétique d’une exégèse pastorale: quatorze études* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 252-3.

²⁸ Palanque takes references to the congregation or to a passage of Scripture just read at the liturgy or to other circumstances as “leftovers” from the oral delivery and uses them to discern the number of sermons used as a basis for a given written treatise. He then goes through the entire *oeuvre* of Ambrose giving for each what he considers the compositional features: either redacted sermon(s) and how many or written treatise. Palanque, 435-79.; See also Gérard Nauroy, *Jacob et la vie heureuse*, Sources Chrétiennes, 534 (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 38-54. Nauroy uses changes of style and foundational work (Scriptural or philosophical) to which Ambrose refers throughout a given section, as criteria for dividing the *De Jacob* into five original sermons.

justice, charity, frugality. Now let us also speak of his hospitality.”²⁹ In any case, these words and phrases connect author and audience; they add liveliness and immediacy to the text; they serve as reminders of the pastoral goal of Ambrose’s literary output, and they evoke the charm of his oral delivery, which was considerable. In the *Confessions*, Augustine tells us that he used to come to church in order to listen to Ambrose’s sermons, not for the content but to decide whether Ambrose’s style measured up to his reputation: “and I was delighted by the sweetness of his speech.”³⁰ Cassiodorus also says that Ambrose “diffused a milky speech, keen and discerning, with gravity and most sweet, with gentle persuasion”³¹ These two early assessments, one of his oral delivery, the other of his written word, highlight the delight and efficacy of his oratory. Augustine gives a vivid account of the transformation caused within him as he listened in spite of his avowed indifference. By all accounts Ambrose was a master of the art. Thinking of his treatises, following Palanque and others, as a series of sermons joined together by the addition of transitional material and by editorial cutting and pasting, may in many cases reflect the actual facts. There is no reason to deny that many of the written texts were based on sermons and that Ambrose engaged in editorial work. The result, however, should be taken at face value, as a fully intended whole. We know also that he had all of his writings carefully checked before publishing them and so we may presume that he, at least, was satisfied with the results.³² Besides, the discernment of original material is a delicate task. It seems to me that the reappearance of com-

²⁹ Diximus de Abrahae deuotione ac de fide, de prudentia iustitia caritate parsimonia: nunc etiam de hospitalitate dicamus. Ambrose, *De Abraham*, CSEL.32:1b, 526.22-527.2:

³⁰ delectabar sermonis suavitate, Augustine, *Conf.* 5.13.

³¹ sanctus quoque Ambrosius lactei sermonis emanator, cum gravitate acutus, inviolenta persuasione dulcissimus; cui fuit aequalis doctrina cum vita quando ei non parvis miraculis gratia divinitatis arrisit. Cassiodorus, *Inst.* 120. See William Theodore Wiesner, *S. Ambrosii De Bono Mortis: a Dissertation* (Washington DC, Catholic University Press, 1970), 65-66.

³² See the letters Ambrose addressed to Sabinus, bishop of Piacenza: *Ep.* 32-34, 37, 39.

mentary on the same Scriptural passage (often with variants) is a better indicator of the presence of multiple sermons, than transitional texts that may look deceptively like connectors between presumed blocks of original sermons. In any case, the *De Bono Mortis* contains none of the temporal indicators often found in homiletic material, which we see elsewhere in Ambrose. There are, on the other hand, passages in which material treated elsewhere reappears a second or even a third time, with variations (perhaps indicating two or three original sermons). In addition, there are passages of such intense rhetorical exhortation that one may suspect oral delivery for them.

Another related problem is the number of sermons that might go into a written treatise. In the course of more than twenty-two years of episcopate, Ambrose would have had the occasion to deliver well over 1600 sermons.³³ Augustine and Ambrose himself both mention his weak voice;³⁴ and judging from examples contained in his letters, his sermons were fairly short.³⁵ If the 6:1 ratio of the *De Sacramentis* to the *De Mysteriis* is typical, one written treatise might draw upon sections of a fair number of oral sermons.³⁶ Assuming that the *De Bono Mortis* is based on homiletic material, then, on the basis of length alone, the treatise must be made of more than two sermons, the number suggested by Palanque.³⁷ These would have been preached over an un-

³³ This is a rough but conservative estimate. If he preached 50 Sunday sermons plus another 30 or so during Lent, Easter week, and for occasional feasts throughout the year (Christmas, Epiphany, the feasts of martyrs) this gives us 80 per year; hence over 1600 between December 374 and the Spring of 397. Much of this material would have been recycled – there are only so many ways to interpret a Biblical event or character, and Ambrose repeats the same exegesis from one treatise to another. Nevertheless, there would probably have been an ever-increasing core of homiletic material from which Ambrose could gather an individual treatise. This process though makes dating the treatises extremely difficult.

³⁴ See Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 1.6.24 (CSEL 73, 25); Augustine, *Conf.* 6.3.

³⁵ See also Nauroy, “L’écriture,” 253, note 19 for references to examples. By way of example, of the two sermons pronounced over the relics of the martyrs Protasius and Germanus the first takes about seven half pages (the bottom half is filled with a plentiful apparatus) and the second takes six in CSEL 82:3.

³⁶ Nauroy, *Jacob*, 54-58, discusses the number of sermons (4 or 5) that might have been combined to form the *De Jacob*, as well as the theological implications of the arrangement of prior material, in this case Ambrose’s own sermons on St. Paul and the apocryphal 4 Maccabees.

³⁷ Palanque, 441.

known period of time. We are dealing, therefore, with a double chronology, which plagues any attempt to attach a particular date to a given treatise. There are *some* indications of circumstance, but these have led to no consensus among scholars. In addition, even if the whole might have a date, the parts do not. As a result, the *De Bono Mortis*, in conjunction with the *De Isaac*, has been assigned dates ranging from late 386 to 397.³⁸

We saw earlier that the opening lines of the *De Bono Mortis* present the written text of the treatise as a sequel to the *De Isaac*.³⁹ Also, the *De Isaac*, the *De Bono Mortis*, and the *De Jacob* may be considered as a block of treatises related to each other by an emphasis on philosophical questions and verifiable reliance on the *Enneads* of Plotinus. So, if there is circumstantial evidence for a dating, either of the sermons that went into the *De Isaac* and the *De Jacob*, or of the written treatises, it is just possible that the same dates may apply, in the same degree, to the *De Bono Mortis*.

In his edition of the *De Jacob*, Nauroy suggests reasons for retaining Palanque's date of 386 for this treatise, whether for the sermons on which it is based or for the treatise itself. In it, Ambrose likens himself under persecution (in the Spring of 386) to the Jewish priest Eleazar, whose martyrdom is recounted in the Second Book of Maccabees, 6:18-31.⁴⁰ There are also similarities of image and idea between the *De Jacob*, on the one hand, and other texts datable to the mid-380s. For example, the following texts all develop in a similar manner the verse from the story of Cain and Abel where God says to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to

³⁸ Visonà gives a summary of the different dates proposed, SAEMA, 25, 65. See also Michaela Zelzer, "Zur Chronologie der Werke des Ambrosius: Überblick über die Forschung von 1974 bis 1997" *Nec timeo mori*. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant'Ambrogio. ed. Luigi F. Pizzolato and Marco Rizzi. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1988, 92:

³⁹ According to Palanque, they were added later as a preface for the two pre-existing sermons used for the treatise. Palanque, 441.

⁴⁰ Nauroy, *De Jacob*. 11; see *De Jac*. 2:10.43.

me” (Gen.4:10): (1) the hymn *Grates tibi Jesu novas* composed to celebrate the finding of the bodies of Protasius and Gervasius (dated June, 386); (2) *Ep.77.23* which describes the same event to Marcellina; and (3) *De Jacob* 2.48, also dated to the same period on the basis of other evidence.⁴¹ With regard to the *De Isaac*, Courcelle has tried to show that Augustine cites passages from the *De Isaac* in his *Contra Academicos* and the *Soliloquies*, both from 386/7.⁴² He notes similarities between Ambrose and Augustine as they follow Plotinus, or Plotinian themes. For example, Plotinus says that an eye cannot look at the sun without first becoming like the sun, nor can a soul see beauty without first becoming beautiful (En.I.6.9). In the passage from the *De Isaac* where Ambrose follows this passage from Plotinus (*De Is.*8.79, 699.7-11), he modifies the text to say that the eye cannot see the sun unless it is in good health and vigor, nor can a soul see the good unless it is good.⁴³ In the *Contra Academicos* 2.3.7 and in the *Soliloquies* I.14.25, Augustine follows Ambrose rather than Plotinus and in the second text he develops the image at length.⁴⁴ Again, a few lines after comparing the man attached to physical beauty to Narcissus who drowned out of obsessive love for his own face, Plotinus asks what is the way of escape. The answer is that, like Odysseus, we must put out to sea and fly to our homeland, from which we

⁴¹ Nauroy, *De Jacob*, 10-15.

⁴² See Courcelle, *Recherches*, 125-30 and also Hadot, *Marius Victorinus: recherches sur sa vie et ses œuvres*, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1971, 205-6. Courcelle was driven by a desire to show that Ambrose was directly responsible in part at least for Augustine’s initiation into Christian forms of Platonism. The reaction against this stance has gone too far in the other direction. Ambrose clearly had a profound influence on Augustine (See Rousseau, “Augustine,” *passim*; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a biography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 77-78). For reasons obvious by now, one cannot pin Ambrose’s influence on particular treatises, as Courcelle tried to do, Augustine’s Platonism needs a broader base. Nevertheless, the relationship between these texts does lend weight to a dating of Ambrose’s Platonic treatises, hence the *De Isaac*, to the mid-380s.

⁴³ Courcelle, *Recherches*, 114, 126.

⁴⁴ amat [corporis oculus] enim tenebras, eo quod sanus non est; solem autem nisi sanus uidere non potest. et in eo saepe fallitur animus, ut sanum se putet et sese iactet; et quia nondum uidet, ueluti iure conqueritur. nouit autem illa pulchritudo quando se ostendat. ipsa enim etiam medici fungitur munere, meliusque intelligit qui sint sani, quam iidem ipsi qui sanantur. nos autem quantum emersemus, uidemur nobis uidere: quantum autem mersi eramus, et quo progressi fuimus, nec cogitare, nec sentire permittimur,... (*Soliloquia*, 1.14). The context is close to Plotinus, En.1.6.

came; our Father is there. In his adaptation of this text Ambrose adds after “Father,” “by whom we are created”; and Augustine in the *De Quantitate Animae* appears to follow Plotinus through Ambrose: “I believe that the proper habitation and homeland for the soul is God by whom she is created.”⁴⁵ Finally, at the end of En.1.6.9 Plotinus says that the Good is behind (that is, above) Intellect/Beauty, which It holds before it as a screen. Ambrose corrects this passage to read: “This is the good that is above every work, above every mind and understanding.” Again, Augustine follows Ambrose in his description of the ecstasy at Ostia: “And we ascended yet higher thinking and talking and marveling at your works and we came to our minds and we passed beyond them, to reach the region of unfailing richness, where you nourish Israel forever with the truth as food, and there life is wisdom.”⁴⁶ Both speak of the Plotinian ascent but correct Plotinus’s idea of Intellect as a subsistent hypostasis.⁴⁷

Do examples like this indicate a dependence of Augustine on Ambrose? In themselves they are minor, but they are reflections in the texts of both men and do seem to have a cumulative weight. There is a confluence of images and ideas in these texts and others from the same period, which might lead us to think that Augustine is checking his readings in Plotinus against Ambrose for possible Christian “corrections.” We should not over-react to Courcelle’s insistent desire to see Ambrose as a direct influence on Augustine.⁴⁸ Even if no reliable influence may be

⁴⁵ Propriam quamdam habitationem animae ac patriam Deum ipsum credo esse, a quo creata est. (*De Quant. An.* 1.2) Cf. Courcelle, *Recherches*, 126.

⁴⁶ et adhuc ascendebamus interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua et uenimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas, ut attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis, ubi pascis israel in aeternum ueritate pabulo, et ibi uita sapientia est (*Conf.* 9.10)

⁴⁷ This last correction reflects such a fundamental difference between Plotinus and Christianity that one might not wish to attribute it to Ambrose’s corrections of En.1.6.9.

⁴⁸ Claudio Moreschini agrees with Courcelle and dates both the *De Isaac* and the *De Bono Mortis* to 386. See Sant’Ambrogio, *Opere Esecutive III: Isacco o l’Anima e Il Bene della Morte*, SAEMO, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1982), 9. So also does James J. O’Donnell, with reserve: Augustine, *Confessions II: commentary on books 1-7*, ed. James J. O’Donnell, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 418.

detected, it is still significant for the dating of Ambrose's three "Platonic" treatises that both Ambrose and Augustine were working with the same or similar sources.⁴⁹ We have no way of recapturing the sermons Ambrose delivered while Augustine was in Milan; it is significant, however, that years later when he cites verbatim the *De Isaac*, Augustine calls Ambrose his master (*doctor meus*).⁵⁰ Regardless, therefore, of the precise dates of the redaction of the treatises, it is entirely possible that elements of the *De Bono Mortis*, the *De Isaac*, and the *De Jacob* come, in oral and/or written form, from the mid-380s. It is impossible to be more precise. This date, however, marks a high point in Ambrose's career. He had faced a real possibility of exile or martyrdom during the basilica crisis, but with the backing of Milanese, he had won a major victory for the Nicene faith over Valentinian II and his mother Justina. He was at the height of his power and authority.

⁴⁹Hadot accepts the similarities between the texts of Augustine and Ambrose. Then he asks whether Augustine read Ambrose or whether they both read Victorinus. A look at vocabulary in Ambrose and Victorinus shows that the two men translate Greek philosophical terms differently. Ambrose would have read the Greek directly. Augustine would have read the "Libri Platoniorum," but the conclusion that he read Ambrose also and followed his lead seems probable (Hadot, *Victorinus*, 205-6).

⁵⁰Augustine, *Contra Iulianum Pelagianum*, 1. 9, 44. Some have argued that Augustine "returned" to Ambrose when he was seeking an authority for his views during the Pelagian controversy. He may have, though Ambrose was a pervasive influence on Augustine, through his writings, through the Church life and the practices Augustine observed in Milan (e.g. the rules for fasting in Rome vs. Milan, cf. Letter to Jnauarius 2.18), and through verbal encounters and preaching. Posidius also portrays Augustine as referring to Ambrose as a model at various points throughout the *Life* (24: in regard to the selling of Church plate for captives and the poor; 27: proper procedures for a bishop and the last words of Ambrose). See also the discussion of Augustine's relationship to Ambrose, begun in Milan but continuing long after, in Philip Rousseau, "Augustine and Ambrose: the loyalty and single mindedness of a disciple," *Augustinianna*, XXVII (1977), 153.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE DE BONO MORTIS: MILAN IN THE 380s

THE “MILANESE CIRCLE”

Aimé Solignac has suggested that there may have been a “cercle Milanaise” of men interested in Platonism, to which Ambrose and Simplicianus would have belonged.¹ The term “cercle Milanaise” connotes some sort of organized group bound by more or less sympathetic interests, which might meet from time to time to discuss philosophical questions.² In his commentary on the *Confessions*, James J. O’Donnell cautions against making too much of the *libri Platonici* Augustine mentions in Book 7 of the *Confessions* and the group of men who may have read and discussed them.³ One of the most obvious reasons for this reserve is that the Platonists in Milan were not all Christian. Goulven Madec considers it hard to believe that Ambrose, who had successfully opposed the restoration of the altar of victory, would sit down and discuss philosophical matters with pagan sympathizers in Milan.⁴ This would obviously create elements of tension, though it would not necessarily preclude social, and in this context philosophical, contacts between pagans and Christians. We know that Christians used to attend

¹ Aimé Soignac, *Confessions*, 8. Notices complémentaires, 529-36; Il circolo neoplatonico milanese al tempo della conversione di Agostino, 1988.

² See for example the comments of Henry Chadwick, *Augustine*, Oxford, 1968, 16: “he [Augustine] became drawn into a group of laymen of high education and social standing, who met to read Plotinus and Porphyry” cited in O’Donnell, *Confessions II*, 416.

³ O’Donnell, *Confessions II*, 416-18.

⁴ See the discussion in O’Donnell, *Confessions II*, 416.

the lectures of Plotinus and the Christian Origen was the student of Plotinus's own teacher, Ammonius Saccas. We should envision, therefore, varied philosophical contacts – multiple Milanese circles – that probably crossed the religious divide, based on friendship (such as that between Simplicianus and Victorinus), class, education, and other circumstances as well. We also know the names of some Milanese contemporaries and friends of Ambrose, who were interested in philosophical matters. Besides Ambrose and Simplicianus, Solignac has gathered the following: Flavius Manlius Theodorus, to whom Augustine dedicated the *De Beata Vita*, who wrote philosophical treatises and seems to have had students of his own; others are known by name only: Celsinus, Hermogenianus, and Zenobius – not Calcidius, as Courcelle and Solignac thought.⁵ We might add Horontianus, one of Ambrose's priests, who seems to have been interested in philosophical questions and who wrote a note to his bishop asking about the nature of the soul. Then there was the Milanese layman Irenaeus, Ambrose's friend and disciple, to whom he addressed numerous letters.⁶ Most of them are responses to exegetical questions, though one, *Ep.* 11(29) is a carefully crafted, spontaneous and unguarded moment with a friend: “As I took a break during my reading – for I had just finished working late at night – I began to reflect on that

⁵ Solignac, *Conf.*, 533-36; for Calcidius, see Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur Saint Ambroise* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1973), 17 and more important: John Rist, “Basil's ‘Neoplatonism’: its Background and Nature,” in *Basil of Caesarea, Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, ed. Jonathan Fedwick (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), 137-220; here: 152-55. Calcidius writing his commentary on the *Timaeus* in the early 4th c., pre-dates the “Milanese Circle.”

⁶ The dossier of letters from Ambrose to Irenaeus forms the largest group in the collection: 13 out of c.90: *Epp.* 4, 6, 11-16, 40, 54, 63, 64, 68), Letter 11 (29) is carefully groomed, though it opens as an ‘unguarded’ moment with a friend. For excerpts from it, see the Conclusion to part two, “Who is the Intended Audience”, note 5. Some would argue that Irenaeus was a cleric. See Aline Canellis, “Les lettres exégétiques d' Ambroise sur les Petits Prophètes,” in *La correspondance d' Ambroise de Milan*, ed. Aline Canellis (Saint Étienne: Publications de l'université de Saint Étienne, 2012), 277, note 2. Canellis (277, n.2) leaves the question of his clerical status open. Nauroy considers him to be a cleric, given the large number of letters Ambrose addressed to him and their place in the collection (Gérard Nauroy, “Édition et organisation du recueil des lettres,” in Canellis, 44). But see Zelzer, CSEL 82:2, xxviii and xxi, n.6. She considers him to be a layman based on the form of address Ambrose uses in the closings of his letters. There is, however, no definitive internal evidence for either alternative.

verse: ‘You are beautiful over and above the sons of men’ (LXX Ps.44/45:2) [and] ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good tidings of Him.’ (Is.52:7).... And truly nothing is more beautiful than that highest Good....”⁷ The meditation that follows on the Highest Good and the ascent of the soul has no purpose other than to share with a friend what one knows he will understand and enjoy. It shows us a shared Christian distillation of a Platonic view of the ascetic spiritual life.

Up to this point, we have considered the relations Ambrose would have maintained with friends and acquaintances in and around Milan. Our knowledge is based in part on his correspondence with them; men like Simplicianus, Irenaeus, and Horontianus wrote notes or letters to Ambrose, even though they all lived in the same town. This seems to indicate that, in addition to the face to face conversations, there was a regular practice of letter exchange. Of course for those who lived far from the metropolis, letters were the medium of contact. One such letter shows Ambrose maintaining contact with a friend out of a pure interest in a shared taste for literary excellence. Romulus was from Aemilia and in 385 he occupied Ambrose’s old post of *Consularis* for Aemilia-Liguria. Ambrose implies a relationship of father to son. In his letter Romulus had asked about an Old Testament conundrum. Before giving his reply, Ambrose sets the tone:

The important thing for those who are absent is that they suffer no loss: loss not only of urbanity of style (*suavitas*) but also of conversation and liberal knowledge. What I think, therefore, about [this question] I shall tell you, since you ask, more out of a desire to confer with you than to expound.⁸

⁷ Inter legendum cum paululum requievissem animo quia lucubratione destiteram, versiculum illum mecum coepi volvere..., et vere nihil speciosius illo summon bono... Nos quantum possumus, intendamus illo animum et in illo simus, illud animo teneamus, quod est pulchrum, decorum, bonum, ut fiat inluminatio et fulgore eius speciosa anima nostra et mens dilucida! (Ep.11 (29), CSEL 82:1).

⁸ Magnum est enim nullum pati absentibus damnum irrepere non solum suavitatis, sed etiam collationis et liberalis scientiae. Quid igitur de eo sentiam quoniam exposcis, conferendi magis quam exponendi studio loquar (Ep.48.1).

Ambrose's terms are *suavitas*, referring to rhetorical style; *collatio*, referring to a conversation among equals; *liberalis scientia*, referring to the assiduously sought and prized fruit of *otium*.⁹

There were certainly others with whom Ambrose maintained contact, whose names we cannot know, such as the “proud man” (probably not one of the above) who procured the *libri Platoniorum* for Augustine (*Conf.* 7.9).¹⁰ Thus it is reasonable to think that there were Christians in Milan with philosophical inclinations, as well as a wide circle of men of letters – Christian and non-Christian – with interests that would include questions of philosophy. Some of these men of letters may have fallen into the category of Marius Victorinus, who took the stance that as a Platonist he was already inwardly Christian and in no immediate need of baptism.¹¹ These may have been genuinely religious men but, like Victorinus, they were unable to see the significance of the sacramental and institutional life of the Church. When Ambrose undertook to write a philosophical treatise on death, he certainly would have had men like Victorinus in mind as he wrote.

A corollary to the picture of intellectual pursuits in Milan is the image of Ambrose that Augustine presents in the *Confessions* (6.3), to which we alluded above. Ambrose allowed Augustine and his friends free access, but as they sat and watched, not daring to disturb him, he read silently. O'Donnell notes that Ambrose taught the future bishop of Hippo some precious lessons with this silent preparation for his demanding schedule of sermons.¹² Yet, from

⁹ Compare this to the terms Augustine uses at *Conf.* 6.3: *ad quaerendum intentus et ad disserendum inquietus*. See the discussion of this passage below.

¹⁰ See O'Donnell, *Confessions II*, 419.

¹¹ See Simplician's account of Victorinus's conversion at *Confessions* 8.2: Simplicianus invariably responded to Victorinus that he would not believe him Christian until he saw him in Church. Victorinus eventually understood and was baptized. See also Ambrose's letter 9 (79) to Bellicius and 67 (80) to an un-named correspondent, both of whom were delaying baptism.

¹² O'Donnell, *Confessions II*, 339-43.

Augustine's language and description, we may divine that more seems to be happening here than the assiduous preparation for homilies and the exegesis of Scripture. This description of Ambrose at *Conf.*6.3 occurs to Augustine as he reminisces about the intellectual turmoil and unrest in his own soul at the time. "Not yet was I groaning in my prayers, that you might come to my aid. My mind was intent on seeking and anxious for disputation; and Ambrose himself I thought was one of those happy men by the world's standards, whom so many powerful men honored so greatly."¹³ Interestingly, the part of the sentence about Ambrose begins with *ipsumque*. The *-que* there (where he might have used *et*) signifies that Augustine in his own mind is drawing a parallel between what he saw going on in himself and what he saw in Ambrose. So, we are talking about intellectual inquiry and discussion and the implication is that, while Augustine is in a tizzy, Ambrose seems – by all appearances – to be calm and self-possessed, to handle well the processes of inquiry and disputation. This reading of the passage is reinforced by Augustin's caveats that follow. He says that, of course, he knew nothing of what might really be going on in Ambrose's mind and heart, just as Ambrose knew nothing of the ideas and questions that were tormenting him. And then follows the description of Augustine and his friends waiting for Ambrose to look up and speak to them. What conclusion do we draw from this description? I think the implication is that Augustine is thinking of Ambrose here primarily in terms of his – Ambrose's – intellectual life. He is reflecting that Ambrose did it well both privately and publicly. In this context, the great men who visited Ambrose – and who were in a position to interrupt him as he read – were there in part at least for the pursuit of intellectual affairs. Of

¹³ Nec iam ingemescebam orando, ut subvenires mihi, sed ad quaerendum intentus et ad disserendum inquietus erat animus meus, ipsumque Ambrosium felicem quendam hominem secundum saeculum opinabar, quem sic tantae potestates honorarent (Augustine, *Conf.*6.3).

course, Ambrose also had many visitors seeking advice, practical benefits, and legal decisions, just as Augustine would later on at Hippo. I am thinking here of the climate of this chapter of the *Confessions*. It seems to me that the chapter is, in part at least, about the use and presentation of *otium*.

This description of Ambrose is corroborated by Neil McLynn's findings in the case of Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory maintained contacts with rhetors in Cappadocia long after his retirement from the profession and his episcopal ordination. Gregory is involved in the choice of rhetor for his grand-nephew, Nicoboulus. His letters also indicate that some casual verses of his enjoyed a certain circulation and popularity – significant inasmuch as they were one aspect of Gregory's customary use of *otium*. Though he has chosen a life across the ascetic divide, so to speak, letters and learning, the occupations of *otium*, cross that divide; and there is no expectation that they should not. Nazianzus was a small town, but it was no desert.¹⁴ All the more reason for Ambrose, the retired *Consularis*, to be expected to keep up his contacts in Milan and cultivate the common intellectual interests of the higher classes there through informal exchange.

A MIXED AUDIENCE

In the last section we took stock of the evidence for a 'Milanese Circle' similar to that suggested by Solignac. There were networks of intellectual exchange, though perhaps one would need to speak of several Milanese circles. Among the Christian friends around Ambrose there seems to have been a steady exchange centered largely around the exegesis of difficult texts in

¹⁴ Neil McLynn, "Among the Hellenists: Gregory and the Sophists" *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections*, ed. Jostien Bortnes and Tomas Hägg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 213-38.

Scripture.¹⁵ This in itself is revelatory of a burgeoning culture growing out of the cultivated and regular practice of reading the Scriptures. The exchanges included, however, other interests as well, philosophical questions and the simple joy of writing in good style. Here I would like to look briefly at the environment from the point of view of the various groups of people in it. First, the basilica crisis and the subsequent finding of the relics of Protasius and Gervasius show beyond the shadow of a doubt that Ambrose had won the hearts of his Milanese people. This group represents more than the Nicene Christians who had remained in the city throughout the tenure of Auxentius. It included a large part of the general populace and was appealing enough to encourage the defection of some of the palace garrison Valentinian II had sent in Holy Week of 386 to guard the *Basilica Nova*. Second, there is the group of young men who were not directly in Ambrose's circle but who gravitated around it, as they did around many other notable men in the city. I would like to return for a moment to the *Confessions*, to look at the passages we discussed above but from a social standpoint. Augustine and Monica represent two different but typical approaches to Ambrose: one is the love (*amare*) a young man feels for a kind (*diligere*), paternal, older, and successful man when he (Augustine) is noticed;¹⁶ the other is the love of a committed Christian for the bishop, whom he or she (Monica) reveres. Although scholarship has focused, rightly of course, on the degree of philosophical and theological influence Ambrose may have had on Augustine, on a more mundane level we can see here the slightly shy, slightly

¹⁵ See for example Ambrose's letters containing comments on the minor prophets (Ep. 12-13, 18,31); on Biblical theses and symbols (Ep. 1, 55 to Iustus); on the Old Law and circumcision (Eps. 63-69). See also Hervé Savon, "Un dossier sur la loi de Moïse dans le recueil des lettres d'Ambroise," in *La correspondance d'Ambroise de Milan*, ed. Aline Canellis, 75-91. Savon identifies 7 different exegetical dossiers. Letters 63-6 and 69, complemented by 67-8, comprise the dossier he considers here.

¹⁶ O'Donnell points out the relevance of the verbs in the text (cited below): from Augustine's side it was a question of *amare*; from Ambrose's of *diligere* (*Conf.V.13* and O'Donnell, *Confessions II*, 324, citing Courcelle, *Recherches*, 68, n.3).

uncertain relationship that typifies the young man on the rise and the older man at the height of his powers. Augustine had come to Milan under the patronage of Symmachus as a non-Christian city rhetor. Yet, he is careful to say that Ambrose approved of his mission.¹⁷ Augustine looked up to Ambrose, admired him, went to see him with his friends and sometimes talked with him, though often (not always is the implication) they left without a word.¹⁸ Notice that Augustine did not come alone – Ambrose might have given him more attention, if he had – so for our purposes here, Augustine belongs to another group in Milan, the young men of potential who could easily be swayed one way or another. It seems that for Augustine’s group, going to see the bishop was something of a Milanese attraction for the young and intellectual. Was Ambrose aloof? Not at all. When he saw him after Church, he would come up and congratulate him on having such a pious mother.¹⁹ This is typical Sunday morning after Mass behavior on the part of Ambrose – perhaps not enough for the anxious and searching heart of Augustine, though we cannot know for certain. If a younger man has a reputation to protect in non-episcopal circles and is not sure of his reception by the elder with an equally public profile, one can easily understand a certain reticence mixed with respect. Again, I do not imagine that Augustine was alone in his stance towards the bishop.

To future generations looking back, Augustine’s picture of Ambrose was the prevailing image. In 386, however, imperial funding for the state religion had ceased only four years before.

¹⁷ The term here is *satis diligere*, meaning literally that he “liked it enough,” that is he approved of it and *episcopaliter*, as one would expect from the bishop, or more nuanced: in his public office as city bishop, he approved of the city rhetor, knowing well, and being himself one of the institutions of the city, the need for the city rhetor. So Augustine went to see him on his arrival and got his paternal approval. The text from the *Conf.* is: *suscepit me paterne ille homo dei et peregrinationem meam satis episcopaliter dilexit. et eum amare coepi primo quidem non tamquam doctorem veri, quod in ecclesia tua prorsus desperabam, sed tamquam hominem benignum in me* (Augustine, *Conf.* 5.13).

¹⁸ Rousseau’s comments are particularly pertinent here. See Rousseau, “Augustine and Ambrose,” 154-6.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Conf.* 6.2 end.

Until then, the temple sacrifices were performed, the Vestals were in full operation, the priest-hoods were maintained. Only two years before, the altar of Victory would have been restored, had not Ambrose intervened. On that occasion, Symmachus made such an eloquent plea for the reinstatement of it, that members of Consistory who were Christians, advised the young Valentinian to grant the petition. A third and final appeal was made to Theodosius in 392; Ambrose thwarted it again but sacrificed his entry to the palace as a consequence.²⁰ So here is another group surrounding Ambrose: disgruntled pagans and their sympathizers. Finally, there were Neoplatonists who saw their philosophy as a total way of life. They had a complex system of ascent/salvation already worked out through theurgic practices²¹ – to which they would cling, clandestinely if necessary, well into the sixth century. Virulent and formidable attacks on Christianity, on the order of Celsus and Porphyry were still circulating.²² Platonism, therefore, was still an immensely appealing alternative to Christianity, not only from an intellectual standpoint (as in the case of Marius Victorinus) but from a religious perspective as well.²³

In general, at the end of the fourth century, and especially in the northern provinces and beyond the reach of the major cities, Christianity was far from holding a place of universal

²⁰ Savon, *Ambroise...* Ambrose successfully intervened.

²¹ See Augustine, *De ciu. dei*, 10.9-11; 32 (on Porphyry's search for the universal way of salvation, which he knows to exist but which he has not yet found).

²² Pierre Courcelle, "Propos antichrétiens rapportés par S. Augustin," *Recherches Augustiniennes*, vol.1, 1958, 149-186 and, closer to the 380s in Milan, Pierre Courcelle, "Critiques exégétiques et arguments antichrétiens rapportés par Ambrosiaster," *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol.13, no.3, Sept., 1959, 133-169. Also, when Gratian was murdered, it was construed as a punishment from the gods for his abandoning of the traditional forms of worship. Similar accusations circulated after the sack of Rome in 410:

²³ See A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), vo. 1, xxv-xxviii. See also Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: the lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students* (Liverpool University Press, 2000) and *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986) ch.10 "Neoplatonist Spirituality," Pierre Hadot treats Plotinus and Porphyry in part one; H. D. Saffrey treats the later Neoplatonists from Iamblichus to Damascius in part two. All references to Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* or to Plotinus's *Enneads* come from Armstrong's edition; corresponding line numbers may be added for clarity.

esteem and acceptance.²⁴ Pagans, Arians, Jews, and Platonists had no particular reason to revere the bishop of Milan. Some of the most intense moments of Ambrose's career were caused by confrontations with these groups or with events connected with them. The controversy over the altar of Victory, the Council of Aquileia, the basilica crisis, and the burning of the synagogue at Callinicum – all showed serious opposition to Nicene Christianity and brought forth deep seated conviction, intransigence even, in Ambrose. I would like to take a brief look at some aspects of these crises because they will shed light on the way Ambrose approached the question of Platonism in the *De Bono Mortis*.

AMBROSE A VETERAN OF CRISES

My purpose is not to assess each crisis as an historical event but to assess Ambrose himself in the crisis. So I base my assessment on the assumption that, to Ambrose's mind, his response was the proper one. My presentation is not chronological, though all the events belong to the 380s, except, of course, the question of Ambrose's senatorial status. One might say that the order is one of expanding consequences.

1. THE BURNING OF THE SYNAGOGUE AT CALLINICUM

The burning of the Synagogue of Callinicum by a group of Christians – supposedly aided by the bishop of the town – is a “test case” for complexity. Historians have assessed Ambrose's reaction with widely varying views.²⁵ This is not the place for a detailed analysis of the event;

²⁴ Rita Lizzi, “Ambrose's Contemporaries and the Christianization of Northern Italy,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 80 (1990), 156-173.

²⁵ Dudden: “Thus fanaticism triumphed. Theodosius gave way before the importunity of the Bishop, and cancelled even his second and amended, order, though it was eminently fair and reasonable. This he did, not from weakness,

but one question most of these historians do not fully address is the lack of separation between church and state, a modern idea of which neither Ambrose nor Theodosius or anyone else in the late Roman empire, had a clear, consistent idea.²⁶ Ambrose nowhere condones the actions of the bishop of Callinicum (supposing the accusations against him to be true) or the monks and other Christians involved in the burning of the synagogue, nor does he disparage the Jews. Yet he cannot see the rebuilding of the synagogue as an act of civil justice and neither would anyone else. The Jewish community, which enjoyed power and prestige in the Persian empire and hence in the border town of Callinicum,²⁷ would probably have taken advantage of this rebuilding to the detriment of the local Christian community. Why was this event so important to Ambrose that, when petitions had failed as well as a letter filled with all the rhetorical tools an ex-lawyer could muster, he was willing to face down the emperor publically in Church? I think the answer lies in Ambrose's deep convictions about the inherent primacy and freedom of the Church

nor on religious grounds, nor because he was convinced by Ambrose's artificial pleadings, but from political necessity." (F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, vol.2, 378); McLynn: "Ambrose's behavior [standing before Theodosius] will have been that of a suppliant.... The loser in this unhappy affair was Ambrose. Theodosius had been forced to concede clemency in a case he felt deserved exemplary punishment; but such concessions were an occupational hazard of the imperial office. As compensation, moreover, he could enjoy the gratitude and admiration which he had no doubt inspired among the Christians of Milan. The bishop, however, had failed entirely to win the emperor's sympathy." (Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capitol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 307-8); Savon is much more nuanced in his assessment. After discussing the complexities of the circumstances (e.g. the support of the Jewish community by Julian and the consequences, e.g. the burning of Christian churches), he concludes: "On est enclin à penser que Théodose gardait un souvenir amer du dénouement de l'affaire de Callinicum. Par une sorte de chantage, on lui avait extorqué l'impunité d'une troupe de fanatiques qui avait mis le feu à une synagogue! Voilà ce qu'il retenait sans doute et ce qu'il devait pardonner difficilement à Ambroise. Il était probablement résolu à empêcher le renouvellement de tels défis à son autorité." (Hervé Savon, *Ambroise*, 265).

²⁶ "To assume that in the later Roman Empire the secular and the religious were perceived as separate and that our view of this period should adhere to this dichotomy is a misleading result of modern thinking.... [The bishop] occupies the middle ground between the two poles of secular and religious leadership.... It is my contention that a proper understanding of the role of the bishops during this time of transition can be accomplished only once we rid ourselves of the anachronistic baggage of a supposed secular-religious dichotomy. This is an artificial distinction that would have been completely incomprehensible to the men and women of late antiquity." from Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: the Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

²⁷ Savon, *Ambroise*, 257-8.

combined with a lack of clarity about how this primacy and freedom should function in the context of civil government.²⁸ In such circumstances the principle gets worked out in the context of particular crises. Some of them may seem exaggerated to us, but they were of major import to the players at the time: Ambrose was ready to cause a political and ecclesial crisis had Theodosius refused to acquiesce. He was astute enough to assess his chances of success, but a desire for power would hardly justify such risks and the inevitable alienation of the emperor.

2: THE BASILICA CRISIS OF 385/6

Similarly, in the basilica crisis, the sequence of events is driven by a confusion of powers and responsibilities between the ecclesiastical and civil authorities and by Ambrose's uncompromising adherence to a principle he saw intuitively but for which there was little political or legal precedent. McLynn implies that Ambrose had no real claim over the Portian basilica, since it had probably originated (hypothetically, as he admits) as a palace church. If this were the case, though, why would Valentinian II feel the need to request it for his use? In theory, the emperor owned all the public buildings in Milan; so he could have taken the Portian basilica with no formal request whatever. Justina and the Milanese Arians already had a bishop in the person of the new Auxentius. Nothing would have been simpler for them than to appropriate a basilica and thereby publicly reinstate Arianism in Milan. Although our main sources for the particulars of this crisis come from Ambrose himself, it is striking that he consistently maintains a clear distinction between himself as a person and his *persona* as bishop. He is standing on principle, a

²⁸ Ambrose refers to the Church as the "Civitas Dei" long before Augustine ever conceived of the idea of writing about the two cities (*Civ. dei*, 11.1). See Ps.118:15. This is strong language. Note also, now that the State is formally Christian, the interesting legislation in the Theodosian Code against apostasy, 16, tit.7, and many similar laws. No separation there.

principle for which he is ready to die a martyr's death. This may seem like an old and over-used idea, but Ambrose was serious; and Valentinian had no wish to make a martyr out of the city's bishop. Exile would be a better option.²⁹ Ambrose was deferent towards the emperor but totally immovable in his conviction that a physical church, as a symbol of the spiritual Church, belongs to God alone.³⁰ In part three we will see that Ambrose saw himself as related to the local church at Milan as a proxy for Christ. This explains, I think, some of the ferocity with which he defended what he considered to be the integrity of the Church. To cede a basilica to Arians would be a desecration. Of course, standing on principle did not preclude a deft handling of the situation. Not only did Ambrose put in his bid for martyrdom but he also reminded Valentinian that Theodosius held to the Nicene faith, as did the Gauls (that is, the usurper Maximus). This was an uncomfortable political reality for Valentinian, which a subsequent letter from Maximus would verify. That a usurper could give as a pretext for invading the territory of his legitimate rival questions of orthodoxy and ecclesiastical supremacy shows just how confused and blended the roles of emperor and bishop were. Fortunately for Ambrose, Valentinian backed down.

3. THE COUNCIL OF AQUILEIA

Ambrose's interventions in crises, such as the controversy over the Altar of Victory and his arrangements for the Council of Aquileia, show the same adherence to principle and ability to judge circumstances, friends, and adversaries. Some historians criticize his procedure at Aqi-

²⁹ J.H.W.G. Liebeschütz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86.

³⁰ In his *Sermo contra Auxentium*, he says, "The emperor is within the Church not over it. We say this humbly but firmly." (*Contra Aux.* 35.36).

leia.³¹ In fact, it seems quite clear that he made every effort to arrange the meeting in such a way that Palladius and Secundianus would be not be given a “fair” hearing but led instead to their condemnation. One of his tactics, among others, was to introduced a letter of Arius which Palladius was to confirm or deny.

The fact that Ambrose did not resort to Palladius’ own writings for discussion, writings with which he was surely familiar, may reveal that he had no intention of debating theology at all. Strategy, not theology, was what he considered the real need at the moment, and Ambrose wanted simply a damning pretext which would serve to condemn the Homoian bishops.³²

This raises questions of major significance. For if Ambrose in his arrangements for the Council of Aquileia and his northern Italian confreres who were present at the council thought they were acting in the best interests of the local churches, what were these best interests, and how did the condemnation of the Illyrian bishops serve them? Further, what is the significance of the absence of Damasus and the southern Italian bishops?³³ Part of the answer to these questions lies in the fact that for Ambrose the “Arians” were fierce dialecticians with whom it was counter-productive to argue and for whom he had no sympathy whatever; they loved argument more than their faith and the straightforward truth of Scripture.³⁴ He had already replied to Palladius’s criticisms and engaged him in the *De Spiritu Sancto*.³⁵ He already knew that Palladius would not adhere to

³¹ McLynn, 129-36; See also Savon, *Ambroise*, 126, note 34.

³² Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 178.

³³ The reasons for the absence of Damasus are complex, not necessarily with negative implications towards Ambrose. See Savon, *Ambroise*, 127-29.

³⁴ Ambrose says of the heretics, “Omnem enim vim venenorum suorum in dialectica disputatione constituent.... Sed non in dialectica conplacuit deo “salvum facere populurn suum”; regnum enim dei in simplicitate fidei est, non in contentione sermonis.” (*De Fide* 1.5.42).

³⁵ We know from the *Scholia* that Ambrose and Palladius had already been in indirect contact through Ambrose’s treatises. See Savon, *Ambroise*, 99-104; Gryson, 80-83; 264-275.

the Nicene creed, and he rightly saw that discussion would only defer and obscure a decision.³⁶

The *Scholia* vindicate Ambrose to the extent that they show that no real resolution would have been possible at Aquileia short of the condemnation and deposition which actually took place. I am not arguing that the protocol at the Council was optimal or even appropriate, but that the fundamental driving force behind it was shared by all parties; it was the same theological impasse that had caused such havoc throughout the fourth century. For Palladius just as for Ambrose the question of the divinity of Christ was absolutely fundamental. It was not a personal preference in a pluralistic society but the immovable foundation for the entire edifice of the Church and society at large.³⁷ When he came to Aquileia, Palladius had no intention of acquiescing to the Nicene creed. He and the Arians of the Danubian provinces thought Ambrose and Nicenes generally were heretics.³⁸

Ambrose, on the other hand, had been elected under, and approved by, the openly Nicene Valentinian, who maintained a policy of toleration for the Homoians. As a former civil servant under Valentinian, Ambrose would have been expected to know and maintain the imperial policy. In this sense his election had little to do with his personal beliefs. Evidence for this may be seen in the fact that he only insisted on being baptized by a Nicene bishop *after* the emperor

³⁶ Savon, *Ambroise*, 113-4. It would be revealing to count up how many councils over the course of the fourth century came to a stalemate because the opposition was allowed to speak. The emperors had to “bully” the bishops into signing their compromise documents, e.g. Rimini in 359.

³⁷ Note the insistence of Ambrose and Theodosius on being baptized by a Nicene bishop. Arians as well as Donatists rebaptized Christians who came over to their camps. Note also the legislation of Gratian (379) and Theodosius (381); see Williams, 118, 157-166. Ambrose said that Constantinople was safe once the Arians had been thrown out (Savon, *Ambroise*, 112; Ambrose *De Spir.* I.19-21). In a sense this is nothing new. Rome had forever linked civic prosperity and safety to religious functions. Symmachus and his friends considered the safety of the Roman Empire to depend on the right religion and, as we mentioned earlier, they ascribed Gratian’s untimely death to his infidelity to the ancient religion.

³⁸ See the profession of faith of Ulfila, in Savon 119. Savon brings out the point that Palladius and the Danubian bishops were under the influence of Ulfila and also reflected an earlier epoch, the more fluid and less united third century.

had ratified his election.³⁹ Yet, his Roman Nicene faith would have been public knowledge. An articulate adherence to this faith is present in his earliest writings.⁴⁰ But, as Theophilus of Alexandria told Flavian of Antioch, Ambrose maintained the Milanese clergy who were in place at his election, many of whom were certainly ordained by the Homoian Auxentius.⁴¹ Why would Theophilus point this out, if it were standard practice? McLynn ascribes this to weakness on Ambrose's part; but without evidence to the contrary, it is more likely, as Williams points out, that this was a measure of prudence and respect for the known imperial policy.⁴² Had Valentinian lived longer, we might have seen a different Ambrose. By the end of 375, however, the emperor was dead, Gratian was young and Valentinian II a child under the tutelage of an Arian mother. The imperial "balance" began, inevitably, to crumble, especially with the arrival in Milan of Ursinus, Valens, and eventually the younger Auxentius. It was only a matter of time before an occasion for conflict would arise. Ambrose, Nicene, Roman, and senator by birth, whose faith was deep and intelligent and who was invested with the authority to defend that faith as he understood it, would not fail to take matters in hand. Though a dramatic climax was reached only in 386, Ambrose came to Aquileia not to discuss or to persuade, but to reach a decisive outcome in favor of Nicene Christianity. Aquileia may seem far removed from the

³⁹ Paulinus, *Vita* 9; Williams, 117-8.

⁴⁰ From Ambrose's reconstruction of the homily of Liberius for the veiling of Marcellina: *Hodie quidem secundum hominem homo natus ex virgine, sed ante omnia generatus ex patre, qui matrem corpore, virtute referat patrem: unigenitus in terris, unigenitus in caelo, deus ex deo, partus ex virgine, iustitia de patre, virtus de potente, lumen ex lumine, nan impar generantis, ... Hunc, filia, dilige, quia bonus. Nemo enim bonus nisi unus deus. Si enim non dubitatur quia deus filius, deus autem bonus est, utique non dubitatur quia deus bonus filius* (*De Virginibus* 3.2-3).

⁴¹ Severus of Antioch cites a letter of Theophilus of Alexandria to Flavian of Antioch encouraging him to integrate into his clergy those ordained by Evagrius, now dead. Theophilus cites Ambrose as an example of a bishop who did the same, from *The Sixth Book of the Selected Letters of Severus, Patriarch of Antioch*, ed. E.W.Brooks (London, 1904), 2:2, 303-4; cited by Duval, "Ambroise," *Ambrosius Episcopus*, 254, note 44; Savon, *Ambroise*, 71; Williams, 121.

⁴² Williams has a much more balanced interpretation of this procedure on Ambrose's part. Ambrose could be trusted to follow the imperial policy (Williams, 117ff.).

Platonists of Milan. Yet in the *De Bono Mortis* they would receive the same treatment as Palladius at the Council in 381. Ambrose was more courteous, but just as intransigent.

4. A SENATORIAL BISHOP

In a sense, the first crisis Ambrose needed to handle was his election. He is the only Roman imperial senatorial bishop on record until Theodosius proposed Nectarius as a replacement for Gregory Nazianzus in, interestingly enough, another imperial city.⁴³ Most bishops came from the curial class, prominent men on a local level, who received exemptions and imperial favor from their ecclesiastical office. They might come from wealthy families, as in the case of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, and so be in a position to confer substantial benefits on their local churches and communities. In the fourth century, however, few bishops come from the lower classes and none from the senatorial class. This would begin to change over the course of the fifth century. Claudia Rapp makes a distinction between the senator who became bishop after renouncing his privileges, like Paulinus of Nola, and the senator who, like Ambrose, was taken directly from the imperial service into ecclesiastical office. As irregular as this second procedure is, it seems to have become a pattern that worked well (for example, Synesius of Cyrene and

⁴³ Frank D. Gilliard, "Senatorial Bishops in the Fourth Century," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 77, no. 2, 1984, 153-175, esp. 172-3; Claudia Rapp also discusses the question of senatorial bishops, though in less detail. See Rapp, 188-194. Gilliard gives a more nuanced appraisal of questionable figures, such as Marcellus (Gilliard, 166-8). Ambrose had been ecclesiastical judge in a suit involving Marcellus, his brother Laetus, and a sister. Ambrose wrote to Marcellus encouraging him to accept the terms. Laetus was *vir clarissimus*, later *illustris*, and was urban prefect of Rome in 398 or 399 (so after the letter to Marcellus). Ambrose refers to Marcellus as *sacerdos*; he uses the term for both bishop and priest. Would a bishop appear in another bishop's tribunal without any acknowledgement of his Episcopal status by the judge? Marcellus is assumed to be a senator (Rapp, 190, and note 96) because of his brother Laetus. But we do not even know for certain that he was a bishop, nor do we have a name for his see. At least two questions remain: 1) Marcellus may not have been a bishop and 2) if he was, Ambrose certainly felt no need to acknowledge it. In 388 Lupicius, who was *consularis* of the ephemeral province of Maxima Senonia under Maximus (the usurper) may have become bishop of Vienne after Theodosius's victory over Maximus. Gilliard's conclusion is that in 374, as far as we can tell, Ambrose was the one and only senatorial bishop. So he was, in the strongest sense, breaking new ground.

Sidonius Apollinaris). Administrative ability, social prestige, and the innate stature and authority that were Ambrose's inheritance made him a dependable and successful, if reluctant, bishop.⁴⁴

One wonders if Theodosius chose Nectarius because things seemed to be going well in Milan.

The risk in making a senator into a bishop is that he will do his job well, which is to say: hold on to his power and serve with success the best interests of his Church.⁴⁵

I have dwelt on these examples in order to probe the complexities of Ambrose's episcopal position and career. While they have little bearing on the details of the *De Bono Mortis*, they show that the big picture around Ambrose was much more fluid and uncertain than one might suppose looking back. He was not in a position to chart a clear cut, well laid out course during his episcopal career. Though he had high ideals, the informal authority of a Roman senator, and a large measure of prudence, the obstacles were serious and effective. Think, for example, of how the dynamics changed once Theodosius had stabilized the Christian community in Constantinople and made Nectarius the bishop there.⁴⁶ The Councils at Aquileia and Rome were originally convoked as ecumenical councils. No eastern bishops bothered to come to Aquileia. In this case Ambrose foresaw and encouraged their absence, and it worked to his advantage. On the other hand, when a council was convened at Rome in the following year, the eastern bishops held

⁴⁴ Ambrose's comments about his reluctance to be made a bishop may be taken seriously. Being "snatched" from the tribunal (*raptus de tribunalibus*, *De Off.* 1.4) was not just rhetorical flourish.

⁴⁵ See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 71. He calls him the "formidable Ambrose." Gilliard refers to an article written by Herbert Bloch in 1945 in which Bloch proposes that the controversy over the altar of Victory was handled in such a dignified and calm manner, because of "the stature and background of both Ambrose and the pagan leaders." Gilliard also notes that though Ambrose observed traditional usage in his epistolary salutations to emperors, he often left off the usual complimentary greetings when he wrote to bishops (Gilliard, 171, n.84).

⁴⁶ Some scholars have surmised (Dudden and Kelly) that Theodosius might have chosen Nectarius as a counterweight to Ambrose. Would the presence of Nectarius in Constantinople have been a stabilizing factor and did it contribute to the fact that eastern bishops came neither to the Council at Aquileia nor to the Council at Rome a year later? Whether or not this was Theodosius's intention, this seems to have been the result. See the discussion in Savon, *Ambroise*, 115-26, 140-1.

a simultaneous meeting in Constantinople and sent a courteous letter of excuse to the Western bishops after they were assembled in Rome.⁴⁷

When we take up the *De Bono Mortis*, we enter a different arena, a more obscure field of action than had been Aquileia, Milan in 386, and Callinicum. Here Ambrose attempts to engage the rich and multivalent intellectual custom that surrounded the Christianity he taught from the pulpit and shared with his intimate circle of clergy, faithful, and friends. Though it may be more difficult to see them at work here, the same obstacles and uncertainties are present in the *De Bono Mortis* as in the political and ecclesiastical crises. They arose out of Ambrose's need to defend and preserve Christianity, as he understood it. As a known Nicene chosen to fill the shoes of a Homoian bishop, he defended the Nicene faith at Aquileia, he defended the Nicene cause in Milan in 386, he defended the cause of Christianity against the Jewish community at Callinicum.⁴⁸ And now it is fascinating to see that, although in the *De Bono Mortis* he moved to a new front and a new field of operations, the same "war" was on. Here it was the arena of ideas tied to Nicaea and the cause of orthodoxy: (1) the authority of divine revelation against human thought, (2) the light of Scripture against philosophic inquiry, and (3) the proper method by which one comes to the truth. A perfect medium for this debate is the idea of death as a good.

⁴⁷ Savon, 127-42; McLynn, 142-6. "The Churches of East and West were, therefore, polarized around their respective emperors."

⁴⁸ He may not have handled these crises in the best, most prudent way possible. But whether or not he did is beside the point for my purposes here.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHRISTIAN PARAMETERS OF THE DE BONO MORTIS

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

At several key places in the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose drives home the distinction between the contradictory and inconclusive speculations of the philosophers and the clear and authoritative truth contained in the Scriptures. He recommends the obedience of faith over purely rational argument.¹ He argues in part along the lines of the traditional *topos*: Plato and the philosophers generally derived the best of their insights from Moses and the Old Testament. At first glance, this seems like a ridiculous assertion that vitiates the force and coherence of Ambrose's arguments;² but he is by no means the first one to use it. Philo, Josephus, Justin, Clement, Origen, and many others had all made the argument before him.³ Also, in the intellectual custom of classical and late antique thought, one of the unquestioned assumptions was that older is better.⁴ Of course, in a given circumstance one might reconsider and correct the assumption; but as a dialectical and apologetic argument the idea of "antiquity" had a real punch. Ambrose and

¹ *Hex.* I.24 (end).

² Madec, 83.

³ "What poet or sophist has not drunk at the fountain of the prophets? Thence accordingly the philosophers watered their arid minds, so that it is the things they have from us which bring us into comparison with them. *Quis poetarum, quis sophistarum, qui non de prophetarum fonte potauerit? inde igitur et philosophi sitim ingenii sui rigauerunt, ut quae de nostris habent, ea nos comparent illis.* (Tertullian, *Apology*, 47). This is a classic statement of the apologetical argument, but the same ideas are expressed with more nuance by Eusebius, Augustine and others. See Paul Ciholas, "The Attic Moses: Some Patristic Reactions to Platonic Philosophy," *The Classical World*, vol.72, no.4, 1978, 217-225.

⁴ For us, the opposite is the case; the theory of evolution, capitalism, technology, etc. all create an environment in which newer is better. We may decide that in a particular situation, newer is not better, but we need to think about it.

his contemporaries had been brought up on the myth of the Golden Age, on the stories of heroes at the dawn of history, and on the Roman traditions of *mos maiorum*.⁵ In the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose answers an anti-Christian argument, that the souls of those who lived long ago must wait an unjust amount of time before receiving their reward, with the following: many of those who have waited long will be seen to be greater, like children born to parents in the vigor of youth (cf. 4Esd.5:53):

For this world has weakened due to the great number of generations, like the womb of one who gives birth and like some creature growing old, who lays down the vigor of her youth, since now the strength of her vital powers is withering. (10.46-7)⁶

Thus the argument runs: if Moses is prior to Homer, and Moses was a wise man, Homer must have derived his wisdom from Moses.⁷ The anti-Christian version was: Plato is prior to

⁵ The questions of the origin of civilization and what a “golden age” might have been were debated in philosophical circles and then entered into the polemical debate between pagans and Christians. One question the Christian apologists had to answer was why God took so long to rescue mankind. Eusebius takes on the debate in the *Hist. Eccl.* and especially in the *Prep. Ev.* with a nuanced account incorporating a “bestial” primitive era and a high level religion in the age of the patriarchs. See for ex. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.2:18-9, where Adam and primitive men are “bestial.” See also Arthur Droge, *Homer or Moses?: Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 1989), 168-93.

⁶ For a discussion of the significance of the aging of the world in connection with 4 Esdras, see Michael Edward Stone, *Fourth Ezra: a Commentary on the Fourth Book of Ezra*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 152-4. For the context of this passage from the *De Bono Mortis*, see section 31 below. *coronae enim dies expectatur ab omnibus, ut intra eum diem et uicti erubescant et uictores palmam adipiscantur uictoriae. illud quoque non reliquit occultum, eo quod superiores uideantur qui ante generati sunt, infirmiores qui postea. comparauit enim utero mulieris partus saeculi huius, quoniam fortiores sunt qui in iuuentute uirtutis nati sunt, infirmiores qui in tempore senectutis (4Es.5:53). defecit enim multitudine generationis hoc saeculum tamquam uulua generantis et tamquam senescens creatura robur iuuentutis suae uelut marcenti iam uirum suorum uigore deponit. ergo dum expectatur plenitudo temporis, expectant animae remunerationem debitam. (De Bono Mort. 10.46-7)*

⁷ Origen says, “Moses and the prophets ... are not only earlier than Plato but also than Homer and the discovery of writing among the Greeks. They [Moses and the prophets] did not say these things, as Celsus thinks, ‘because they misunderstood Plato.’ How could they have heard a man who had not yet been born?” (*Contra Cels.* 6.7). See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: a History of the Development of Doctrine I, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 33-35. For Justin, the gods of Greek mythology are evil demons; men fell from a pure state of innocence and began to worship these demons, who have copied elements of the true religion in order to deceive mankind; Moses and all the prophets are older than Plato, etc. Droge outlines the history of the accusations and the responses of Christian apologists through Eusebius. See also Robert M. Berchmans, *Porphyry Against the Christians* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

Christ, he was the wisest of men, so Christ must have derived his wisdom from Plato.⁸ Particular arguments were then marshaled to reinforce the point;⁹ and for those whose faith was weak such arguments could represent a formidable challenge. But although the presentation is in terms of time (who lived before whom), the argument itself is about authority: who is closer to the source and therefore has a purer form of the truth, and for Christians in particular the source is God speaking through the Scriptures.¹⁰ Augustine also, in *De doctrina christiana* 2.28, mentions the need to answer this Platonist charge (that Christ derived his wisdom from Plato) and thinks that Plato could have met Jeremiah in Egypt.¹¹ But, again, though chronology comes into the argu-

⁸ Augustine wrote Paulinus of Nola to ask for the work of Ambrose, now lost, in which he refuted the arguments of some Platonists who tried to show that Christ depended on Plato for his teaching: *Libros beatissimi papae Ambrosii credo habere sanctitatem tuam; eos autem multum desidero, quos aduersus nonnullos inperitissimos et superbissimos, qui de Platonis libris Dominum profecisse contendunt, diligentissime et copiosissime scripsit* (Ep.31).

⁹ The following is an example from Origen's *Contre Celse*. The whole is a quotation, though I have not enclosed it in quotation marks in order to simplify the internal quotations. Celsus: "They have also a precept to this effect, that we ought not to avenge ourselves on one who injures us, or, as he expresses it, 'Whosoever shall strike thee on the one cheek, turn to him the other also.' This is an ancient saying, which had been admirably expressed long before, and which they have only reported in a coarser way. For Plato introduces Socrates conversing with Crito as follows: 'Must we never do injustice to any?' 'Certainly not.' 'And since we must never do injustice, must we not return injustice for an injustice that has been done to us, as most people think?' 'It seems to me that we should not.' ... 'We must then not do injustice in return for injustice, nor must we do evil to any one, whatever evil we may have suffered from him.' Thus Plato speaks... But let this suffice as one example of the way in which this and other truths have been borrowed and corrupted." Origen in reply: "When Celsus here or elsewhere finds himself unable to dispute the truth of what we say, but avers that the same things were said by the Greeks, our answer is, that if the doctrine be sound, and the effect of it good, whether it was made known to the Greeks by Plato or any of the wise men of Greece, or whether it was delivered to the Jews by Moses or any of the prophets, or whether it was given to the Christians in the recorded teaching of Jesus Christ, or in the instructions of his apostles, that does not affect the value of the truth communicated. It is no objection to the principles of Jews or Christians, that the same things were also said by the Greeks, especially if it be proved that the writings of the Jews are older than those of the Greeks...." (Origen, *C.Cels.*7.58-9)

¹⁰ denique non in persuasione humanae sapientiae nee in philosophiae simulatoriis disputationibus, sed in ostensione spiritus et uirtutis tamquam testis diuini operis ausus est dicere: *in principio fecit deus caelum et terram....* auctorem deum exprimendum putauit. aduertit enim uir plenus prudentiae quod uisibilium atque inuisibilium substantiam et causas rerum mens sola diuina contineat... sequamur ergo eum qui et auctorem nouit [Moises] et gubernatorem nec uanis abducamur opinionibus (*Hex.I.2:7*).

¹¹ Later, in the *De civ. dei* and the *Retractationes*, he changed his mind because the dates cannot coincide. By the time he wrote the *De civ. dei*, the need for the priority argument was also diminished. He could shift the argument, without danger of confusion, away from history to the reflections of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans: that Plato understood invisible reality by observing the visible creation (*Civ. dei* 8.12). See the discussion in Madec, 250-51.

ment as a convenient method of dialectical proof, the real argument for Christians lies in the absolute primacy of the divinely authoritative Scripture over all forms of philosophic inquiry.¹²

Does this mean that Ambrose is an enemy to philosophical thought? Goulven Madec has conducted a detailed analysis of texts in which Ambrose uses the terms “philosophy” or refers to pagan philosophers and commentators. Madec’s goal is to reconstruct if possible some idea of the contents of a lost work, the *De Sacramento Regenerationis siue de Philosophia*.¹³ Predictably, given the limits of his method, he concludes his study with a negative appraisal: “There is no doubt that the *De Sacramento Regenerationis siue de Philosophia*, in the last analysis is based on an opposition between Christian wisdom and philosophy, which appears to characterize the thought of Ambrose.”¹⁴ Madec continues that Ambrose’s interest in philosophy was marginal; he used it as supporting material when appropriate, but he mainly refers to it in order to contrast or combat it with Christianity (340).¹⁵ Madec admits that at the beginning of his study he had asked whether or not philosophy was a pastoral concern for Ambrose.¹⁶ He explains that this question has remained unanswered because the remarks Ambrose makes about philosophy and the pagan philosophers are too general and incidental; they are derived second hand from Philo, Origen, or Basil; they are attacks on general problems, such as reincarnation. Finally, says Madec, Ambrose

¹² See the helpful discussion in Ambrose, *De Officiis*, ed. with introduction, translation and commentary by Ivor J. Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21-2; 26.

¹³ Goulven Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes), 1974.

¹⁴ “Il n'est pas douteux que le *De sacramento regenerationis siue de philosophia* fut fondé., en dernier instance, sur l'opposition de la sagesse chrétienne et de la philosophie, qui paraît caractériser la pensée d'Ambroise en la matière.” (Madec, 340)

¹⁵ Le problème de la philosophie est foncièrement marginal dans l'esprit d'Ambroise. Ses préoccupations sont celles d'un évêque qui a charge de prêcher la Parole de Dieu, de commenter l'Écriture sainte. La position de la philosophie, à cet égard, ne peut être que secondaire et subordonnée : au mieux, elle offrirait une ressource d'appoint ; plus sûrement, elle présente des points de comparaison et de confrontation susceptibles d'être exploitées aisément à son détriment, ou, si l'on préfère, à l'avantage de la sagesse biblique et chrétienne (Madec, 340).

¹⁶ He asks the question on 25. The answer: Nous nous demandions, en commençant, si la philosophie posait à Ambroise un problème pastoral. Je conviens qu'il n'a guère été répondu à cette question en cours d'étude. Mais c'est que les remarques relatives à la philosophie et aux philosophes ne s'y prêtaient guère (Madec, 340).

often uses Plato as a global target for his comments about philosophy, whether or not Plato was the actual source for the idea under discussion. Madec concludes, “It seems, therefore, that Ambrose regularly engaged in a tactic of generalization, which allowed him globally to oppose philosophy to Christian wisdom.”¹⁷

Madec has focused his attention too closely on passages from Ambrose that directly – and *rhetorically* – address the question of philosophy or philosophers.¹⁸ He has not been able to go beyond this level of principled and rhetorical opposition to pagan philosophers as rivals and alternatives to Christianity, in order to look at the philosophical *ideas* Ambrose endorsed as his own. On this deeper level we find a different Ambrose. The *De Bono Mortis* in particular offers some insight into the kind of Platonism that was congenial to Ambrose as well as an answer to Madec’s question about philosophy as a pastoral concern for Ambrose.

From the late 1940s onward Pierre Courcelle championed the cause of Ambrose’s philosophical culture. He saw in the three treatises – the *De Isaac*, the *De Bono Mortis*, and the *De Jacob* – extensive borrowing from Plotinus, primarily from the first Ennead, as we mentioned earlier. As one reads through the parallel passages laid out in his 1950 article and in his *Recherches sur les confessions de saint Augustin*, the resemblance between Ambrose and Plotinus is not always as precise as one might wish; but still, there is a real connection, and it is highly suggestive.¹⁹ Ambrose rarely translates large blocks word for word. He works selectively with words changed and quotes from Scripture added, but the passages as a whole are a clear ren-

¹⁷ Il semble, donc qu’il ait régulièrement pratiqué une tactique de généralisation qui lui permettait d’opposer globalement la philosophie à la sagesse chrétienne. (Madec, 341). See also Madec, 90-95.

¹⁸ See the review of Madec: Hervé Savon, “Saint Ambroise et la philosophie, à propos d’une étude récente,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, vol.191 n°2, 1977. pp. 173-196.

¹⁹ Pierre Courcelle, “Plotin et Saint Ambroise” *Revue de philologie de littérature et d’histoire ancienne*, vol.24, 1950, 29-56; *Recherches sur les confessions de saint Augustin*, 2ed. (Paris: Boccard, 1968), 106-132; 336-344.

dering of Plotinus.²⁰ Pierre Hadot, Aimé Solignac, Gerard Nauroy, and others have verified these discoveries and added to them.²¹ To recapitulate, it is clear that Ambrose used En.I.6 and 1.8, and 4.8 in the *De Isaac*, En. 1.1, 1.7, and 3.5 in the *De Bono Mortis* and En.I.4 in the *De Jacob*. Hadot and others hesitate to say that Ambrose read Plotinus directly. They look for intermediary sources through which he may have known Plotinus. Such would be anthologies, Porphyry, or a lost Christian text.²² Hadot thinks that the finesse of the citations and the grouping of them looks like the work of the Cappadocians; in any case a native Greek would more easily accomplish the task. If there is a lost Greek text that served as Ambrose's source for Plotinus, we have no textual evidence for it. Also, we should certainly not neglect the fact that an informal group of intellectual friends, and/or foes, in Milan might offer a likely forum for the gathering of sources. As we know from Ammianus Marcellinus and Sidonius Apollinaris, senatorial libraries could be significant.²³ They were a topic for letters among friends and so represented a significant social and intellectual resource. For the purposes of this dissertation, I assume that Ambrose had at least a layman's knowledge and understanding of the Platonism of his day;²⁴ that, although much of his knowledge would have come from his general culture and education, there were contemporary sources available to him from which he drew his acquaintance with Plotinus; and finally that these sources came from the West – Rome and Milan – because his Greek Christian sources

²⁰ We have already seen such parallels in the *De Isaac* (no.s 2:5-3.6, 7.60-1, 8.78-9). See also, for example, no.10 in the Commentary below.

²¹ Pierre Hadot, "Platon et Plotin dans trois sermons de Saint Ambroise," REL, vol.34, 1956, 202-220; Nauroy, *De Jacob*, passim.

²² Hadot, *Marius Victorinus*, 204-206.

²³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*, 29.2: In letter 3.7 to his friend Magnus Felix, Sidonius Apollinaris complains that Felix has buried himself in some library; in an *ekphrasis* on the villa of his friend Consentius, he mentions the large and copious library (8.4); his friend Lupus also has a representative library of his own *tam multiplicis biliothecae* (8.11).

²⁴ Savon, *Revue*, 187-89 for examples and Ambrose's reaction to the religious "Platonism" of Julian.

show only a minimal use of Plotinus.²⁵ Again, we do not know whether he read these texts directly or through other texts,²⁶ but scholars agree that his competence in Greek would have allowed him to read both Plato and Plotinus without translation.

AMBROSE, A NICENE PLATONIST

Much enthusiasm was generated by Courcelle's discovery of Plotinus in Ambrose. In the aftermath, some scholars, Courcelle included, inferred more than could be verified and others, Madec and those who question Ambrose's influence on Augustine, reacted by minimizing the potential impact. Finally, others have offered more cautious insights that are nevertheless full of interest and potential.

One of the first comes from John Rist in his article on Basil's Neoplatonism.²⁷ He traces the path of Neoplatonism in the East and the West from the later decades of the third century to the Council of Nicaea and then through the life of Basil. He concludes that before Nicaea little of Plotinus was known in the Christian East; Eusebius uses *Enneads* 5.1 and 4.7, but these are early *Enneads* and they seem to have come from Eustochius or from another source that predates Porphyry's edition. Porphyry's own texts (filled with anti-Christian rhetoric) seem to have been known and critiqued for a short period only (c.310-324) before Constantine banned them in 324. If they were used after that date, it was clandestinely because of the ban. It is not until c.350 that

²⁵ John Rist, "Basil's 'Neoplatonism,'" 220. See the discussion below.

²⁶ See Aimé Solignac, "Doxographies et manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustin," *Recherches Augustiniennes*, vol.1, 1958, 113-148. Some of the manuals available to Augustine may have been available to Ambrose and his contemporaries as well.

²⁷ John Rist, "Basil's 'Neoplatonism.'"

one finds Porphyry and Plotinus in the writings of Marius Victorinus.²⁸ We do not know for certain whether the “libri Platoniorum,” probably translated at this time, contained the works of Porphyry; it is suggestive that in his works before c.400, Augustine mentions Plotinus not Porphyry.

In Christian Alexandria neither Athanasius nor Arius show signs of Neoplatonist influence. On the pagan side, Middle Platonism seems to have been the norm in the years leading up to Nicaea.²⁹ In his account of Plotinus’s teacher, Ammonius Saccas, John Dillon makes two observations that shed some light on the situation in Alexandria. First, Porphyry says that Plotinus made the rounds of the established school and was disappointed. So, there was in fact an establishment teaching Middle Platonism, and this seems to have been the case since the beginning of Middle Platonism as we know it.³⁰ Second, Ammonius was not part of the establishment. Plotinus found him only through a friend. Dillon goes on to point out that after ten years with Ammonius, Plotinus wished to go to Persia and India. Would Ammonius have had any influence here? The other connection that seems to have Ammonius as a source is that between Plotinus and Numenius, and through Numenius to other sources of wisdom, such as the Chaldean Oracles and, again, the wisdom of Persia and India. Consequently, though Plotinus himself was not known in Alexandria during the fourth century, Ammonius had other pupils and we may think of an abiding presence there of Neopythagorean Platonism. By the end of the century Iamblichean

²⁸ Rist, 148. Victorinus came to know Plotinus and Porphyry in the context of paganism before his conversion (Rist, 190).

²⁹ John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists 80 B.C.- 220 A.D.* rev. ed. with new afterward (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). See in particular the sections on Eudorus (114-123), Philo (139-82), Ammonius Saccas (380-83).

³⁰ The Middle Platonist and Neopythagorean, Eudorus, who was the teacher of Plutarch (in Athens) was from Alexandria (Dillon, 115. See also his conclusions about common ground between Eudorus and Philo, as indicative of the Platonism at Alexandria at the turn of the millennium and in the early years of the Christian era, 182-3).

Neoplatonism had been added to the mix.³¹ It seems as if Plotinus and Porphyry were known but relatively unimportant.³² Synesius knew of Plotinus but did not follow him, though he used Porphyry, which did not displace his fundamental Middle Platonic stance.³³

Although the council fathers at Nicaea had a clearer sense of what they wanted to avoid than of what it meant to say that the Son was “true God from true God,” I think Rist is right to say that the Council of Nicaea directed Christian thought about God away from Platonism, in this sense that subordination of the Word to the Father was precluded from the creed of the council:

A fundamentally “unplatonic” account of the nature of God was proposed and accepted. The new logos-theology allowed no place to Middle or Neoplatonic versions of subordinationism, whether they came from pagans or from Christians in the “Hellenizing” traditions of Origen and Arius. In the new Christian culture Platonic *theologies* (or accounts of God) were thus largely excluded, and later Arian (or Origenist) attempts to reinstate them were ultimately unsuccessful.”³⁴

I also think the idea of a “new Christian culture” is significant. Put simply, it makes a difference if one thinks of Christ as intermediate, in some sense, or if one thinks of him as fully divine with the same status as God the Father. Ambrose gave a lapidary formula in one of his hymns: “in the Father, the whole Son and in the Son, the whole Father.”³⁵ The difference may not be easy to articulate in precise and correct theological terms. Yet, on a deeper level of faith and intuition Nicaea created a benchmark from which Christianity would never fall back. I think, therefore, that it is correct to think in terms of an intellectual culture that developed over the course of the fourth century, as thinkers like Basil and Ambrose began to see more clearly ways to articulate a

³¹ See H.D. Saffrey *Le Néoplatonisme après Plotin* (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 228-9. Note the interesting connection between the influence of Iamblichus’s use of Aristotle’s logic and the use of dialectic by Aetius and Eunomius.

³² Rist, 181.

³³ *ibid.*, 169.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 179.

³⁵ The doxology from Ambrose’s hymn *Splendor Paternae Glorae: Aurora cursus provehit; / aurora totus prodeat / in Patre totus Filius, / et totus in Verbo Pater* (29-32). See Fontaine, *Hymnes*, 48, 98, 184.

theology of the relation between Father and Son and of the Trinity. The intuition comes first, the details get worked out as one goes along. Working out the details was what the series of councils over the middle years of the fourth century tried to accomplish.³⁶

What significance does this idea of Nicene culture have for Ambrose and his adherence to Platonism? With regard to a knowledge of God, Ambrose would eliminate all differences of degree between the first and second hypostases, whether he thinks of them in terms of Plotinus or in more general terms. With regard to a knowledge of human nature, however, he sees no reason to abandon the fundamental Platonic divide between body and soul. Both Marcia Colish and J. Warren Smith argue that Ambrose endorses a *hylomorphic* idea of human nature, though they differ in the degree of unity between body and soul they attribute to Ambrose.³⁷ It seems to me, though, that this is to read too much into Ambrose's statements. He does say clearly, in the *Hexameron* (6.6.39 and 6.7.42-3), in the *De Isaac* and in the *De Bono Mortis* that he thinks, along the lines of Socrates in the *First Alcibiades*, that we are our soul, our body is our possession, tightly held no doubt, but not who we are in essence.

From a philosophical standpoint, to say that the body is the possession of the soul is not the same as to say that the soul and body form one nature composed of matter and form. So, returning to the idea of Nicene culture, the notion of a God who is fully divine and fully human

³⁶ See Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 96-9.

³⁷ Colish, 34; J. Warren Smith, 29-42: Colish identifies Ambrose's ideas of the unity of soul and body with Aristotle. Smith nuances his position, emphasizing the fact – evident, he says, for Platonists as for Aristotelians – that the soul and body are intimately united and act together in this life, even if they do not form one nature. He attributes Ambrose's definition of the soul as the true man, the body as something possessed, to the condition of man after Adam's sin, attributing Ambrose's anthropology to a view of man in terms of Paul's Romans chapter 7: the soul that Ambrose describes as the true self is the "remnant of the goodness of our original creation" which has been regenerated and sealed in baptism. This is Paul's "inner man" in conflict with the "body of death." Smith's primary goal is to discuss the regeneration of man in baptism, so I do not want to push his views too far. Nevertheless, to my mind, the significant aspect of Ambrose's anthropology is the degree to which it follows Plato and Plotinus, and that this is the intellectual custom not only of Ambrose but of his audience as well. See Smith, 24-5, 61, 63-5. See also my General Introduction, 28, note 49.

and who has total control over matter causes a certain tension with the Platonic idea of man as soul.³⁸ Ambrose believes in the resurrection of the body, because Christ rose from the dead. He sees it as the definitive restoration of the integrity of human life. Again, how the resurrection accomplishes this, the implications of the idea of the “resurrection of the body” are not yet fully explored. This creates a certain tension between the idea of man as essentially spiritual and the idea that his full perfection in the afterlife requires a resurrected body. Another factor that contributes something to this tension is what one might perhaps qualify as a matter of temperament: Ambrose was much engaged in the practical realities of the moral life; he was focused on how to make his flock better and more holy; he also understood, intuitively perhaps, the essential role of the body in the cultivation of a moral and spiritual life of holiness. This manifests itself in his use of the ordinary, sensual imagery of the *Song of Songs*. In the *De Isaac* we saw him dwell on the lovers’ kiss; in part three, section two, stanza eleven of Ps.118, we will see him explore the effects of passionate desire.

To my mind, this clarity about the nature of the triune God combined with an uncertainty about the nature of man is what Ambrose’s Nicene Platonism looks like on the level of thought. With regard to texts, Rist’s investigations seem to eliminate even immediate post-Nicene Greek sources for Ambrose. He finds only a few reliable examples in Basil. *Ennead* 5.1 comes into the early *De Spiritu*, not necessarily Basil’s, and later in his *De Spiritu Sancto*; but it seems that the later work does not indicate a separate use of En.5.1.³⁹ Basil may also have used En. 6.9, in the *De Spiritu Sancto* and (implausibly according to Rist) 1.6 in the *Hexameron*. Again, these are early works of Plotinus. Rist concludes that Gregory of Nyssa, who uses Plotinus in his *De*

³⁸ To which one could add the question of evil as connected in some way with matter as such.

³⁹ En. 5.1 was a well known text used by later writers (Rist, 193).

Virginitate, may be the source for Basil's limited interest in Plotinus.⁴⁰ In any case, Rist argues, the appearance of Plotinus in the *De Spiritu Sancto* is incidental to the content of the treatise.⁴¹ His conclusions seem to indicate that although Plotinus wrote in Greek, he was a Western source. Unless other discoveries come to light, it looks as if Ambrose derived his knowledge of Plotinus from local Western sources, Rome and/or Milan, even as he read Basil, Didymus and other contemporary Greek writers. This would weaken Hadot's hypothesis that Ambrose knew Plotinus through a contemporary Greek source, now lost to us.⁴²

Hervé Savon adds another historical dimension to this picture of Ambrose. He begins with the reminder that Julian had been dead for a little more than ten years when Ambrose was made bishop. He points out that Ambrose's emphasis on the historical reality of the Scriptures and the centrality of the historical person of Christ must inevitably have made him, in some sense at least, an enemy of the more radically minded Neoplatonists, especially to men like Julian, where a non-material view of the universe was blended with cosmic religion and theurgy.⁴³ Savon echoes Rist, however, in his estimation that, "Platonists and Christians might engage in bitter confrontation on the level of theology, natural science, and psychology. This does not keep them, however, from advocating a common ideal of separation [of the soul] from the sensible world and the mortification of carnal passions."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Rist, 218.

⁴¹ "though, in the area of moral/ascetical thought where Platonism was still allowed to flourish, Basil may have become interested, however mildly, in Plotinus towards the end of his life, his utterances might have been very similar in content whether or not he ever read any "original" Plotinus at all. They need not entail more than a synthesizing of earlier versions of Platonism and Stoicism" (Rist, 222).

⁴² Hadot, *Marius Victorinus*, 206.

⁴³ Hervé Savon, "Saint Ambroise et la philosophie, 173-196.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 191-2. My translation. Personally, I think more work needs to be done in this area.

Generally, however, as Savon (with Hadot) points out, the pursuit of philosophy was a much more practical affair for the ancients than it is for us. As we look back from our tradition that sees philosophy as an intellectual pursuit, we have difficulty envisioning the commitment and the threat. If we look at the philosophical traditions in the fourth century that stood as alternative life styles to Christianity, however, we understand better what was at stake.⁴⁵ Savon argues that there were three practical models: the Academic, that is the man who questions without ever fully settling on an answer that brings truth. Savon calls this one the heir to Socrates. There were the Cynics, who sought the truth by removing themselves from and challenging the norms of mainstream society. Third, there was the large majority of varying schools of Platonism, whose followers were initiates in the sense that they went through some form of intellectual, moral purification and they received more or less sacred books (Plato's dialogues, the Enneads, the Chaldean Oracles, and the like).⁴⁶ There is, perhaps, something of an over-simplification here, but the important point is that these ways required commitment and offered solutions for living that made them true alternatives to Christianity. When Ambrose, therefore, or any other of the early Christian writers, engaged in philosophical discourse, his adversaries would have been at the back of his mind. His own personal commitment to Christianity was clear, but many thought differently.

⁴⁵ In this regard the comments of A. H. Armstrong on the significance of the contemporary Platonic religious view of the cosmos are most helpful. How did living in a universe inhabited by more and less divine beings, all reflections of a world soul, and ultimately, of a wholly good and intelligent source [unaware of lower beings] affect one's view of the world and life in it? See A. H. Armstrong, *St. Augustine and Christian Platonism*, (Villanova University: The St. Augustine Lecture Series, 1966), 14-20.

⁴⁶ H.D. Saffrey, "II. From Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius" in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A.H. Armstrong, (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 251-3.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND COMMENTARY

The *De Bono Mortis* considers the all-important question of the preparation of the soul for death. Since, however, Ambrose conceived of it as a continuation of the *De Isaac*, we would expect the topic to be a preparation for death intended for the soul that seeks union with God as the goal of life. This is largely what we find in the treatise; it presents many of the same arguments one might find in a traditional *consolatio* or a Christian treatise on how to handle death and bereavement; but Ambrose presents these arguments to some degree in the form of an exhortation, so that the reader will be prepared for the great transition from this life to the next. Yet, as we also mentioned in the Introduction, questions arise out of a first reading of the text. Why does Ambrose think death is good for the wicked as well as the holy? In light of the Genesis account of death as a punishment for sin, why does he think death is good at all? Why is there so little mention of the resurrection of the body, when this is the keystone of Christianity? Why is Ambrose so fierce in his desire to show that the Platonists got their idea of Heaven from Moses? Finally, why does the *Song of Songs* crop up in the middle of the exhortation?

There are many answers to these questions. Some we have tried to address in the preceding chapters: the argument for the priority of Moses over Plato, for example. We also tried to show that the scope and limits of Ambrose's episcopal career were such that, on a first level, a likely and fair general answer to these questions would say that Ambrose was feeling his way

through complex philosophical questions, trying to find, if I may use this term, a proto-theological account of death in a milieu, which he fully shared, of fourth-century Platonism. On a second level, however, a brief look at some of the crises Ambrose faced makes it clear that he was involved in controversy of one sort or another for most of his public life. So the presence of apologetic material in the *De Bono Mortis* would come as no surprise. My general conclusion is that on both levels we find fascinating tensions in the text of the *De Bono Mortis*.

I have decided to present a synopsis with commentary of the whole of the *De bono mortis*, because the general conclusion I have suggested here can only come from an experience of the whole of the treatise. One must taste the earnest appeal and the submerged tensions between different aspects of Ambrose's thought, as well as those between Ambrose and the adversaries hidden behind the text. His intense commitment to a Platonic view of life coupled with an equally deep conviction that Scripture is the authoritative repository of truth are like a drum roll that one must hear fully in order to grasp the import of the meeting of these two currents in his thought. In order to preserve a sense of the whole, without reproducing the entire text followed by commentary, I have replaced the original Latin paragraph numbers with my own division and section numbers.¹ These numbers are found at the beginning of each section, and they represent my arrangement of the text for the purposes of this dissertation, but the standard chapter and paragraph numbers are given in parentheses at the end of each section. I will always distinguish between my section numbers and the original chapter/paragraph numbers in the commentary. I have organized the presentation on three levels.

¹ The Latin text of Ambrose is divided into twelve chapters and fifty seven paragraph numbers in the CSEL 32:1, ed. C. Schenkl (Vienna, 1897), 701-53. As in the *De Isaac*, chapter and paragraph numbers always appear together, for example (12:55). The page and line number may be added occasionally for clarity.

1. Sections containing the text of Ambrose translated or summarized. There are thirty-six sections placed under thirteen divisions of the text.²
2. Commentary proper in which I point out sources for Ambrose's text or parallels and make comments that bear directly on the text.
3. Second Tier Comments, labeled "Observations." These are reflections of my own on general themes and questions that arise out of a reading of the *De Bono Mortis*.

In order to clarify the development of the text and to facilitate a selective reading, I have listed the divisions below, in the Table of Contents, and in the text.

DIVISIONS OF THE TEXT

1. Division One (Sections 1-3): Introduction of the Problem and the Three Kinds of Death.

First Observation: Can the Penalty of Death be a Good?

2. Division Two (Sections 4-9): First presentation of the Platonic arguments for death as a good and descriptions of how the good man prepares for death, with Biblical examples standing in for Socrates: Simeon, Paul, David.

Second Observation: an Assemblage of Homilies?

3. Division Three (Sections 10-12): A further inquiry into the possibility that death can be good: what does this mean and in what sense?

Third Observation: The Resurrection.

4. Division Four (Section 13): An impassioned exhortation to take to heart the principles laid out in the former sections and to flee from the flesh.

5. Division Five (Sections 14-15): A description of the soul created in the image and likeness of God followed by the entrance of the soul into the garden of delights: the beginning of the commentary on the last verses of the *Song of Songs*.

Fourth Observation: A Spiritual Exercise.

Fifth Observation: A Note on Metaphor and Allegory.

² This process has reduced the size of the treatise by more than half. All translations are my own, unless specified otherwise. There are two English translations of the *De Bono Mortis*: *Saint Ambrose, Seven Exegetical Works*, The Fathers of the Church, 65. trans. Michael P. McHugh (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1972); William Theodore Wiesner, *S. Ambrosii De Bono Mortis: a Dissertation* (Washington DC, Catholic University Press, 1970). I have consulted both, but neither shows the beauty and vivid liveliness of Ambrose's text. In the passages below where I have translated Ambrose's text in full, I have tried to give a fresh and more engaging rendering of the combined color and earnest appeal that made Ambrose such a magnificent preacher.

6. Division Six (Section 16): A development (full of sensual imagery from the *Song of Songs*) of the life of the perfected soul, ready for flight, but living in the garden. This section is divided by the following subtitles:
 - The Three Gardens: the Garden of Zeus, Paradise, and the Garden of the *Song of Songs*.
 - Ambrose read Plato through Plotinus.
 - The Birth of Eros in Plato and Plotinus.
 - Ambrose and Plotinus: on the Soul.
7. Division Seven (Section 17): The Wedding in the Garden.
 - Sixth Observation: Why do the Wedding Guests get Drunk?
 - Seventh Observation: A Note on the Sacraments.
8. Division Eight (Sections 18-20): Warnings against those powers who seek to destroy the soul followed by descriptions of the perfected soul: how she handles the flesh. She plays (uses) the body as a musician the lyre.
9. Division Nine (Sections 21-24): Death is only an evil for the evil. Dread of it belongs to life not death. Life is a stormy sea, death the port.
10. Division Ten (Sections 25-27): A visual commentary on the event of death and the separation of the soul from the body, followed by the concluding argument that the soul does not die at death. This is followed by one final salvo on the snares of the flesh (a description of the process by which a young man is captured by a harlot).
11. Division Eleven (Sections 28-29): Exhortation to adhere to the good; the soul that has no sin does not die. An introduction of Socrates' concluding remarks at the end of his arguments in the *Phaedo* for the immortality of the soul.
 - Eighth Observation: The Final Argument of the *Phaedo* and Ambrose's Presentation of it.
12. Division Twelve (Sections 30-33): Ambrose turns from the uncertainty of human argument to the authority of Scripture. He introduces the Fourth Book of Esdras.
 - Ninth Observation: The *Phaedo* Myth and the Fourth Book of Esdras.
13. Division Thirteen (Sections 34-36): Final prayer and exhortation.

Some sections of the treatise receive more development than others. This arrangement inevitably reflects personal choices on my part, but it still gives a fair picture of the treatise as a whole.

Scholarly researches into sources for the *De Bono Mortis* have focused on textual parallels and allusions to particular authors.³ Although this is the indispensable first step, at some point one must stand back and take a broader look at the ideas borrowed from the source texts or from other venues more diffuse and difficult to define but no less real. It is this second level inquiry that is the goal here. Since my work on this treatise has led me to think that Ambrose is working within the framework of a long and in some sense standardized tradition, I will be looking for associations in his thought, which may not be based on one particular, clearly discernible source text. There are some risks involved in this process, but my purpose is to understand what Ambrose was thinking as he wrote, not to chart the use or provenance of particular texts.

DIVISION ONE (SECTIONS 1-3)

Introduction of the Problem and the Three Kinds of Death

1. Introduction: "Having considered the soul in the *De Isaac*, it will be easier to say something about the good of death here." If death hurts the soul, it may be considered an evil, but if it does not, then it is not evil, but good. For whatever is not evil must be good, since good and evil are contraries. Yet someone might say, "What is more opposed to death than life? If, therefore, life is thought of as a good, how is death not an evil?" We must ask ourselves what is life and also what is death.⁴ (1.1-2a)

To ask whether death is a good or an evil is, on the face of it, a simple question. It is the one Ambrose wishes to discuss in this treatise. It is also a question that Plotinus asks prominently in his last *Ennead* (1.7). Pierre Courcelle has shown convincingly, I think, that Ambrose

³ Ambrose's sources have been noted, often in parallel columns, in seminal articles by Pierre Courcelle and Pierre Hadot. The translation and commentary by William Wiesner has also relied on these same articles and added other references to Cicero and parallel passages in Ambrose. Michael McHugh has added a few other sources in the notes to his translation of the *De Bono Mortis*. I have used these resources for the commentary that follows and have added additional sources.

⁴ The sections of commentary do not represent block quotations. Direct translations from Ambrose are enclosed in quotation marks. Material outside the marks is my own summary, though words and phrases will be those of Ambrose. If a section consists entirely of a direct translation of Ambrose, the whole is enclosed in quotation marks.

borrowed elements of his discussion of death from *Ennead* I.7 (see section ten).⁵ We will examine this in detail below. If it is true, however, that Ambrose does borrow later on from this *Ennead*, then one may wonder if he introduces the question here, not only because it is the subject of the treatise, but also in order to “resonate” Plotinus in the ears of some attentive readers. En.1.7 is the shortest of the *Enneads*; section three takes less than one page in the Loeb edition. It is a succinct meditation on the options for the soul of one who has lived well – even under less than optimal circumstances – in the face of death. Plotinus asks first: “But if our life, with its mixture of evil, is good, why is not death an evil?” and then again a few line later: “But if life is good, how can death not be an evil?”⁶ This is Ambrose’s question here and twice later on at 4.13 (section ten).⁷ These questions, therefore, introduce not only the theme of the treatise but also a passage in which he follows Plotinus’s text carefully (section 10). There is an element of insistence here. Though the content of the treatise at large comes as much from Plato, and perhaps Cicero, as from Plotinus, I think that Plotinus set the tone for many of Ambrose’s interpretations of the fundamental questions surrounding death and the Good.⁸

2. Life is the enjoyment of the gift of breath; death the privation of it. Most people consider this gift of breath a good. So in general life seems to be the use and enjoyment of good things, death the stripping away of these. Scripture calls life good and death evil (Deut.30:15; Gen.2:16). “Adam did not keep the precept and lost the fruit [of the tree of life]; exiled from Paradise, he tasted death. Death, therefore, is an evil introduced as the penalty of condemnation (*pretio damnationis*).” (1.2b)

⁵ Courcelle, 1950; *Recherches*, 118-120; Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 107.

⁶ Plotinus, En.1.7.3.4-5 and 16-7.

⁷ Si ergo vita bonum putatur, quomodo mors non est mala? (1.1); Vita erat in paradiso, ubi lignum vitae (erat),... Mors igitur mala, quae accidit et subintravit. Sed quomodo mors mala...? (4.13).

⁸ In the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose clearly uses En.1.7 and En.3.5. In the sections immediately preceding the parallels with En.1.7 (found at 4.13-14), we find elements of En.I.6 (at 3.10-11). Then, Ambrose refers to Plato’s myth of the birth of Eros, through Plotinus’s reworking of the myth in En. 3.5 (at 5.19). En. 3.5 would also have a special appeal to Ambrose because it deals with the use of mythology and image in general.

Section one ended with the fundamental question of the treatise: since death appears to be an evil, we must step back and ask ourselves what life is and how death is related to it. Section two gives the first obvious answer. It is the ordinary Biblical position on life and death. Ambrose refers to Genesis, first, with regard to life: “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Gen.2:7) Ambrose says, thinking of Genesis, that we are alive when we enjoy the gift of breath and all else that goes along with that. He refers to Genesis again for the concept of death: God warned Adam that if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die (Gen.2:16-17). According to Genesis, death is the formal punishment for sin (Gen.3:19). This is the traditional Christian position on death.⁹ Ambrose would never wholly deny this.¹⁰ Note his statement above that “death was introduced after sin as the penalty of condemnation.” (*praetio damnationis infertur*). Yet, over the course of the *De Bono Mortis* he will provide a reinterpretation of death that shifts the burden of the argument away from the fact of physical death as the penalty for sin.

3. But there are three kinds of death: one caused by sin (*mors peccati*), another resulting from death to sin and life in God (*mors mystica*) and a third by which we reach the end of this life through the separation of body and soul (*mors tertia*).¹¹ The first is bad, the second good. The third is in between (*tertia mors media sit*). The just man considers it good, but most think it fearful; but this is not the fault of death. It is the result of our being captivated by the pleasures of this (*istius*) life. We fear the end of our course, since there is more bitterness in it than pleasure, though the holy and the wise mourn the length of life: Job laments the day of

⁹ In the *Civ.dei*, 13.6-8,12,16, Augustine addresses the question of the respect in which death might be considered a good. He concludes that it may in actual fact be good for one who dies with faith, the prime example being a martyr who must die in order to preserve his/her faith. But in itself death is always evil. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1008.

¹⁰ See sect. 12 below and also the *De Sacr.* 2.6.17 where Ambrose clearly states that death is introduced as a punishment for sin. But then later in no.17 he adds the distinction that death causes an end to sin and is therefore, from this point of view, a good.

¹¹ cf. *Phaedo* 64c, 67d.

his birth (Job3:3); Ecclesiastes says the dead are better off than the living, and that the best is never to have been born (Eccl.4:1-3; 6:3-5).¹² (2:3-4)

In section 3 Ambrose begins to make the distinctions that will allow him to show that physical death, rightly understood, is a good. Henri-Charles Puech and Pierre Hadot have argued that the immediate source for Ambrose's distinction between the three kinds of death is Origen's *Dialogue with Heraclides*.¹³ In both Origen and Ambrose the three types of death are explained on the basis of the same or similar texts from Scripture.¹⁴ At times Ambrose appears to give a literal translation of Origen.¹⁵ They both appeal to the Stoic term *medius* ("indifferent," neither good nor evil) to describe physical death.¹⁶ There are other similarities which we will mention later, though Ambrose's purpose in the *De Bono Mortis* is fundamentally different from that of Origen in the *Dialogue*. Origen introduces the distinction in order to explain that the death of sin renders the soul mortal in a real, though non-physical sense.¹⁷ Ambrose, on the other hand, introduces the distinction in order to envision the possibility that some types of death may be good. The first step is to propose that physical death is neutral. Once we have accepted this, he can gradually argue that, viewed from the right perspective, it may in fact be a good. I do not mean to imply that Ambrose is making a false move here, though he was an excellent rhetorician! Still,

¹² Affertur etiam de Sileno fabella quaedam, qui, quum a Mida captus esset, hoc ei muneris pro sua missione dedisse scribitur: docuisse regem, non nasci homini longe optimum esse; proximum autem, quam primum mori. (Cicero, *Tusculanum* I.48).

¹³ Henri-Charles Puech and Pierre Hadot, "l'Entretien d'Origène avec Héraclide et le commentaire de Saint Ambroise sur l'Évangile de Saint Luc," *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol.13, no.4 (1959), 204-234.

¹⁴ Thus, in the four places where Ambrose distinguishes between the three kinds of death (the other three are *In Luc.* 7:35, the *De Exc. Frat.* 2.36, and *De Paradiso* 9.45), the proof texts from Scripture are as follows: for the death of sin: "The soul that sins, dies" (Ezech.18:4; also in Origen); for the death to sin: "We are buried with him [Christ] through baptism into death." (Rom.6:4); Origen and Ambrose both use verse 10, but Ambrose also uses verses 8 and 11; "Let the dead bury the dead." (Mt.8:22; Lk.9.60); finally for physical death: both Origen and Ambrose use Gen.5:5 "Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years and he died." In the *De Exc. Fratris* 2, Ambrose replaces Adam with Abraham and David. See Puech and Hadot, 218.

¹⁵ See in particular the parallels between the *Dialogue* and the *De Exc. Frat.* 2, 36 (Puech and Hadot, 216).

¹⁶ Origen uses this term in other texts as well. It is from the classical tradition. See Puech and Hadot, 219-220, esp. note 32 and Weisner, *De Bono Mortis*, 164.

¹⁷ Origen, *Dialogue with Heraclitus*. 25.25-26.10.

from death as an indifferent reality, he moves to subjective assessments of it by the just and the foolish. Only the foolish fear it; the wise and holy think the best is never to have been born. The conclusion remains unstated, but it is almost clear.

FIRST OBSERVATION: CAN THE PENALTY OF DEATH BE A GOOD?

Ambrose's insistence on the goodness of death is significant and interesting. He knows perfectly the verse from Genesis: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die the death" (Gen.2:17). Yet in this case as in that of other fundamental truths of Christianity, until all the implications were hammered out into a coherent and definitive theological statement, there was room for varied interpretation. In the late fourth century, the Christian theological ideas on death were still not fully formed as they would be by Augustine as a result of the Pelagian controversy and in the *De civitas dei*.¹⁸ There are two questions to answer. First, to which sense of death does Gen.2:17 refer? Second, in the light of Gen.2:17 how does one interpret God's formal pronouncement of punishment after Adam's sin:

And to Adam he [God] said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen.3:17-9)

How ought one to interpret "till" in this passage? Does it imply that physical death is part of the punishment, or does it imply that death is the limit, the cessation, of the punishment? One way to answer this question is to say that the death implied in the threat (Gen.2.17) is the death of sin,

¹⁸ Éric Rebillard, *In Hora Mortis: évolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort aux IVe et Ve siècles dans l'occident latin* (Rome: École Française, 1994), 28-9 and ch.2 *passim*.

while the death mentioned in the formal statement of punishment (Gen.3.19) is physical death. If this distinction is appropriate, physical death may be thought of as a gesture of mercy, since as long as man lives in sin, he continues to increase his guilt and death cuts short the increase. This was Ambrose's interpretation.

For Ambrose, therefore, physical death accomplished two goals: it freed the soul from the fetters of the body (the traditional Platonic view) and it imposed a limit on the accretion of sin (Origen's view based on the Scriptures).¹⁹ Neither of these goals stands in clear contradiction to Gen.2:17; and they fit the other distinction between the death of the soul as opposed to death of the body, an idea common to the philosophical and the early Christian traditions.²⁰ Philo, for example, interpreted Gen.2:17 in a spiritual sense:

The death of the good is the beginning of another life; for life is a twofold thing, one life being in the body, corruptible; the other without the body, incorruptible. Therefore, a wicked man surely "dies the death" (Gen.2:17), who while still breathing and among the living is in reality long since buried, so as to retain in himself no single spark of real life, which is perfect virtue.²¹

Ambrose read Philo and speaks of spiritual death (the *mors peccati* above) later in the *De Bono Mortis*. Yet following Origen – perhaps both follow Philo – he argues that the real punishment for Adam's sin lay in the toil and hardship of life until he (Adam) should return to the earth from which he had been formed. In his second funeral oration for his brother Satyrus, Ambrose addresses the question directly:

Death is given as a remedy, as the end of evils. For [God] did not say, "Because you listened to the voice of your wife, you shall return to the earth." This would have been a

¹⁹ This view is based on his interpretation of Rom.6:23 "stipendia enim peccati mors, gratia autem Dei vita aeterna in Christo Iesu Domino nostro." Origen interprets death here as death of the soul only. Physical death is a remedy established by God against the incursion of sin. For references to Origen and Ambrose, who follows him, see Puech and Hadot, 222 and notes. See also the argument of Rufinus the Syrian, cited by Rebillard, 32:

²⁰ See Puech and Hadot, 225-28.

²¹ Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis I*, 16.

sentence of penalty, just like that [sentence]: “Cursed is the earth, it shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you.” But it says “you shall eat your bread in the sweat [of your brow] until you return to the earth.” You see that death is rather the end of our punishment, by which the course of this life is cut short.²²

Ambrose’s willingness to reinterpret these classic texts from Genesis on death as a punishment for sin shows the depth of the influence of Platonism and to a lesser extent Stoicism, in the general sense of these terms, on the early Christian tradition, on Ambrose himself, and on those who would read his treatise and listen to his sermons.²³ All would change, however, when Pelagius began to argue that man was created mortal – so that physical death was a neutral consequence of mortality in the Stoic sense – and that original sin in no way changed human nature.²⁴

There is another more subjective element at work here also. Whether or not the fact of death is good, on one level Ambrose’s intent is to help his audience make their deaths as good as possible. The *De Bono Mortis* is from beginning to end an exhortation to face death with courage and equanimity, and most especially to live the present life with an intense desire for union with God – or in the Platonic terms Ambrose often uses – the highest Good. This is the goal and outcome of a life well lived, and death is nothing more than the passage from this life to that better life. Ambrose stresses the idea of continuity: if one’s life here is good, one will take that goodness across the threshold of death. The present life, therefore, already holds the kernel of eternal goodness. So not only do the infirmities and trials of life on earth cease in death, but death itself

²² Mors pro remedio data est quasi finis malorum. Non enim dixit: “quoniam audisti vocem mulieris, reverteris in terram.” Haec enim esset poenalis sententia, quemadmodum est illa: *Maledicta terra, spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi*. Sed dixit: “manducabis panem tuum in sudore donec reverteris in terram.” Vides mortem magis metam nostrum esse poenarum, qua cursus vitae huius inciditur (Ambrose, *De Exc. Frat.* 2.38). See also the excellent discussion in Puech and Hadot, 223-224 and Rebillard, 15-8.

²³ See also sect. 10 below.

²⁴ Rebillard, 30-34. Concomitant difficulties here are in what sense was man created mortal? Was immortality offered as a gift? Does the removal of the gift signify a change in human nature? Is the death that is the punishment for sin the death of the body or of the soul? Note that Julian of Eclanum may have used Ambrose’s *De Bono Mortis* to argue against Augustine (Rebillard, 40-42).

is a source of freedom and life for the soul. These are traditional themes of the *consolatio*; they are found in the *De Excessu Fratris* 2 as well as in the *De Bono Mortis*.²⁵ Metaphysics and morals are never far apart in Ambrose.

DIVISION TWO (SECTIONS 4-9)

*First presentation of the Platonic arguments for death as a good and descriptions of how the good man prepares for death, with Biblical examples standing in for Socrates:
Simeon, Paul, David*

4. In reality, if life is full of dissatisfaction and trouble; we never find rest, except in death.²⁶ So death is a good and a release. Simeon, as if detained in life by necessity, says, “Now let your servant depart in peace...” (Luke 2:28-9). Thus he asks that he might be released from the fetters (*vincula*) of this body (*corporis huius*), and what is more serious, from the fetters of temptation, which bind us and constrain us to a harmful state of captivity by the law of sin. In fact, at the moment of death we see how the soul of the dying releases herself little by little from the bonds of the flesh; and sent forth from the mouth, she can fly out, as if divested of the prison-like hovel (*carcereus gurgustio*) of this body (*corporis huius*).²⁷ (2:5)

The body is a prison, death a release. This is a pervasive image for the body in ancient thought.²⁸ One of the best known sources for this idea is the *Phaedo* (62b; 82e) and the *Cratylus* (400c); but it belongs to a long tradition before Plato. Socrates tells Cebes, “There is a doctrine uttered in secret – [a religious, Orphic, myth]— that man is a prisoner who has no right to open the door of his prison and run away” (*Phaedo* 62b). A graphic explanation is found in Dio Chrysostom.²⁹ References are also found in many Latin texts Ambrose would have read: Cicero (*Somnium Scipionis*, 6.14; *Tusculanum* I.30.74; *De Amicitia*, 4.14); Virgil (*Aeneid*, 6.730-734).

²⁵ See Yves-Marie Duval, “Formes profanes et formes Bibliques dans les oraisons funèbres de saint Ambroise,” *Huit Exposes Suivis De Discussions Fondation Hardt pour l’étude de l’antiquité classique*, Entretiens, Tome XXIII, 1976, 255-57

²⁶ See, for example, Cicero, *De Amicitia* 4; *De Senectute* 21; *Somnium Scipionis*, 6(6.14).

²⁷ “paulatim solvat se vinculis carnis et ore emissa evolet tamquam carcere corporis huius exuta gurgustio.” (CSEL, 706, 13-14). The *exuta* makes one think of a turtle slipping out from under its shell or of a serpent freeing itself from its skin. See also Ep. 21.2-4, esp. 4 (CSEL 82:1, 154-5).

²⁸ See Pierre Courcelle, “Traditions platoniciennes et chrétiennes du corps-prison,” *Revue des études latines* 43 (1965) 406-43.

²⁹ Courcelle, “Traditions,” 409-10. Life on earth for men is a prison sentence exacted by the gods.

Philo uses it in a number of places; for example, in his treatise *On Dreams* I.139, he combines the myth of winged souls from the *Phaedrus*, with the account of them as linked to the stars in the *Timaeus* (41d-42b) and says, “Of these souls, ... others condemning the great worthlessness of the body, call it a prison and a sepulcher and fleeing from it as from a cell or a tomb, lifted up high on light wings to the *aether*, pass their life there dwelling on high.”³⁰ Plotinus considers the different texts where Plato speaks of the human soul, and he places the burden of captivity in part at least on the soul herself, not on the body. Each soul has a double function: to look to what is above and to order and govern what is below. As long as she keeps her gaze fixed on the intelligible world, she will maintain her purity and integrity. If she focuses too much on the level of reality beneath her, however, she loses sight of the universal good and little by little sinks to the lower level of particular concerns. She stands apart, becomes weak, sinks deep into matter and is thereby caught in the fetters of the material world.³¹ Plotinus says that the soul is amphibian, out of necessity living by turns the life there above (ἐκεῖ) and her life here below (ἐνταῦθα).³² Origen and the Cappadocians also use the prison image.³³ Finally, Ambrose himself makes much of it throughout the *De Bono Mortis* and in a number of his treatises.³⁴ The prison motif is either found alone or in combination with other motifs equally standard and widespread, fetters, for example, wings, and flight: thus, the soul is *bound* in prison with fetters (*vincula*).

³⁰ Philo, *On Dreams*, 1.139. See also Courcelle, “Traditions,” 413. The final verb (μετεωροπολέω) is the same colorful verb used by Plato at *Phaedrus*, 246c (the adjective is also used of the Clouds in Aristophanes, *Clouds*, eg.266). It means both to fly through or haunt the air like a bird; but also, figuratively, to occupy oneself with lofty matters. See also Plotinus’s discussion of the soul (in connection with *Phaedrus* 246c) at En.4.8.2,20-21 where the verb is similar: μετεωροπορέω.

³¹ Plotinus, En.4.8.1-4, especially 4.

³² En. 4.8.4,32-35. See the paragraph below on Ambrose’s use of *hic* and *ille*.

³³ Courcelle, “Traditions,” 422-23.

³⁴ *Hex.*6.9.55 ; *De Paradiso.*12:54 ; *De Cain et Abel.*2:9.36, *Exp.in Luc.*2:59, (see below), 8.47 ; *De Exc. Frat.*1.73. See also Courcelle, “Traditions,” 423-26.

Once released she can discover her wings (*ales*) and fly up and away (*evoleit*). Other Platonic images include bird lime, glue, and nail. See 5.16 (section 13 below).

Courcelle points out that Jerome had also used the prison metaphor before the Origenist controversy came to a head but that, after Epiphanius attacked it as unbiblical, he dropped it.³⁵ The difficulty lies in the fact that Adam had a body before his sin, so the fact of being in a body cannot be conceived of as a punishment (prison). Also, if the body is a prison, then did the soul exist somewhere else before it sinned and was confined to a body? Finally, if the body is a prison, what good could come from its resurrection?³⁶ We may think Epiphanius takes a poetical metaphor too literally, but the ambiguity was real enough. It was present in Ambrose and we see it clearly in paragraph 2:5 above. It looks as if we have an image, like the idea of the penalty of death as a good, that was used freely until someone pointed out theological inconsistencies. In fact, one of the interesting aspects of the *De Bono Mortis* is that it seems to reflect a number of early Christian ambiguities, from which as yet no one had drawn all possible conclusions. Ambrose clearly had no qualms about using the prison metaphor.

I think the ambiguity in Ambrose surrounding the prison motif is permanent. The body may be a prison simply because it is a material body; or it may be a prison because it is the locus of temptation, a fallen body liable to sin. In fact, Ambrose often, as in the passage above, either does not distinguish between the two senses or he mentions both. In Simeon's case, above, the body is a prison because it is the body and because somehow the "fetters of temptation" seem to be connected with it under the idea of flesh (*caro*). Simeon asks, therefore, to be freed from two

³⁵ Courcelle, "Interpretations," 428-29.

³⁶ These are questions which Augustine addressed, though as a young man he too had used the prison metaphor. *ibid.*, 430-33

sets of fetters, one of the body, the other of temptations. Ambrose even specifies that the liability to temptation is a more serious problem than life in a prison-body, thereby distinguishing the two. Then, he says that at the moment of dying the soul frees itself from the bonds of the flesh (the cause of temptations) as it is emitted from the mouth of the prison-body. Thus we find both senses together in the same passage. When Ambrose speaks of Simeon in his commentary on Luke, he mentions only the prison of bodily mass or weight.³⁷ We may conclude that, for Ambrose, the combination of soul plus body is essentially an unhappy mix, though a more significant problem is that temptations come to the soul from its linkage to the body.

The idea of the body as a source of danger for the soul seems to be contained in the term “flesh” (*caro*). If sin and temptation, caused by association with the body, are the more significant causes of evil for the soul, then the problem is not so much possessing an earthly body as it is possessing a body partisan to a life of sin. The problem is complex; but to the degree that Ambrose shifts it away from the body as such and speaks of the division between soul and body in terms of the Pauline divide between flesh and spirit, he leaves the door open to the idea of a body not liable to sin. Though the resurrection is not his focus in the *De Bono Mortis*, as it is in the *De Excessu Fratris* 2,³⁸ the shift back and forth between the body as such to the reality of sinful flesh may indicate that Ambrose has the resurrection at the back of his mind.³⁹

³⁷ *Nunc inquit dimitte servum tuum. Unde iustum velut corporeae carcere molis inclusum velle dissolvi, ut incipiat esse cum Christo (Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam, 2:59)*

³⁸ See the arguments Ambrose gives for the resurrection, on the basis of Scripture and nature, at *De Exc. Frat.* 2.51-68.

³⁹ Where Ambrose first mentions the resurrection of the body at 4.15, it is in precisely this context: death frees us from guilt, while the resurrection of the body preserves the integrity of nature: *data est resurrectio mortuorum, ut per mortem culpa deficeret, per resurrectionem autem perpetuaretur natura*. Smith also notes the ease with which Ambrose passes between the idea of body and that of sinful body. See Smith, 24.

There is another more subtle shift, however, that might not be significant except that Ambrose is consistent in his use. He uses the demonstratives *hic*, *iste*, and *ille* with the classical connotations of proximity = pejorative and remoteness = honorable. When he refers to the body in a context where the word *corpus* alone would suffice, Ambrose often attaches some form of *hoc* or *istud*. The implication is that he is speaking of “*this* body” that we possess here and now in this life, as opposed to “body” in general or, depending on the context, a future body(?). He follows the same procedure when he speaks of the present life, adding some form of *haec* or *ista*, by which he effects an implied contrast between “*this* life” and the future life of the soul after death. All references to the Good, on the other hand, are accompanied by some form of *illud*.⁴⁰

Here are three examples of this ubiquitous practice: (1) At 4.11 he concludes the discussion of Paul’s Plotinian interior ascent to the Good by saying that “he [Paul] rightly, therefore, deprecated and contemned *this* body, calling it a body of death.”⁴¹ (2) At 2:4 he asks, “Why then does *this* life delight us, filled as it is with vexations and anxieties?”⁴² (3) At 3.10 he says, “nor can we grasp with *these* hands, eyes, or ears *that* highest truth.”⁴³ Thus Ambrose builds up gradually an “atmosphere” of contrasts (1) between the meanness of our physical life in which we struggle with the body, or flesh, and temptations, in contrast to a future life of freedom and happiness after the death and (2) between the life of *this* physical body here and

⁴⁰ In a discussion of life and death, contrasts between life here and life there (*hic* vs. *ille*) are to some extent normal. Cicero uses them thus but never to the same extent as Ambrose. See, for example (*Tusc.* I.31.75) : cum a negotio omni sevocamus animum, quid, inquam, tum agimus, nisi animum ad se ipsum advocamus; secum esse cogimus; maximeque a corpore abducimus? Secernere autem a corpore animum, nec quidquam aliud est mori discere. Quare hoc commentemur, mihi crede, disjungamusque nos a corporibus, id est, consuescamus mori. Hoc et, dum erimus in terris, erit *illi* caelesti vitae simile; et, cum *illuc* ex *his* vinculis emissi feremur, minus tardabitur cursus. animorum. (my Italics).

⁴¹ [Paul] merito ergo depretiauit et dehonestaui hoc corpus, corpus mortis appellans (4.11).

⁴² quid enim est quod haec vita delectet plena aerumnarum et sollicitudinum... (2:4)

⁴³ neque enim manibus istis aut oculis atque auribus comprehendere supernam illam possumus ueritatem (3.10).

now in contrast to the life of *that* un-named but implied body in the future life. This contrast of pronouns is subtle but significant.⁴⁴

5. Why do we desire this life so much, when the longer we live the greater the accumulation of sin? The Apostle says, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil.1:21) The first refers to the necessity of living (Christ is our king; we may not desert our post, but must remain and serve), the second refers to the usefulness of death (it is a flight from what is worse to what is better). Paul adds, “To be dissolved and be with Christ: this is better by far, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” (Phil.1:23-4). One is better, the other is necessary: necessary on account of the fruitfulness of the apostolate, [the other is] better on account of grace and union with Christ (*copulam Christi*). (2:6-7)

One striking aspect of the *De Bono Mortis* is the extent to which Ambrose illustrates philosophical principles with texts from Scripture. He finds in the example of Paul and in his epistles a perfect fit between the classical philosophical tradition and the Christian life. In this section he uses Paul’s “for me to live is Christ” to show that the Christian, like anyone else, must stay at his post and serve until he is legitimately released by death. This theme belongs to the prison motif in the *Phaedo* 62b, where Socrates argues that we must stay under guard until released by the gods. Yet it is everywhere in the classical tradition. In a passage inspired by the *Phaedo*, Cicero, describing the song of the swans before they die (*Tusculum* 1.30.74), says that Cato left this life with delight, since he had been discharged by legitimate (divine) authority; and he adds that all these ideas are already old and borrowed from the Greeks (*haec et vetera, et a Graecis*).

⁴⁴ This would seem to be leading in the same direction as the argument of J. Warren Smith: that “The critique of the body in *Isaac* and *On the Good of Death* should not be read as a dualistic opposition of soul and material embodiment, that union that God created in the beginning. Rather his complaint about the body is a critique of the body of death that is inscribed with weakness and corruption resulting from sin.... Thus, when Ambrose speaks of the body as something not proper to us, he refers not to corporeal existence generally speaking but to that in the body that the corruption of sin adheres to. It is this corrupt body that is alien to our proper identity” (25). My objection to Smith lies only in his forcing of Ambrose’s ambiguity to a solution. To my mind, this is to read back into Ambrose an idea that would become clearer later.

Again, in the *Somnium Scipionis*, Cicero makes Paulus warn Scipio not even to consider the thought of leaving his life on earth before the god of the universe frees him from his duties.⁴⁵

With regard to the *copulam Christi*, the term *copula* signifies in general anything that joins two things together: (1) a tie, bond, ship's cable, grappling iron; (2) a joining or association: of elements, body and soul, members of a group; (3) in grammar and rhetoric a verb or other word that joins two parts of speech, two metrical units. When used of persons, it signifies friendship, a love relationship, and marriage. The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* indicates that in the fourth century, it commonly signifies matrimony; according to the grammarians, *haec copula* (feminine singular or neuter plural) means matrimony. The TLL also gives examples of the use of *copula* in Christian authors to signify the relationship of the Christian to Christ or of the consecrated virgin to Christ. Ambrose's use of it here is no surprise, but it does imply an intimate relationship with Christ, which in light of the development at 5.19 evokes the metaphor of love and marriage found in the *Song of Songs*.

6. If what the Apostle teaches, therefore, is true: that he who escapes this body (*hoc*), and is worthy, will be with Christ, let us consider what death is and what life. Scripture teaches that death is the release of body and soul, a kind of separation of the man; we are in fact freed at the moment of death from this joining (*nexus*) of body and soul. [1] David says, "You have broken apart my bonds; I shall offer you a sacrifice of praise" (Ps.115:7-8). The previous verse of Ps.115 shows that he means the bonds of this life: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps.115:6). In Scripture we read that David often offered sacrifices to God, but here he says that he will offer a sacrifice of praise. The future tense signifies that after being freed from the bonds of this life, each will offer a perfect sacrifice when he stands before the Lord and offers himself as a sacrificial gift of praise (*hostiam laudis*). [2] The Apostle says, "It is far better to be dissolved and to be with Christ" (Phil.1:23). In this

⁴⁵ *De Rep.* 6.15. Also, in the *Apology*, Socrates compares his duty as a philosopher to his duty as a hoplite in the Athenian army: there he never left his post, so here also he must stay at it till death (Plato, *Apol.* 28d-29a).

unbinding (*solutio*) the body is released and quiets down, the soul turns towards her rest (Ps.114:7), she is free and, if devout, will be with Christ. (3.8)⁴⁶

In this section once again, Ambrose subsumes the philosophical tradition under the authority of Scripture. He begins by saying, “Scripture teaches....” The Scriptural texts Ambrose chooses to make his point are a perfect fit. Nevertheless, the idea they teach is essentially the same as that taught by Plato in the *Phaedo* at 64c. Since it was one of the most popular dialogues of Plato, and this is a memorable passage, the educated reader would have picked up the nuance. Socrates says:

Do we think that death is something?
Of course, said Simmias in reply.
Well, is it anything other than the release of the soul from the body? And this is what it means to die: the body, on the one hand, alone and apart, released from the soul, has become itself fully [what it is by nature] all by itself; the soul, on the other, alone and apart, released from the body, continues to be itself [what it is by nature] all by itself. Is death something other than this?⁴⁷

The two entities, body and soul, are totally different. Death releases them both, so that each may become what it is independently of the other. This is the significance of the perfect infinitive (γεγονέναι) for the body: having been held back by association with the soul, it takes on its full nature now that it is by itself. The soul, on the other hand, continues to be what she is (present infinitive: εἶναι) only more so, now that she is freed from the body and by herself. Ambrose, using the voice of Scripture, says the same thing: “In this unbinding the body is released and quiets down, the soul turns towards her rest.”

⁴⁶ Ambrose uses here varied forms of *absolutio*, *dissolutio*, *resolution*, and *solutio*. The nuance of the English “dissolution” is too strong for this passage. One should think of both the body and soul as retaining in some way their proper nature after death. Ambrose’s terms are close to the Greek ἀπαλλαγή. See note 47 below.

⁴⁷ ἡγούμεθα τι τὸν Θάνατον εἶναι;

Πάνυ γε, ἔφη ὑπολαβὼν ὁ Σιμμίας.

Ἄρα μὴ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος ἀπαλλαγὴν; καὶ εἶναι τοῦτο τὸ τεθνάναι, χωρὶς μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπαλλαγὴν αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ τὸ σῶμα γεγονέναι, χωρὶς δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος ἀπαλλαγείσαν αὐτὴν καθ’ αὐτὴν εἶναι; ἄρα μὴ ἄλλο τι ἢ ὁ θάνατος ἢ τοῦτο; (*Phaedo*, 64c)

SECOND OBSERVATION: AN ASSEMBLAGE OF HOMILIES?

After a few short paragraphs, Ambrose repeats the opening proposal of the treatise: “let us consider what death is and what life” (section six above). Is it possible that this repetition actually comes from a separate homily, which Ambrose is here joining to what he has said before? Modern editors tend to use such repetitions as evidence that Ambrose did a fast and careless job of editing.⁴⁸ Since he could easily have removed the repetitions, it seems more likely that he left it in for stylistic or didactic purposes; and even if he did join two homilies here, he may have decided to keep both. Why? We said earlier that a likely sign of two homilies joined might be the repetition of the same material. Here there is the same reasoning ending with the same quote from Paul (Phil.1:23-4) as in section five above. Here, though, there is also a variation. In the former paragraph, the goal of his argument was to show the tension in Paul between his duty of charity for the Church which kept him “at his post” and his personal desire to be with Christ. Here it is used as the second of two arguments to prove that death is a dissolution of body and soul, a dissolution that in no way harms the good soul, since it is better for her to die and be with Christ. Most editors, following Palanque, say that the *De Bono Mortis* is made of two sermons, but I think this passage and others show that it could easily be made from four or more.⁴⁹ We shall return to this question later. By way of example, Ps.114, used here, returns again at 9.38 and 12:55. The same verses 7-9 are the subject of commentary but with variations. Here at 3.8 Ambrose emphasizes the idea of rest, for both the body and the soul. At 9.38 he uses the same verses to show that the soul cannot die with the body because it is

⁴⁸ Palanque, 436; Nauroy, *La Structure*, 218; Nauroy, *L’Ecriture*, 251-2; Sagot, *La Triple Sagesse*, 112-3.

⁴⁹ See Palanque, 441: first 1.1-7.29 and second 8.30-12:57; Rebillard (18) also divides the *De Bono Mortis* into two sermons. He divides it as: first homily 1.1-8.30; second 8.31-12:57.

essentially independent of it. “Return my soul into your rest... for God has freed my feet from the snare (i.e. of sin through the remedy of death)... and I shall please the Lord in the land of the living (after death because my faults have ceased but not my nature).” Finally at 12:55 he uses the same verses to focus on the contrast between this earthly life lived in the shadow of death and eternal life in the land of the living. Other passages from Scripture and other images from the philosophical tradition such as the wings of the soul, the prison of the body, the snares of the flesh, all return in ways that make one wonder if they were not originally in separate homilies. Ambrose then brought them into the *De Bono Mortis* as is because each adds richness to a contemplative reading of the text. Repetition with variation is like kindling for the meditative reading of Scripture and of works related on Scripture.

One might say, therefore, that the *De Bono Mortis* is like an anthology of the best of Ambrose on death. Reading through the “collection” would give one both the best foundation philosophy could offer and corroborating passages from Scripture; together these would give the greatest insight into a Christian approach to death and present for imitation the great exemplars, Paul and David. Some parts of the *De Bono Mortis* leave one with the impression that they are intended as a kind of spiritual exercise to help the reader “work on” the assimilation of a particular idea. For those accustomed to reading for information, as opposed to edification, the flood of repetitive intertwined texts, images, and ideas is vaguely confusing; but viewing them as a contemplative anthology from which to pick and choose gives a better sense of Ambrose’s purpose. I also think it is a mistake to push too far the distinction between written text and delivered homily. This is true for Ambrose himself and for those who would read his texts. We know that Ambrose wrote partly in response to requests for written summaries and developments

of his homilies, so that they could be pondered at leisure. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find homiletic material and style in the text.

The following three sections (7-9) correspond to paragraphs 3.9-4.12 in Ambrose's text. They form a unified whole. To combine the sections, however, before providing commentary would be even more awkward than separating them into three. It would be helpful to bear in mind, however, that the three belong together.

7. What else does the just man do in this life (*haec vita*) but try to divest himself of the pollutions of the body, which bind like fetters, and separate himself from these vexations? He renounces luxuries and pleasures and flees the flames of lust. While stationed in this (*hac*) life, he imitates the appearance of death (*speciem mortis imitatur*). He is the man who can act in such a way that to him all delights and desires of the body die and he himself dies to all the enticements of the world. He is dead just as Paul was when he said, "The world is crucified to me and I to the world" (Gal.6:14). Indeed, so that we may know that there is a death in this life and that it is a good death, Paul exhorts us to bear the death of Christ in our bodies. For he who has in himself the death of Jesus, will also have the life of the Lord Jesus in his body (2Cor.4-10-11). Death must work in us, that life may also work (cf. 2Cor.4:12): the good life after death, that is, the good life after victory: the good life after release from the struggle, at which time the law of the flesh will no longer know how to fight against the law of the spirit (Rom.7:23). Our exterior man is undergoing corruption, but the interior is being renewed (2Cor.4:16). (3.9)

Again, Ambrose presents fundamental Platonic principles: (1) that the wise man imitates and practices for death in this life (*Phaedo* 64a-b; 67d-68b; 80e-81a); (2) that he accomplishes this by separating the soul as much as possible from association with the body (*Phaedo* 64d-65a; 83a-84a)⁵⁰; (3) justice is the work of the interior man (*Republic* 588b-90b).⁵¹ He explains and

⁵⁰ Hadot shows the parallels between sections 6-9 (Ambrose's 3.8-3.12) of the *De Bono Mortis* and the *Phaedo*. See Pierre Hadot "Platon et Plotin," 210-12: The parallels are there. See also Wiesner, 173-83. In a sense, though, they are broader than the *Phaedo* because they have entered into the common heritage of classical philosophy. The idea, for example, that the life of the philosopher is a preparation for death is found in Cicero, *Tusc.*I.31 and other places as well. These same passages from the *Phaedo* are also behind much of what Plotinus says in En. 1.6.5-9, sections of which Ambrose follows at the end of the *De Isaac*. So is Ambrose looking back to the *Phaedo* or to Plotinus or to both? I think that the parallels between Ambrose and Plotinus, En.1.6 are in some ways closer than parallels with the *Phaedo*. I will discuss this in the following sections.

illustrates these principles, however, with passages from the Pauline epistles that show Paul as the exemplar of the Socratic wisdom. Those in Ambrose's audience familiar with the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* would understand that Socrates is implied but Paul is presented as the model and interpreter of the philosophical principle. Yet, separation from the body takes on a new aspect here: one does not just leave the body aside, one crucifies it. The life sought for the soul is also defined as a life of freedom after a victory over death, in Christ. There is an intensity in Paul's exhortations, as represented by Ambrose, absent from the *Phaedo*. In the dialogue Socrates tries to defend his understanding of the immortality of the soul in order to show his friends that he can approach and pass through death with constancy, good cheer even, to a better life. Socrates minimizes death; it is the sloughing off of the body. For the Christian, however – and Ambrose brings this out in the *De Bono Mortis* – death is not a sloughing off of dead weight. It is the mighty combat of Christ worked out in the life of each Christian, a path through death to victory. Nor does the Christian need to cultivate his own death alone by himself. He cultivates within himself the death of Christ so that the life of Christ may prevail in him. Paul goes so far as to say that death *must* work in us, so that [Christ's] life may also work. His way to eternal life, therefore, is founded on the saving, life-giving death of Christ and the Christian's participation in it. The Christian can make use of death in a way Socrates could never have imagined.

In the condensed version of Ambrose presented above some of the intensity of his commentary on 2Cor.4:10-12 is lost. The full text manifests the paradoxes Paul makes in the epistle.

Paul says:

⁵¹ Socrates describes here the image of man as containing within the inner man, the lion, and the many-headed beast. The image may be at the back of Ambrose's mind here, since he refers to this passage from the *Republic* at of the *De Bono Mortis* 9.38 (sect. 25 below with commentary). The idea of the interior man, however, is also an important element of Paul's anthropology, as in 2Cor.4.16 (above); but Rom.7: 15-23 may also be read as a Christian counterpart to Socrates' description of the inner man at *Rep*.9.

We always carry in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2Cor.4:10-11)

After quoting and summarizing Paul, Ambrose says, “And I myself know not if this sort of death may be of greater worth than life.” (*atque haut scio ipse an maioris uirtutis mors ista quam uita sit*) (3.9). He continues in the same vein for another nine lines. Why this insistence? In the entire section (3.9-11) I think he deliberately creates a subtle but highly suggestive juxtaposition. The notion of the Platonic philosopher dead to the body and its passions is set up against the Christian life and career of Paul, not only to show that dying to the body is a different sort of activity for the Christian than it is for the Platonist, but also to highlight the worth of the body. This will become clearer as we proceed, though here already Ambrose suggests that *this* death caused by the carrying around of the death of Christ in one's living body is better than life itself. So the vehicle for this death-better-than-life is the body. Ambrose does not say that the body is good in the present life but that, if it participates in Christ's death, it will also share in Christ's life: the Christian will have Christ's life “in his body.” I think, therefore, that Ambrose insists because he is trying to show in these sections both the strengths and the limits of Platonism. A Platonist reading paragraph 3.9 would begin by recognizing himself but end in doubt about the real goal of the Pauline program of life and death.

8. He imitates death, therefore, [1] who leads himself away from communion with this flesh (*caro haec*) [2] who loosens the bonds of injustice of which Isaiah (58:6) speaks and [3] who raises himself up to dwell in Heaven, where Paul, though he was still alive, habitually dwelt. He says, “Our way of life/habitual association (*conversatio*) is in Heaven” (Phil.3:20). This statement of his “may be attributed to the anticipation of merit [in the next life] as well as to contemplation [in the present life]. For in that place (i.e. Heaven, *illic*) was his contemplation; there (*illic*) his habitual life; there (*illic*) his understanding and wisdom, which were never held fast by the anxieties of this (*huius*) flesh. For when a wise man seeks this divine reality, he frees his soul from the body and gets rid of his association with it, since he is dealing with

that knowledge of the true, which he wishes to have shown to him naked and unveiled.... For we cannot grasp that (*illa*) supreme truth with these (*isti*) hands, eyes, and ears, since what is seen is temporal, what is unseen is eternal (2Cor.4:18). In fact, we are often misled by sight and we see a great many things other than as they are; we are also misled by the sense of hearing. So we must contemplate not the things that are seen but those that are not, if we wish to avoid error. When therefore does our soul avoid deception, when does it attain to the throne of truth, if not when she withdraws herself from this (*iste*) body so that she cannot be misled or mocked by it?... And, therefore, in order to show us that it is not by indulgence towards the body, but by elevation of the soul and humility of heart that we reach the truth, Paul says, 'Our way of life is in Heaven.' This is where he would seek, therefore, what is true, what exists and remains permanent. He would gather himself into himself and draw together all the discernment and acuteness (*aciem*) of his faculties (*virtus*), nor would he entrust himself to others or put his faith in them; but what he saw he would recognize and understand to be himself (*ipsum se* not *se ipsum*) and he would know that what seemed true to him was what he should follow. What he might esteem worthy of choice on the basis of physical pleasure (*delectatione carnali*), this he would know to be false; he would draw back from it and flee, since it is full of deceit. Rightly, therefore, he [Paul] deprecated and discredited this body (*hoc corpus*), calling it 'a body of death' (Rom.7:24)." (3.9c-11a)

There are many reminiscences of the *Phaedo* here, as also in section 9 below. Both Hadot⁵² and Wiesner⁵³ have made a textual comparison, in parallel columns. I would only like to mention here briefly the development of ideas and images in both texts. More important than textual parallels is that Ambrose follows Plato's line of thought.

<i>Phaedo</i> 65a-67a	<i>De Bono Mortis</i> 3.10, 711.8-712:13
Is the body useful when one seeks the truth? No.	The wise man frees the soul from the body in order to see the naked truth
Sight, hearing, and all the other senses are inaccurate and indistinct. So the soul is deceived when she searches for truth with the body.	The hands, eyes, and ears and all the senses show us only what is temporal and deceive us. We seek the eternal and so must not rely on the senses.
Thought is best when the mind is gathered up into herself, untroubled by the senses.	He finds the truth by elevation of soul and humility of heart.
So the philosopher abandons and dishonors the body.	He abandons and deserts the senses.
The soul desires to be alone and by herself.	He gathers himself into himself and trusts

⁵² Hadot, *Platon*, 210-213.

⁵³ Wiesner, 179-180.

Phaedo 65a-67a*De Bono Mortis* 3.10, 711.8-712:13

Is there absolute justice, beauty, etc.? Have you ever reached them with your senses?

The philosopher attains knowledge of them with the mind alone when he has blocked out as much as possible the physical senses.

We have found a path to the truth but as long as we are tied to the body we will never be satisfied. It is a source of endless trouble.

At death the foolishness of the body will be cleared away.

nothing other than himself...

Ambrose turns here to Plotinus for a clearer explanation of what it means for the soul to withdraw and see the truth within and through herself (See 3.10 below).

Ambrose then continues to follow Plato (at 3.11, 712:16-714.9. See section 9 below):

Who has ever seen the splendor of virtue, touched justice, gazed on wisdom?

When we contemplate, we do not wish to see anyone or hear any sounds. We often do not see what is in front of us. We think better at night. We close our eyes and seek solitude.

The necessities of the body give rise to many cares for us and block the vigor of the soul and distract us from our purpose.

Death is the only true rest for a man.

The *Phaedo*, therefore, is a conceptual source for these paragraphs of the *De Bono Mortis*.

Plotinus, however, who himself follows the *Phaedo*, gives a deeper, more explicit, account of the process of purification and interior vision. Though he does not cite Plotinus, he speaks his language; he seems to look at Plato through a Plotinian lens. At 3.10 he says:

He [Paul] would gather himself into himself and draw together all the discernment and acuteness (*acies*) of his faculties (*virtutes*), nor would he entrust himself to others or put his faith in them; but what he saw he would recognize and understand to be himself (*ipsum se* not *se ipsum*) and he would know that what seemed true to him was what he should follow.⁵⁴

This is reminiscent of passages in Plotinus. We know Ambrose read the following:

⁵⁴ [Paulus addidit]: *nostra autem conversatio in caelis est* (Phil.3:20). ibi igitur quaerat quod verum est, quod est et manet seque in sese colligat et congreget omnem aciem uirtutis suae neque aliis committat et credat, sed ipsum se cognoscat et intellegat et quod sibi videtur verum esse, hoc sequendum noverit. (Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 3.10 end)

1. En.I.6.7, 8-12: When he discusses the progress of the ascent, Plotinus says that whoever seeks the Good goes up to higher things and strips himself “until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the Good, one sees with one’s self alone That alone – simple, single, and pure – from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think.”
2. En.I.6.8,1-5: Plotinus asks “How may one gaze upon the inconceivable beauty which stays within holy sanctuaries and does not come forth that the uninitiated may see it?” He begins his answer with: “Let him who is able go and follow within, leaving behind the sight of his eyes....”
3. En.I.6.9,8ff.: “Go up into yourself and look....” Plotinus says that we must look at what is in our soul as a sculptor looks at the statue he is making. He cuts away and polishes until it is beautiful. When our souls are “finished,” they become the place from which we ascend to the truth. Ambrose does not deify the soul as Plotinus does, but the process is the same.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates says that we can attain knowledge of absolute beauty and goodness with the mind alone, when the soul is gathered into herself away from the body.⁵⁵ Yet, Socrates still looks “out” or “beyond” himself in a sense at a reality separate and higher than himself, whereas for Plotinus the way to beauty and finally to the good is *within* the soul. When the soul rightly sees herself (the sculptor having finished his work), she sees intelligible reality *there*. She must be her own guide because the fullness of reality is nowhere else except within.. Her only option, really, is to be alone with the alone. Ambrose seems to understand something of this interiority. This is what he has picked up when he says that Paul would not trust himself to another, that he becomes his own guide, and that what he sees within is himself. If I have translated correctly, this is an amazing statement. Ambrose’s Paul is a Christian Plotinus.

9. “Who can see the splendor of virtue with his eyes? Who can grasp justice with his hands? Who can fix his gaze upon wisdom? Actually, when we are pondering something, we do not want anyone to interrupt us or make noise and we concentrate so intently that we often do not see what is before us. Furthermore, at night we think with greater clarity and at that hour we

⁵⁵ κάθαρσις δὲ εἶναι ἄρα οὐ τοῦτο συμβαίνει, ὅπερ πάλαι ἐν τῷ λόγῳ λέγεται, τὸ χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ἐθίσαι αὐτὴν καθ’ αὐτὴν πανταχόθεν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι, καὶ οἰκεῖν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν παρόντι καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔπειτα μόνῃ καθ’ αὐτὴν, ἐκλυομένην ὥσπερ ἐκ δεσμών ἐκ τοῦ σώματος; (*Phaed.*67c5-d2). See also *Phaed.*66d,

contemplate better matters of the heart. Thus, the prophet says, ‘The things you say in your heart, be sorry for them on your beds’ (Ps.4:5). Some people regularly close their eyes, avoiding the impediments of sight, if they want to pull something up by dint of deep reflection. We also generally seek out a solitary place, lest some casual remark should be whispered and come to our ears. It would lead our soul away from the truth, as she fixes her attention on the path of her thought, and divert her from her purpose. Necessary care for this body (*hoc corpus*) produces many preoccupations for us and introduces activities by which the vigor of the soul is blocked and its attention is distracted (recalled; lit. *revocatur*). Hence the fine saying of the holy Job: ‘Remember that you have made me out of mud.’ (Job,10:9). If, therefore, the body is made of mud, it does not clean us but dirties us for sure,⁵⁶ and it pollutes our soul with the filth of intemperance. Job says, ‘You have covered me with hide and flesh; you have woven me together with bones and sinews.’ (Job,10:11). Our soul is bound and stretched by the sinews of this body (*iste*); as a result it sometimes becomes rigid, but often it is stooped....”⁵⁷ Job says that [a man’s] life is like the wages of a hireling (Job,7:1). In labor and the heat of the day (cf. Job,7:2), his life is lighter than words (cf. Job,7:6), flowing away and fluctuating like words; his dwelling is in houses of mud and life itself is mud. There is no firmness of thought, no constancy. By day he desires night, by night day (cf. Job,7:4)....” The only real repose for man lies in death. (3.11b-4.12)

In an interesting passage Philo establishes a contradiction between the senses and the mind: when the mind is truly awake, the senses sleep; when the senses are aroused, the mind is incapacitated – partially by sight and hearing (as in the *Phaedo* above) but wholly by the lower senses. The proof of this, says Philo, is that when we wish to think carefully about something, we close our eyes, stop up our ears, seek solitude, and discard the use of our external senses (*Alleg. Int.* 2, 8.25-26). Plotinus also says that we begin the ascent by closing our eyes and habituating ourselves to a new interior light, rather a new, at first invisible, interior radiance (En.1.8, end-1.9, beginning); and Porphyry describes Plotinus as a man who succeeded in maintaining that kind of constant focus and attention (*Life*,8.9).

Ambrose uses the image of mud from the Book of Job to paint a dark and pessimistic picture of life in the body. This is like the passages from En.1.6.5,44 ff. where Plotinus says that

⁵⁶ There is a pun here between *oblinit* and *diluit*.

⁵⁷ The entire passage until “stooped” is a direct translation of Ambrose. Again, these sections of the *De Bono Mortis* are a combination of translation and summary, not block quotations. Quotation marks indicate translation as opposed to summary and are placed, when necessary, at the beginning of a paragraph.

preoccupation with objects of sense and matter hide the purity and beauty of the soul, just as mud and filth hide gold. Was Ambrose rethinking Plotinus in terms of the Book of Job?⁵⁸

DIVISION THREE (SECTIONS 10-12)

*A further inquiry into the possibility that death can be good:
what does this mean and in what sense?*

10. “But someone will say, ‘It is written that God did not make death’ (Wisd.1:13). Life was in Paradise, where there was the tree of life (Gen.2:11) and the life was the light of men (Jn.1:4). So death is an evil that happened and came in afterwards. Yet how can death be evil, if, as the pagans say, it is a lack of sensation, or if, as the Apostle says (Phil.1:21,23), Christ is gain, and to be with him is better by far [than to live]? So how can death really be bad for us, if there is no sensation after death? For where there is no sensation, there is no pain (or sorrow) from injury, since pain is a sensation. Or grant that there is sensation after death, then, you must admit (*utique*), there is life after death: the soul survives death, she has sensation and performs her vital functions. Now, since both life and the soul remain after death, something good remains that is not lost by death, but rather augmented: the soul is held back by no impediment of death, but rather does what is proper to her better than before, because she performs her proper activities without the association of the body, which is more of a burden for her than an advantage.⁵⁹ What evil is there for the soul, who guards her purity and the discipline of virtue? Or, if she does not guard it, death is not the evil, but life, since the life she was living was not a real life: for what is a life obsessed with vice and sin? Why then do we blame death which either pays us the recompense of life or ends its sorrow and suffering? Therefore, death either acts for the good of its proper repose or it labors under a foreign evil [of a sinful life].

“Now consider this. If life is a burden, death is a release; if life is suffering, death a remedy; if there is judgment after death, there is life after death. So either life here below is

⁵⁸ [The impure soul] dragged in every direction towards the object of sense, with a great deal of bodily stuff mixed into it, consorting much with matter and receiving a form other than its own it has changed by a mixture which makes it worse; just as if anyone gets into mud or filth he does not show any more the beauty which he had: what is seen is what he wiped off on himself from the mud and filth; his ugliness has come from an addition of alien matter and his business, if he is to be beautiful again, is to wash and clean himself and so be again what he was before. So we shall be right in saying that the soul becomes ugly by mixture and dilution and inclination towards the body and matter. This is the soul's ugliness, not being pure and unmixed, like gold, but full of earthiness; If anyone takes the earthy stuff away, the gold is left and is beautiful, when it is singled out from other things and is alone by itself. In the same way the soul too, when it is separated from the lusts which it has through the body with which it consorted too much, and freed from its other affections, purged of what it gets from being embodied, when it abides alone has put away all the ugliness which came from the other nature. 6. For, as was said in old times, self-control, and courage and every virtue, is a purification, and so is even wisdom itself. This is why the mysteries are right when they say riddlingly that the man who has not been purified will lie in mud when he goes to Hades, because the impure is fond of mud by reason of its badness; just as pigs, with their unclean bodies, like that sort of thing (En.1.6.5-6).

⁵⁹ See the Third Observation below for a discussion of Ambrose's ideas on the resurrection of the body.

not good [in which case death is a release] or, if life here is good, how can death there (*illic*) not be good, since there, no dreadful fear of judgment survives? But if this life here below is good, by what things is it good? By means of virtue and good morals. It is not, therefore, good because of the joining of body and soul, but because through virtue life repels what is evil for it (*malum suum*) and attains the good that belongs to death. In this way it accomplishes what belongs to the soul more than what belongs to the association and joining [of body and soul]. And if life is good – which is a mirror of the soul separating itself from the body – and if the soul is good – which elevates herself and detaches herself from association with the body – then clearly death is also good, which releases the soul from association with this flesh (*huius carnis*) and frees it.” (4.13-14)

The idea that death cannot be an evil if the soul is not able to feel it is a *locus classicus* in traditional consolation literature. One must, so the thinking runs, envision the possibility that Epicurus was right after all.⁶⁰ Cicero has a refreshing “take” on it in the *De Senectute*, where he makes Cato say, “But if when I am dead I shall feel nothing, as certain petty philosophers think (*quidam minuti philosophi*), then I have no fear that these philosophers when they are dead will laugh at my delusion [that the soul is immortal].” (Cicero, *De Senectute*, 85). We may assume that Ambrose is paying his respects to this argument here and making the most of it. In his life of Ambrose, Paulinus says, “He pleaded his causes so splendidly, that Probus, the praetorian prefect, chose him as an adviser.”⁶¹ Ambrose is pleading a cause here, moving through a number of rhetorical arguments, drawing on our normal feelings and ideas about death but skirting the metaphysical and theological questions as to the essential goodness or evil of death. To give one example, the paragraph begins with an objection from Scripture: God did not create death, therefore it must be evil. Ambrose answers that both the pagans and Paul say it is not evil: an argument by authority and example to convince the reader rather than prove the point. Yet, in

⁶⁰ See sect. 22 below.

⁶¹ ita splendide causas perorabat ut eligeretur a uiro illustri Probo, tunc praefecto praetorii, ad consilium tribuendum (Paulinus, *Vita*, 5; (*Vita Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensi Episcopi* a Paulino eius notario ad beatum Augustinum conscripta, rev.text & comment., ed. Sr. Mary Simplicia Kaniecka (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1928), 42).

fairness to Ambrose, the Genesis account never calls death evil. It “came in afterwards” as a consequence of evil and as a penalty.

Both Hadot and Courcelle consider this section (4.13-14) to be an elaboration of Plotinus’s En.I.7.3. The parallel passages run in Plotinus from the question at line 3 to the end; in Ambrose from 4.13, line 13: “sed quomodo mors mala” to the end of 4.14: “mors utique est bonum, quae animam a societate huius carnis absoluit et liberat.” Courcelle has laid out the two texts side by side. This procedure sometimes gives more information than we need and obscures the convergences which may or may not result from actual copying.⁶² I have tried to give a translation of Plotinus with a reduced translation of Ambrose, without elaborations. It does look as if Ambrose is translating Plotinus or at least following the lines of his text.

En.I.7.3	<i>De Bono Mortis</i> 4.13-14
If our life, mixed with evil, is good, how is death not an evil?	How can death be evil if, according to the Gentiles it lacks sensation or, according to the apostle it is the gaining of Christ?
There must be someone to whom the evil can happen. Either it no longer exists or it has no life. Evil cannot happen to a stone.	If there is no sensation after death, how can it be bad for us? If there is no sensation after death, there can be no pain, because pain is a sensation. Or there is sensation and so there is life and the soul survives death.
If there is life and soul after death, there is a good because soul does its proper work better without the body...	Since life and soul remain after death, a good remains, which is not lost by death but augmented. The soul is not set back by any impediment of death but she performs her proper work better without association with the body, since it is more of a burden to her than an advantage..
If it has kept its purity, no harm can come to it. If it has not, life is evil for it, not death. If there are judgments in Hades, life there is an evil, [not death]	So what evil is there for the soul that has guarded her purity and kept the discipline of virtue? Or, if she has not kept it, death is not evil but life, since it was not life; for what is a life that is obsessed

⁶² Courcelle, *Recherches*, 118-19. See also Hadot, *Simplicity*, 107 with note 32:

En.I.7.3	<i>De Bono Mortis</i> 4.13-14
<p>since life will not be simple [but punishment or reward]</p> <p>But if life is the joining of soul and body and death the dissolution, the soul shall be capable of both.</p> <p>(Plotinus asks the question again.) But if life is good, how is death not evil?</p> <p>Either life is good for those who consider it good not in virtue of the joining, but because through virtue it staves off evil, but death is a greater good.</p> <p>Or one must say that life in the body in and of itself is evil, but by virtue the soul comes to good (is engaged in it), not by living the union but by separating itself [from the body] even now.</p>	<p>with vice and sin? Why do we accuse death, which either pays the wages of life or dissolves its sorrow?</p> <p>(Ambrose gives a response to the same question, implied.) If life is a burden, death is a release; if life is a trial, death is a remedy, or if there is judgment after death, then [there is no death at all since] there is life after death.</p> <p>The present life itself, if it is good, in virtue of what is it good? Virtue and good morals. So it is not good through the joining of soul and body, but because through virtue it repels its proper evil and attains the good belonging to death. .</p> <p>If the life is good, which is a mirror of the soul separating itself from the body and if the soul is good, which elevates herself and detaches herself from association with the body, then clearly death is also good, which releases the soul from association with the flesh and frees it.</p>

11. “In every way, therefore, death is a good: [1] because it separates the warring parties, so that they cannot fight each other, [2] because it is a kind of harbor or port for those who seek an anchorage and secure rest, after having been tossed upon the great sea of this (*istius*) life, and [3] because it does not reduce them to a worse condition but as it finds them so it keeps them for future judgment. It sustains them with rest, draws them away from envious desire for present things, and quiets them with the expectation of things to come.” (4.15a)

Ambrose alludes here to another widely used classical image: the harbor of rest for the soul after being tossed on the sea of life. He uses it again at 8.31, 8.35. and 9.38.⁶³ Cicero ends his first *Tusculanum* dialogue with this image: “Rather, let us think that a port has been prepared

⁶³ For details and references see Wiesner, 186 and 219-220; 227. Wiesner refers to Cyprian’s *De Mortalitate*, 12 for a Christian source. See also C. Bonner “Desired haven,” *Harvard Theological Review* 34: 1941, 49-67.

for us and a refuge. To which may we be conveyed under full sail! But if we are driven back by adverse winds, still it is necessary that we be brought back a little later to that same place.”⁶⁴

The place to which souls are brought is, in Ambrose’s account, a spiritually hospitable place. Death accommodates the souls confided to it. This is an allusion to the Fourth Book of Esdras. Ambrose seems to be envisioning an interim period for the dead as a time of preparation for the last judgment and the final resurrection. He will return to 4 Esdras later.

12. “Further, it is to no purpose that men fear death as the end of nature. For if we remember that God did not create death but that after man fell into the crime of lying and fraud, he apprehended him with the judgment that he should return to the earth from which he came (Gen.3:9), we will find that death is the end of sin, lest the longer we live the more numerous our sins become. So the Lord allowed death to enter, in order that the guilt might cease. Lest there be an end to nature in death, however, he gave us the resurrection of the dead, that guilt might fail, through death, but through resurrection nature might remain forever. This death, therefore, [of the body] is a passage for all. Your task is to go through it with constancy. It is a passage from corruption to incorruption; from morality to immortality (1Cor.15:42-54); from distress to tranquility. So do not let the name of death be offensive to you, but let the benefits of a good passage (*transitus*) delight you. What is death if not the burial of vices, the resurrection of virtues?... Those who bear the death of Christ in their body and soul (cf. 2Cor.4:10) lay down their sins in death and take up the grace of the just. What more could be said of the good of death than that death has redeemed the world?” (4.15b)

Ambrose addresses here a certain group of people who fear death as a total dissolution of themselves. He seems to be granting them their point since, he says, God’s punishment for Adam was the return to the dust from which he came. This would entail a descent into nothingness, and the loss of nature. From another point of view, however, this cessation of life is a merciful remedy because of the inevitable accumulation of sin. The real reason why God brought in death was to check the growth of sin. Resurrection, on the other hand, is the other half of the story; it is God’s gift that saves nature from the total destruction. This is as far as Ambrose goes here. But

⁶⁴ Portum potius paratum nobis et perfugium putemus. Quo utinam velis passis pervehi liceat! Sin reflantibus ventis reiiciemur, tamen eodem paullo tardius referamur necesse est. (Tusc.I.118-19). See also *De Senectute*, 19.71.

what about the people who die with a large accumulation of sin on their souls? What does the resurrection look like for them? Ambrose does say that those who have lived and died in Christ put off their sins at death and take on the grace of the just (4.16, 717.7)

THIRD OBSERVATION: THE RESURRECTION

The Scriptures as well as creeds contained clear statements about the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. More detailed ideas, however, about the state of the soul after death, the last judgment, the nature of the resurrected body, and the fate of those who died in sin were all matter for speculation: serious thought but not unified doctrine.⁶⁵ Interestingly, in the generations after Ambrose, the Pelagian controversy seems to have been a catalyst for greater clarity about the afterlife. In the late fourth century, however, one could still speculate with relative ease and flexibility. We will look briefly at three questions here. (1) What happens after death? (2) What is the resurrection and for whom is it? (3) Is the soul immortal?

(1) With regard to Ambrose's thoughts on death and resurrection, it seems to me that Brian Daley's comment that Ambrose always remained "the Christian rhetor" is something to bear in mind.⁶⁶ If we are looking for straightforward metaphysical arguments, they are there but under a patina of emotive appeal. As a consequence the arguments run on two levels: on the lower level there are serious reflections on the nature of death and resurrection; on the higher level there is the equally serious but different argument, which says: "Live on the interior level

⁶⁵ For this Observation I am much indebted to Hervé Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l'exigence de Philon le Juif* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1977); Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: a Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Eric Rebillard, *In Hora Mortis: évolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort au IV^e et V^e siècles dans l'occident latin* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1994). These works show the wide spectrum of thought about the "last things" in the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁶⁶ Daley, *Hope*, 97.

of your soul. Do not dissipate yourselves into worldly, physical concerns. If you do this, the resurrection will be full and glorious for you.” In any assessment of Ambrose’s thought, we need to navigate both levels at once. Section 13, coming up, will bring this higher rhetorical level to a first climax in the *De Bono Mortis*.

Daley gives a series of examples showing Ambrose’s thought on different aspects of the afterlife. With regard to what happens after death, there seems to be some fluctuation, but two aspects are striking. First, Ambrose does not dwell on the pains and terrors of the judgment and the afterlife. He does think that we must all pass through a some form of fire in a personal judgment,⁶⁷ though he also says that Christ judges us by his knowledge of our hearts, not by an inquisition.⁶⁸ Second, though Ambrose foresees the possibility of eternal punishment for the incorrigibly sinful, he envisions a period of purification after death. Daley does not mention this, but I think we are seeing here in Ambrose the hidden presence of the Fourth Book of Esdras. Ambrose thought it was canonical and it contains an elaborate apocalyptic description of graded mansions where the dead wait between death and final judgment. 4 Esdras figures prominently in the last part of the *De Bono Mortis*, and so we will return to a consideration of it there. Yet, I think that although Ambrose quotes it only later, it is in the back of his mind here and generally. This is why he can say, as he does in section 11 above, that death “sustains them [the dead] with rest, draws them away from envious desire for present things, and quiets them with the expectation of things to come.”

⁶⁷ The idea is based on Scripture (1Cor.3:15 as one example among others). Origen also thought there would be some sort of fire.

⁶⁸ iudicat Christus cognitione cordium, non interrogatione factorum uirtutem remunerans inpietatemque condemnans (Ambrose, *In Luc.*10.49)

(2) With regard to the resurrection: it gives life to the body,⁶⁹ but more important, it preserves nature (see above). In the *De Sacramentis*, also, Ambrose says that man was made for life and that the resurrection is the “re-formation of nature.”⁷⁰ Earlier, however, in the *De Bono Mortis*, towards the end of 2:5, he quotes David as saying (Ps.38:14) that he hastened to ask for the forgiveness of his sins because without forgiveness there can be no eternal life.⁷¹ He does not appear to be talking here about eternal happiness but about eternal life as such. So the question remains: If death and resurrection are God’s “solution” to the dilemma caused by sin, will the solution apply to all?⁷² On the one hand, Ambrose seems to ‘weight’ his presentation in the *De Bono Mortis* towards a natural immortality for the soul along the line of Plato and Plotinus. On the other, there is a lingering fear of annihilation without the forgiveness of sins.

(3) With regard to the nature of the soul: a long conflict lies under the surface of Ambrose’s texts above.⁷³ No doubt, his readers would have been much more aware of what was at stake than we are. The question was: is the soul immortal by nature or by God’s grace? If immortal, was it a fifth element, the *æther*, as Iamblichus and his disciple Julian the Apostate (dead for a mere 20-25 years) thought and the Chaldean oracles taught? The *æther* was indestructible and the matter of the heavens – the stars – and it was either the substance of the soul or

⁶⁹ For an unambiguous statement, see Ambrose’s paragraph 8.32: *interitus autem hominis esse non potest, cum anima superstes corpori sit, saluo eo quod ipsum corpus manet resurrectio.*

⁷⁰ *homo, qui factus fuerat, ut viveret... et resurrectione naturae est reformatio. De Sacr. 2:6.17.*

⁷¹ *qui enim hic non acceperit remissionem peccatorum illic non erit; non erit enim, qui ad uitam aeternam non potuerit peruenire, quia uita aeterna remissio peccatorum est (2.5 end).* See also sect. 28 below where Ambrose says that by cleaving to the Good, the soul becomes “not mortal.” This also joins Origen in the *Dialogue with Heraclitus*, 26.25-35.

⁷² See also Augustine *Civ. dei*, 13 on whether the soul is alive after the second death (*Civ. dei* 13.2, 8, and esp. 11 end).

⁷³ See Hervé Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l’exégèse de Philon le Juif*, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1977, t.1, 185-88. See also 179-85 for a discussion of the development of the question; esp. a text from Ambrose in n.306 and for the importance of the *æther* to Julian the Apostate.

connected to it, as a vehicle,⁷⁴ like the chariot of the soul in the *Phaedrus* myth.⁷⁵ The philosophy and religious practices of the later Platonists were inextricably tied to this question. Even some Christians, like Tertullian and Hilary, thought that the soul was composed of a highly refined material substance (the incorruptible “substance of Heaven”).⁷⁶ In Iamblichus’s system the souls of theurgists could rise to the same station as that of angelic spirits. They would then “re-descend (by means of the vehicle, of the *Phaedrus* myth, made from æther) “for the preservation, purification, and perfection” of this realm.”⁷⁷ Even more sober Platonists, like Plotinus, considered the soul to be by nature immortal, having a higher part that remained, though often without our realizing it, united to the Universal Soul, and so in some way naturally divine.

Ambrose rejects the idea of an incorruptible material substance. He also rejects the native immortality of the soul, though he speaks as if it were immortal in the Platonic sense.⁷⁸

Scripture, as well as a long Christian tradition based on it, teaches that God alone is immortal

⁷⁴ Such ideas had been in circulation for centuries. Cicero, for example, explains the immortality of the soul in these terms, among others, at *Tusc.*1.17-19. His account includes the *aether*, to which the soul rises at death. It finds its natural place there above the four heavier elements of the earth, and it is in equilibrium, like with like. It remains there forever, or at least for a very long time. This seems to be partly a Stoic interpretation, who taught, e.g.

Panaetius, according to Cicero, that the soul is fiery breath (*animus...inflammata anima constat*) (*Cic.Tusc.*1.18).

⁷⁵ See John F. Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul*, American Classical Studies n.14, American Philological Association, 1985.

⁷⁶ Daley, *Hope*, 95.

⁷⁷ Finamore, 153. See also the summary of the reply of Iamblichus to Porphyry’s letter to Anebo, H.D. Saffrey, *Le Néoplatonisme après Plotin* (Paris: J.Vrin, 2000), 96-9; H.D. Saffrey, “From Iamblichus,” 263.

⁷⁸ Savon remarks on the juxtaposition of these two ideas in Ambrose’s works (190-2). Ambrose states clearly the difference between the immortality of the soul, as a contingent being, in contrast to the essential immortality of God at *De Fide* 3.19-20: Sed alia immortalitas suae [divinae] naturae, alia nostrae. Non sunt flagilia comparanda divinis. Una sola substantia divinitatis est, quae mori nescit. Unde et apostolus, cum sciret et animam et angelos immortales, quod “solus deus immortalitatem habeat” praedicavit (1Tim.6:16). Nam et anima moritur; *animna enim quae peccat, ipsa morietur* (Ez.18:20). Nec angelus immortalis est naturaliter, cuius immortalitas in voluntate est Cratoris.... Et in ipsis [angelis] enim naturae capacitas vitio obnoxia, sed non obnoxia disciplina. Omnis enim rationabilis creatura accidentia recipit et subiecta iudicio est, in accidentibus autem et poena iudicii et corruptela est et profectus. Unde et Ecclesiastes ait quoniam *omne opus suum deus adducet in iudicium* (Eccl.12:14). Ergo
Ergo corruptelae et mortis, etiamsi non aut moriatur aut peccet, capax tamen omnis est creatura nec ex immortali natura habet, sed ex disciplina vel gratia, si se in aliquibus ad vitia non mutat. Alia ergo immortalitas quae donatur, alia, quae sine capacitate mutabilitatis est semper (*De Fide* 3.20).

(Ps.101:25-6),⁷⁹ and Christ had said, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my Words will not pass away" (Mt.24:35). For Ambrose only God is in his essential being immortal. Souls are immortal by his gift; he alone keeps them alive, though on the other hand Ambrose never actually says that souls cease to exist.⁸⁰ They die to a life of eternal happiness through sin, though they may live on undergoing a process of purification for an indefinite amount of time and perhaps forever.⁸¹ One of the difficulties with Ambrose's texts is that the soul who dies through sin – as in the distinction between the three kinds of death – may be actually a living person still in this life. Section 28 below shows well this ambiguity. Yet we see Ambrose's dilemma. He understands the depths of the interior life of the soul Plato and Plotinus describe so well. He is intent on bringing his audience into the appeal of this life that will come to full fruition after death. On a metaphysical and theological level, however, he must reconfigure Plato and Plotinus. Without the tools of a tradition of theological speculation on death and resurrection, this is a difficult process. On a rhetorical level, though, Ambrose is up to the task. Beyond all philosophical argument, his primary goal is to show that death is good for the committed Christian, who has borne the death of Christ in his body, that the life of Christ may also be manifest in his body, and in the fullness of life after death. In keeping with this goal, he brings the resurrection into the discussion with increasing frequency towards the end of the

⁷⁹ Savon, 187-91.

⁸⁰ See for example the *De Exc. Frat.* 2.116: only those united in the Church under the divine name will receive the privilege of the resurrection and the grace of eternal joy: *praerogativam resurrectionis et delectationis aeternae gratiam consequentur* (116).

⁸¹ In the Dialogue with Heraclitus, Origen argues that sin causes the soul to die in a real, though not wholly defined, sense. This is one of his three meanings of death there, similar to Ambrose's first meaning of death in the *De Bono Mortis* (See Puech and Hadot, 221, esp. notes 38 and 39). Augustine also says that in the second death, the soul lives only to provide sensation for the suffering body. It is alive only in a derivative sense (*Civ. dei*, 13.11). See also Plotinus En.1.8.4 end and esp.1.8.13.

treatise (from 8.32 onwards). Finally, he uses it in connection with the Fourth Book of Esdras, to bring into the Christian camp the best of Plato.

DIVISION FOUR (SECTION 13)

An impassioned exhortation to take to heart the principles laid out in the former sections and to flee from the flesh

13. “But let us speak of the death that is common to all: why do we fear it when it customarily does no harm to the soul? It is written: ‘Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.’ (Mt.10:28). By this death [of the common sort] the soul is liberated, as it withdraws from association with the body and is stripped of the wrappings of disorder. We also, therefore, as long as we are in the body, should imitate the activity (*usum*) of death and lift our souls up off of the bed of this flesh (*istius*) and rise up, as it were, out of this tomb. We must remove ourselves from the embrace of the body and abandon all things earthly whatsoever, so that the adversary may find nothing of his own in us (Jn.14:30). We must strive for what is eternal, fly up to the divine on the wings of love, with the oars of charity.⁸² Let us rise up from this place, that is from secular and worldly affairs. For the Lord said, ‘Arise. Let us go from here.’ (Jn.14:31). He is instructing each one of us to rise up from the earth, raise up our soul lying on the ground, lift it up on high, and rouse his eagle of which it is said, ‘Your youth shall be renewed like the eagle.’ (Ps.102:5). This is addressed to the soul. So let our soul seek the heights like an eagle, let it fly over the clouds, glistening with renewed plumage, carrying its flight into Heaven, where it cannot fall into snares. For a bird which descends from the height, or which cannot lift itself up on high, is caught often in snares or deceived by bird-lime, or entangled in any number of traps. So let our soul beware, lest she descend to these worldly things. The snare is in gold, the lime in silver, the fetter in property, the nail in love: as we seek gold, we are strangled, as we search for silver, we adhere to the lime, as we seize property, we are bound. Why do we vainly seek gain to the loss of our precious soul?... What will you give in exchange for your soul? It is redeemed not by gold, not by silver (cf.1Pet.18-19). No, by gold it is lost. Indeed, the beauty of a woman: as it is explored, so it binds. Lust is a nail, sadness a nail, anger a nail, all the passions are nails, which like a kind of skewer penetrate our soul, drive it into the body, and bind it to the vital organs.” (5.16)

This is an eloquent and earnest appeal to elevate the soul and free it from excessive attachment to the flesh. It is based first on the well-known passage from the *Cratylus* (400c).

With a pun on the Greek words for body (*σῶμα*) and tomb (*σῆμα*), Socrates explains that *σῶμα*

⁸² The combined image of wings and oarage may be a reminiscence of Virgil, *Aen.* 6.19?

can mean both tomb and prison (in which, according to the Orphic myth the soul is placed for safekeeping; σῶζεται).⁸³ Ambrose also alludes, again, to the image of the winged soul from the *Phaedrus* (246a-249b). Here he illustrates it with a verse from Scripture – “Your youth shall be renewed like the eagle”(Ps.102:5) – and he explains that the youth of the Biblical eagle is renewed by restored plumage, a key element in the *Phaedrus* myth; it is high flight that makes the wings grow (248b-c). On the other hand, the soul that descends too close to the earth, that is to fleshly concerns, encounters a rich array of obstacles (*Phaedo* (82d, 83d). Many writers, pagan and Christian, used these images: Philo, Porphyry, Iamblichus, the Greek fathers, and Prudentius, among others.⁸⁴ Augustine turns the image against Porphyry and other Neoplatonists who, he says, are glued to their philosophical ideas, where the acceptance of Christianity would give them wings for flight.⁸⁵ The metaphor was evocative and remembered.

DIVISION FIVE (SECTIONS 14-15)

*A description of the soul created in the image and likeness of God
followed by the entrance of the soul into the garden of delights: the beginning of the commentary
on the last verses of the Song of Songs*

14. “Let us therefore flee these (*haec*) evils and raise up our soul to that great (*illa*) image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26). Flight from evils is the likeness of God and by the virtues the image of God is acquired.⁸⁶ Thus, he who has painted us has painted like an artist with the colors of the virtues. He says, ‘Behold, Jerusalem, I have painted your walls’ (Is.49:16). Let

⁸³ See also *Gorgias*, 493a. See also Wiesner, 190-91 for more details.

⁸⁴ See Pierre Courcelle, “La colle et le clou de l’âme dans la tradition Neo-platonicienne et chretienne (Phedon, 82e,83d),” *Revue Belge de philologie et d’histoire*, v.1,1958, 72-95. Courcelle conjectures, after reviewing patterns among the authors who refer to these images, that a common source for the Latin and Greek fathers may have been Porphyry’s *De Regressu Animae* (90-95).

⁸⁵ Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, 5.7. See Courcelle, “La colle,” 81. The image also had a special appeal for Augustine. He uses it in the *Confessions*: when speaking of the bait used by the Manichees (the divine names) to lure him (3.6); to describe his frustration and sense of being “stuck” in his ambitions when he sees the carefree beggar (6.6); when admitting to Alypius that he could never dream of living a celibate life (6.12); finally, years later when he still has dreams that arouse a latent concupiscence (10.30).

⁸⁶ Fugiamus ergo haec mala et exaltemus animam nostram ad illam imaginem dei et similitudinem. fuga malorum similitudo dei est et uirtutibus imago dei acquiritur (Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*,5.17)

us not erase through negligence the strong walls painted on our souls. He said, “I have painted walls”; with them we may turn back the enemy. The soul says, speaking of her own walls by which she stands forth: ‘I am a fortified city, a city besieged’ (Is.27:3). By these walls she is fortified, by these she is defended under siege. And in reality, the soul is a wall spread before the camp; thus she herself says in the *Song of Songs*: ‘I am a wall and my breasts are like towers’ (Sg.8:10). The wall is good which the Lord has painted, as he himself says, ‘I have painted your walls on my palms and you are in my sight forever.’ (Is.49:16). It is a good soul who has God as a watchman (cf.Ps.127:1) and who is in his hands, like the prophetic soul who commends herself, her spirit, into the hands of the Lord (Ps.30:6) and who is in his sight: ‘The eyes of the Lord are upon the just,’ (Ps.33:16). As she herself says, ‘I was before his eyes as one finding peace’ (Sg.8:10).⁸⁷ The soul has good towers who has the Word in intellectual matters (with regard to the intelligibles: *intelligibilibus*), and discipline in morals.” (5.17-18a)

Section 14 turns around two complementary themes: flight from evil and the acquisition of virtue. In Ambrose’s terms here, flight is what we do. Acquiring virtue is a joint effort between God and the soul, since God is the artist who paints virtues on our souls as if they were city walls. As far as flight is concerned, it is a favorite theme for Ambrose, mainly in the sense of flight from evils, but as we shall see, flight to the good also. One finds it in various guises in the *De Isaac*;⁸⁸ it is the subject of a separate treatise, the *De Fuga Saeculi*;⁸⁹ in conjunction with the myth of the winged soul from the *Phaedrus* it is a leitmotif of the *De Bono Mortis*.⁹⁰ The classic source as it is used here is the well-known passage from the *Theatetus*, in which Socrates equates flight from evil with a likeness to God and this, of course, reminds Christian exegetes of the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26). In his *De Fuga et Inventione* Philo quotes the relevant passage from the *Theatetus* and names his source. Since Ambrose read Philo and followed him in his own *De Fuga Saeculi*, he would have taken note of Philo’s use of it there. Such a passage

⁸⁷ Cf. *Hex.* 6.49.

⁸⁸ *De Is.* 3.6, 4.19, 6.54, 8.64, 8.78, and 8.79.

⁸⁹ This treatise was loosely modeled after the *De Fuga et Inventione* of Philo. See Hervé Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l’exégèse de Philo le Juif*, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1977, 329-376.

⁹⁰ *De Bono Mortis* 2:7, 3.9, 3.11, here at 5.17 and 18, and finally at 9.41. Note also that at 5.16 (717, line 23) and elsewhere the images of flight in the sense of flying and fleeing are conflated (either rising up in an attempt to escape or fleeing in order to fly, as at no.16 below).

from Plato, however, would have entered into the common tradition from any number of sources.⁹¹ Plotinus also opens the second treatise of his first *Ennead* with it (En.1.2.1).⁹²

In the *Theatetus*, Socrates says, “To flee is the likeness of God.” (φυγή δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ); in Genesis it says, “Let us make man in our image and likeness”(Gen.1:26). Both Clement of Alexandria and Origen use the *Theatetus* in conjunction with Genesis. Origen even brings it into his apologetic arsenal of arguments for the derivation of sources.⁹³ Socrates says:

It is not possible for evils to die out, Oh Theodore. For it is necessary that there be something always opposite to the good. There is no place for them among the gods, but they circulate around mortal nature and this place [earth]. For this reason, we too must try to flee from here to there as quickly as possible. Flight is the likeness of God according to one’s ability. But likeness is to become just and holy with wisdom. Indeed, my good Man, it is not at all easy to persuade men that not for the sake of the things with regard to which the many say one should flee evil and pursue virtue: [not] for the sake of these things ought one to be careful, on the one hand or not [careful], on the other: not to appear bad but to seem good. For he who says these things speaks nonsense, like an old woman, as it seems to me. The truth of the matter is as we say: God is never in any manner unjust, but as just as possible; and nothing is more like him than whoever among us becomes once again as just as possible.⁹⁴

⁹¹ See, for example, the work of Hubert Merki, O.S.B., ‘Ὁμοίωσις θεῷ: von der Platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa, (Freiburg: Paulusverlag, 1952).

⁹² At 1.2.1 Plotinus says, “Since it is here that evils are, and ‘they must necessarily haunt this region,’ and the soul wants to escape from evils, we must escape from here. What, then, is this escape? ‘Being made like god,’ Plato says. (θεῷ, φησιν, ὁμοιοῦσθαι). And we become godlike ‘if we become righteous and holy with the help of wisdom,’ and are altogether in virtue.” See *Theatetus* 176a-b. See also En.1.6.8,17ff. the flight not with the feet but with the mind, discussed above.

⁹³ “The highest good, then, after the attainment of which the whole of rational nature is seeking, which is also called the end of all blessings, is defined by many philosophers as follows: The highest good they say, is to become as like to God as possible. But this definition I regard not so much as a discovery of theirs, as a view derived from holy Scripture.” (*Peri Archon*, 3.6.1)

⁹⁴ [ΘΕΟ.] Εἰ πάντας, ὦ Σώκρατες, πείθοις ἃ λέγεις ὥσπερ ἐμέ, πλείων ἂν εἰρήνη καὶ κακὰ ἐλάττω κατ’ ἀνθρώπους εἴη.
[ΣΩ.] Ἀλλ’ οὐτ’ ἀπολέσθαι τὰ κακὰ δυνατόν, ὦ Θεόδωρε -- ὑπεναντίον γάρ τι τῷ ἀγαθῷ αἰεὶ εἶναι ἀνάγκη -- οὐτ’ ἐν θεοῖς αὐτὰ ἰδρῦσθαι, τὴν δὲ θνητὴν φύσιν καὶ τόνδε τὸν τόπον περιπολεῖ ἐξ ἀνάγκης. διὸ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι χρὴ ἐνθὺνδε ἐκείσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα. φυγή δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι. ἀλλὰ γάρ, ὦ ἄριστε, οὐ πάνυ τι ῥᾶδιον πείσαι ὥς ἄρα οὐχ ὦν ἔνεκα οἱ πολλοὶ φασι δεῖν πονηρίαν μὲν φεύγειν, ἀρετὴν δὲ διώκειν, τούτων χάριν τὸ μὲν ἐπιτηδεύτεον, τὸ δ’ οὐ, ἵνα δὴ μὴ κακὸς καὶ ἵνα ἀγαθὸς δοκῇ εἶναι· ταῦτα μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ λεόμενος γραῶν ὕβλος, ὥς ἐμοὶ φαίνεται· τὸ δὲ ἀληθὲς ὧδε λέγωμεν. Θεὸς οὐδαμῇ οὐδαμῶς ἄδικος, ἀλλ’ ὥς οἶόν τε δικαιοτάτος, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ ὁμοιότερον οὐδὲν ἢ ὃς ἂν ἡμῶν αὖ γένηται ὅτι δικαιοτάτος. (*Theatetus*, 176a-c).

For Plato, evils will always be present in this world. The wise man's flight consists in the cultivation of justice and holiness with wisdom and these are what make him like God. The significant phrase here is: *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν*. On the face of it, this means "likeness to God as far as possible." It could also mean "likeness to God according to our capacity." This is slightly different and it opens up other dimensions. If our "capacity" to acquire virtue is an innate quality – considered by some Christian writers, Basil in particular, to be an aspect of the "image" of God given to man at creation – then acquiring virtue according to our capacity means building it up on the base of the image.⁹⁵ If Ambrose knew and used Basil's writings, it may be significant that he does not endorse Basil's distinction between image and likeness here.⁹⁶ Of more immediate significance here is the metaphor of painting virtues. The Latin term *imago* fits the context of *pingo* (to paint) better here than the term *similitudo*, since *similitudo* has more a nuance of reproducing something that already exists, a portrait painting or statue, for example. *Imago*, on the other hand, has a wider application and may signify a new artistic creation, not necessarily a likeness of something that already exists. Here, God is the artist who paints the colors of virtue on the walls of the soul and he is the watchman who guards the walls. Whether these virtues are part of the image or likeness is not specified, but the implication is that there is no significant distinction between them.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Basile de Césarée, *Sur l'origine de l'homme*, ed. Alexis Smets et Michel van Esbroeck (Paris: Cerf, 1970) 10.15-6 (205-9); 24-5, 109-13. See also, Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 114-5, 340-3. See also Dillon's discussion of adjustments made by Eudorus and later Platonists to Plato's *κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν*, *Middle Platonists*, 122-3.

⁹⁶ I find no distinction in Ambrose's *Hexameron* between "image" and "likeness." Here in the *De Bono Mortis*, he seems to imply, if anything, that the opposite of Basil's distinction is the case, since the image is acquired through the painting on of the virtues. A discussion of the influence or non-influence of Basil on Ambrose here surpasses the limits of this dissertation. The question is this: since Ambrose read and used Basil's *Hexameron* for his own treatise on creation, but if he gives no indication that he knew of Basil's distinction between image and likeness, what would this absence of Basil contribute to the debate over who wrote the last two books of Basil's *Hexameron*.

⁹⁷ This looks more like Gregory of Nyssa than Basil.

For the purposes of the *De Bono Mortis*, I think that the passage 5.17-18a is a transition from an essentially ascetic approach to the preparation for death – focused on the purity of the soul and her separation from corrupting influences – to a more specifically Christian and positive approach, focused on the initiative of God in the life of the soul and the soul’s response to that initiative. This question of the divine initiative is the great and foundational dividing line between Platonism and Christianity, and at this point in the *De Bono Mortis* Ambrose intends to emphasize that divide. So he places side by side Socrates – the true man of wisdom completely alienated from the rhythm of normal human life, as Plato portrays him in the *Theatetus* – and the beautiful city of Jerusalem, who turns out to be the bride of the *Song of Songs*.⁹⁸

Ambrose uses the same image of the painted walls and the fortified city in the *Hexameron* (6.49) but with a significant difference. Here in the *De Bono Mortis* he emphasizes the spiritual content of the walls and towers: “The soul has good towers who has the Word in intellectual matters (with regard to the *intelligibles* – *intelligibilibus*), and discipline in morals.” In the *Hexameron*, he emphasizes the ministers by whom the content is given, “Hence, also, it is said in the Canticles, ‘I am a wall and my breasts are as a towers’ (Sg.8:10). The wall is the Church and the towers are her priests, through whom knowledge of the nature of things and discipline in morals abound.”⁹⁹ Another context, another interpretation; but the underlying dual reality of truth in the intellect and discipline in the soul is the same. In the *De Bono Mortis* Am-

⁹⁸ See the descriptions of the wise man in the *Theatetus* 173c-176a. See also the comments of Savon on Ambrose’s adaptation of Philo’s description of the rivers of Paradise. They subtly lead to a picture of the historical intervention of God in Christ. Something similar is happening here as well. See Savon, *Saint Ambroise devan Philon*, 239 (236-39).

⁹⁹ denique habes in Esaia quia iusti anima dicit vel ecclesia: “ego ciuitas munita, ego ciuitas obsessa,” (Is.27.3, LXX) muuita per Christum, obsessa per diabolum. sed non debet obsidionem vereri cui Christus adiutor est; munitur enim gratia spiritali et saecularibus periculis obsidetur. unde et in Canticis habes dictum: “ego murus, et ubera mea turres.” (Sg.8:10) murus est ecclesia, turres eius sunt sacerdotes, quibus abundat et de naturalibus uerbum et de moralius disciplina. (Hex.6.49).

brose does not mention the Church or the clergy, but he uses the code words, *uerbum* and *intelligibiles*. Looking at the whole, therefore, we see Ambrose begin this paragraph with a direct quote from Plato; then he interprets Plato with a Scriptural mosaic of nine verses; these climax in a verse from the *Song of Songs*; and finally he ends by associating a word as significant for Platonists as *intelligibiles* with the “Word;” that is, with a reference to Scripture and to Christ.

FOURTH OBSERVATION: A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

I would like to add two brief comments about sections 13 and 14 of the *De Bono Mortis*. First, we have analyzed them separately; but if one were to read them as one block of text (paragraphs 5.16-18a), one would be struck both by the intensity of Ambrose’s delivery and by the shift in emphasis from a presentation of the high stakes of the moral life – renewed plumage or bird lime and nails – to a much gentler and hopeful picture of the city loved and adorned by God. Taken together these sections form a kind of spiritual exercise, in which Ambrose does not so much impart information as try to create an attitude within his audience, a turning away from the ugliness and peril of sensible and earthly pleasures towards the good, holy, and beautiful life of virtue. Engaging in such an exercise may not appeal to the taste of a modern reader, but it has been helpful to me at least to realize that this is his purpose. He stands in a long tradition of such philosophical exercises and religious exhortation.¹⁰⁰ As he said in the *Hexameron*, it is the duty of the priest to give effective lessons in moral improvement (6.49). He expects his readers to take the lessons of these sections to heart, in order to progress to the sections that follow (5.19-21).

¹⁰⁰ L'un des aspects fondamentaux de la philosophie à l'époque hellénistique et romaine [est qu'] elle est une manière de vivre, ce qui ne veut pas dire seulement qu'elle est une certaine conduite morale..., mais qu'elle est une manière d'exister dans le monde, qui doit être pratiquée à chaque instant, qui doit transformer toute la vie. Le mot *philosophia*: amour de la sagesse, suffisait, aux yeux des Anciens, pour exprimer cette conception de la philosophie. Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1993), 218.

Second, it seems to me that there are profound questions of purification, for lack of a better word, that underlie the shift in emphasis between sections 13 and 14. I do not want to overemphasize; but in order to come to the likeness of God, as described in the *Theatetus*, the philosopher must become in a real sense Socrates. The description Plato gives in the dialogue of the man of true wisdom, which leads to the quotation given above is in one sense a caricature, but in another an impossible goal. Ambrose, on the other hand, is as serious as any Platonist when it comes to *ascesis*, but in a real sense he is more realistic. One cannot help but think of Porphyry, who thought that the goodness of the world must imply a way of universal salvation, but he knows that he has not found it.¹⁰¹ Ambrose knows he has. This knowledge is behind the shift; and he will develop this shift into a frontal attack on Platonism in the following sections and at the end of the *De Bono Mortis*. For Ambrose, the purification of which the Platonists speak is the goal, but the way to attain it is different.

Finally, one of my aims in this dissertation has been to try to discover the genius of Ambrose. He is not just an imitator of someone else, he is not just a rhetorician, though of course he was a fabulous rhetorician and he imitated everyone. Nevertheless, there is something else that is the true Ambrose. One aspect of this true Ambrose is his intense vision of the interior life and he unfolds it here in the *De Bono Mortis*. So I would like to suggest that reading him as “spiritual exercise” is helpful, because it aligns our reading with his writing; we are able to pick up nuances that we would miss otherwise.

15. “And so, this soul with grace in her breasts enters the gardens and finding there her spouse, sitting and conversing with his friends, she says, ‘You who sit in the gardens, let me hear (*insinua*) your voice,’ (Sg.8:13): ‘me’ she says, not ‘your friends.’ Then, ‘Flee, my Brother’

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *Civ.dei*, 10.32:

(Sg.8:14): she exhorts her spouse to flee, for now she herself can follow him who flees all earthly things. She speaks like the deer who escapes from the nets; she herself also wishes to flee and fly out above the world.” (5.18b)

Though in the last section Ambrose introduced verse 8:10 from the *Song of Songs*, here he begins his commentary on the final verses of the *Song* (8:10-14), in “dialogue” with Plato and Plotinus. The soul has grace in her breasts;¹⁰² she has come to full maidenhood (cf. Ez.16:7) and is ready for marriage. She is beautiful, in love, filled with desire, and it seems already happily betrothed. She is tired of listening to her spouse speak with his friends. She wants him to speak softly (*insinua*) to her alone. So she lets fall the golden word, “Flee my Brother.” This is a sort of code, as we now know from the *Theatetus*. It does not mean to flee with the feet but with the heart and mind. He sits in the garden with his friends; yet he is the one, more than all others, who knows how to flee all earthly things. The soul has now accomplished the great task of purification, and she too is ready for flight. Ambrose has carefully arranged the *De Bono Mortis* such that the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Theatetus* are all in the mind of his reader; but now the soul of these dialogues has become the bride of the *Song of Songs* standing before her beloved in the garden. Ambrose will explain the different senses of “garden” and to whom these belong.

FIFTH OBSERVATION: A NOTE ON METAPHOR AND ALLEGORY

I would like to return for a moment to the question of metaphor and allegory, as Ambrose uses them, in this section and those following (5.19-21). Allegory was defined in the

¹⁰² This refers to *Song of Songs* (4:10): quam pulchrae sunt mammae tuae soror mea sponsa pulchriora ubera tua vino et odor unguentorum tuorum super omnia aromata. But the context is Sg.8:8-14: We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister, on the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar. I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace.... O you who dwell in the gardens, your companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it. Make haste (or flee), my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices (Sg.8:8-14).

Introduction as extended metaphor. Allegory, therefore, may rightly be thought of as a grouping of metaphorical images into some form of narrative. Though metaphor and allegory may be used in any circumstance in which they fit appropriately – according to the classical rhetorical principle of the aptness of a figure – metaphor and allegory are especially useful when applied to things and events that cannot otherwise be described, either well or at all. Theology and philosophy are filled with such uses of metaphor; for example, descriptions of the Church in terms of a city or the body, descriptions of the ascent of the soul in terms of flight, and descriptions of the body as a prison.

I would like to reflect here on the gradations of metaphor and allegory and our corresponding reception of them. Ambrose has already filled the *De Bono Mortis* with various images, many of them traditional. Take, for example, the final sentence of section 13: “Lust is a nail, sadness a nail, anger a nail, all the passions are nails, which like a kind of skewer penetrate our soul, drive it into the body, and bind it to the vital organs.” As dreadful as this image is, it is well said and in some way it delights us. Why is this? I think in part because the imagery is vivid and highly visual. Both of these elements add something over and above the cognitive idea the meaning of the words convey.

For our purposes, we may think of these as standard poetic metaphors, though they are used in the service of philosophy. Other metaphors and allegorical interpretations, however, seem totally arbitrary; they depend on the decision of the author for the parallels drawn. When Prudentius represents virtues and vices as women, he could have chosen other symbols, animals, for example, like Aristophanes. When Ambrose uses garden spices, fruits, and other foods to represent the different types of Scriptural text and the results these produce in the soul, he is

engaging in this type of allegory. There is no direct connection between the literal meaning of the terms for fruits and spices and the metaphors applied, but usually Ambrose keeps his metaphors limited and easily understood. Besides the fact that Ambrose enjoys this kind of imaginative play – it comes naturally to him – there are two reasons why he might engage in it. First, he was writing for Christians who took the whole of the Biblical text as the inspired word of God. Far from engaging in arbitrary interpretation, he was required by those he calls “weak” in his congregation to make sense out of every detail.¹⁰³ Second, because the *De Bono Mortis* is not purely a metaphysical discourse; it contains a large element of moral persuasion that is enhanced by the use of metaphor. This is the middle rhetorical style, which according to Cicero and Augustine, aims to please. So an element of delight is appropriate to the style.¹⁰⁴

But there is a third use of metaphor that is in no way arbitrary, because the images are, to use Paul’s expressions, “shadows” or “types” of things to come.¹⁰⁵ As we said in the Introduction, these metaphors are close to the historical events and persons that are thought of as the objects of typology as such. Many of the metaphors Ambrose inherited from Philo and the Christian exegetical tradition fall under this use. Some of them may seem more or less arbitrary to us, but for Ambrose and his audience they were regarded as essential elements of the correct

¹⁰³ Hervé Savon, “Le temps dans l’exégèse allégorique dans la catéchèse d’Ambroise de Milan” in *Le temps chrétien de la fin de l’antiquité au moyen âge ii^e-xii^e siècles* (Paris : Éditions de CNRS, 1984), 246. One might also think of Augustine’s joy and relief when he heard Ambrose make sense out of perplexing passages and stories from the Old Testament (*Conf.* 6.4).

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 4.69-75; we will consider this question of style in greater detail in part three.

¹⁰⁵ Examples: (1) Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col.2:16-7); (2) There are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.” (Heb. 8:4-5); (3) For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities... (Heb.10:1); (4) Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. (Rom. 5:14). See also Ambrose, *De Mysteriis*, 8.47-9 in conjunction with ICor.10:4-6.

reading of Scripture. They are true images of a reality that far exceeds them but which they dimly portray.¹⁰⁶ Some we have already mentioned, such as the symbolism behind the relationship of Isaac to Ishmael (Gal.4:23-5) or behind the appearance of Melchizedek to Abraham (Gen.14:18-20). Such also are the symbols of the bronze serpent, the rock Moses struck, the burning bush, even the names “Jerusalem” and “Solomon.” These are not *types* in the strict sense in which Old Testament events foreshadow New Testament events. Rather, they are signs of the unfolding reality of salvation. Thus they are one step off, so to speak, from the modern definition of typology: they clearly foreshadow but require some degree of allegorical interpretation.¹⁰⁷ For Ambrose and his audience, however, they were true prophecies of New Testament realities. The bride of the *Song* falls into this group.

Allowing for radical differences in the reality behind the metaphors, one might say that the Platonic myths play a role similar in the development of Platonism to the Old Testament images and stories in Scripture. Some of the dialogues end in or contain stories of a quasi-religious nature that deal with the soul and life after death. These “myths” allowed Plato to describe what he understood to be true but could not appropriately express in the dialogue proper; These stories then formed the basis of much commentary in later generations. Think of the commentaries on the *Timaeus*, for example. Plotinus also uses myth and metaphor and comments on Plato’s myths. Such is the story of the birth of Aphrodite, coming in the next section.

Finally, there are images so essential, we cannot fully grasp reality without them. For Plotinus, one such image, if it is one, might be that of light emanating from the sun as a

¹⁰⁶ Christ himself used the Old Testament in this way. Fulfillment of the Scriptures was an important element in the validation of his message. See, for example, Mt.21:42; Mt.22:29; Lk.24:27; Jn.5:39. See also Acts 17:11.

¹⁰⁷ The only place in the New Testament where the Greek verb ἀλληγορέω is found is in the passage where Paul interprets the relationship between the son of Hagar, Ishmael, and the son of Sarah, Isaac.

reflection of the derivation of reality from the One. For Christians, defining images are such as the Pauline metaphors for the Church as the body of Christ or the bride of Christ. The bride of the *Song of Songs* allows an extension of this last metaphor: she is either the Church at large or the individual soul of whom the Word is, to use Ambrose's expression, the Spouse by legitimate covenant.¹⁰⁸ Metaphors of this last kind may be extremely difficult to decipher. Beyond them are the great analogies that enter into the foundation for our knowledge of God. For example, when after the Resurrection Christ says, "I go to my God and your God, to my Father and your Father"(Jn.20:17), he is referring to the effects of his death, by which he has reconciled the world to the Father and made of us his adopted children. "Adoption" here may be a metaphor, a powerful one, but "Father" used of God and human fatherhood is an analogy, since the essential idea of fatherhood is common to both.¹⁰⁹

DIVISION SIX (SECTION 16)

A development (full of sensual imagery from the Song of Songs) of the life of the perfected soul, ready for flight, but living in the garden

16. "From this source Plato devised that garden of his which in one place he called Jove's garden, in another the garden of the mind; for he said that Jove was both god and mind of the universe. Into this garden came the soul, whom he names Venus, in order to fill herself with the bounty and riches of the garden. In the garden lay Poros full of drink and emitting (belching) nectar. Plato fabricated this [myth] out of the *Song of Songs*, since the soul clinging to God enters the garden of the mind, in which there is an abundance of varied virtues and the flowers of discourse/words (*sermonum*). Who, indeed, is ignorant of the fact that Plato thought he should transfer an abundance of virtues from that paradise, which we read in Genesis had the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and other trees, and plant them in the garden of the mind, which in the *Song* Solomon called the garden

¹⁰⁸ Section 17 below.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *S.Th.Ia*, Q13,a.5 and 6; *Sent.* 1.d.21.1.1.5. Mgr. Maurice Dionne, a philosopher and professor at the Université de Laval once said that the distinction between analogy and metaphor depends in part on the strength of the intelligence, by which he did not mean that all metaphors become analogies for the intelligent, but only that there is a continuum, so that there may be cases, circumstances or perspectives, where one may see a metaphor and another an analogy.

of the soul, or the soul itself? For thus it is written: 'She is a garden enclosed, my sister my spouse, a garden enclosed, a sealed fountain; your fruits and spices are a paradise.' (Sg.4:12-13). And later, the soul says, 'Rise up, north wind, and come, south wind, blow through my garden, waft about my fragrances. Let my brother come down into his garden.' (Sg.4:16). How much more beautiful is this: that the soul herself, adorned with the blossoms of virtue, is the garden and has within herself a burgeoning paradise. Into her garden she invites the Word of God to descend, in order that, refreshed and nourished by the heavenly rain of the Word and his abundant blessings, she may bear fruit. And the Word of God feeds upon the soul's virtues each time he finds her obedient to him and plentiful. He harvests his fruits and delights in them. Moreover, when the Word of God descends into her, aromatic spices of health-giving words flow out from her and redolent perfumes of varied graces spread their fragrance far and wide." (5.18b-19)

Although the bride came into the last paragraph encouraging her spouse to flee, there is no indication that they fled or where they went. And now, in a kind of dream sequence, Ambrose places the bride in the garden of Paradise: the garden of Eden, the garden of the mind, and finally she herself is the garden. Here the bride invites her spouse, the Word of God, and he comes. Such an intermingling of images as this is a true garden of spices for the native poet in Ambrose.¹¹⁰ Clearly, a vision of reality on many levels is a feature of early Christian exegesis, where the Old and New Testaments were seen as interdependent. Here, however, Ambrose has passed beyond the limits of Scriptural exegesis; the *Song of Songs*, Plato, and Plotinus all come together. Since the associations are complex, I will try to clarify the different sources and levels of significance with the help of subtitles.

THE THREE GARDENS: THE GARDEN OF ZEUS, PARADISE, THE GARDEN OF THE *SONG OF SONGS*

The identification of Zeus's garden from the myth of Eros in the *Symposium* with the Paradise of Genesis did not originate with Ambrose. Origen makes the association both in his

¹¹⁰ It is interesting that we find the same rich layering in the poetry of Prudentius, Ambrose's contemporary and no doubt acquaintance in Milan.

commentary on Genesis, as he himself says in the *Contra Celsum* IV.39. He responds to Celsus's ridicule of the story of the creation of man and the garden of Eden by referring to the myths of Hesiod and Plato's myth of Eros in the *Symposium*. Origen then quotes the relevant passage from the dialogue and says that one might laugh at Plato's myth but one might also admire the way he has concealed in the form of a myth the great ideas he wished to present.

Now I brought forth this myth occurring in the writings of Plato, because of the mention in it of the garden of Zeus, which appears to bear some resemblance to the paradise of God, and of the comparison between Penia and the serpent, and the plot against Poros by Penia, which may be compared with the plot of the serpent against the man. It is not very clear indeed, whether Plato fell in with these stories by chance, or whether, as some think, meeting during his visit to Egypt with certain individuals who philosophized on the Jewish mysteries, and learning a few things from them, he may have preserved a few of their ideas, and thrown others aside.... (*Cont.Cels.*4.9)

The text of Origen shows the seriousness of the Christian-pagan controversy over sources, but it also summarizes for us Origen's interpretation of the myth in his lost commentary on Genesis: Poros is man, Penia is the serpent plotting against Poros. This is radically different from Ambrose's interpretation here.¹¹¹ On the other hand, the association between the paradise of Genesis and the *Song of Songs* also had a long history. As far as I know, Ambrose is the only one to expand the traditional connections to include all three gardens.

AMBROSE READ PLATO THROUGH PLOTINUS

Ambrose connects the myth of Eros with the *Song of Songs* through Plotinus. This will be discussed in more detail below. Here I would like to point out, first, that there are two textual indications that a connection exists between Plotinus's Ennead 3.5 "On Love" and this section of

¹¹¹ In his *Preparatio Evangelica*, Eusebius also connects the garden of Zeus with Eden, saying that Plato "obscurely hinted at [Eden] in his imitation of Moses (*Prep. Evang.*12:11).

the *De Bono Mortis*. Courcelle was the first to point them out.¹¹² Since his objective was to show that Ambrose was a source for Augustine's Platonism, he simply showed that Plotinus was one of Ambrose's sources, without elaboration. The connections are deeper than he realized. First, Ambrose says that the garden of the *Song of Songs* was called by Plato the garden of Zeus or the garden of the mind (*hortum mentis*). Plato never said this. Philo called the paradise of Genesis wisdom, the outlines of which were placed by God in the rational intellect of man.¹¹³ So Ambrose might have interpreted him as saying that paradise was the garden of the mind. Plotinus, however, calls the garden of Zeus of the *Symposium* myth the mind of Zeus as Intellect, or rather Intellect itself filled with all the Forms (which are the flowers and spices of the garden). Plotinus asks what Zeus's garden would be in the interpretation of the myth and then answers by saying that Plato calls Zeus a great leader (in the *Phaedrus*); the third hypostasis (in his second letter); and, more clearly (in the *Philebus*), one having a "royal soul and a royal intellect." He concludes that Zeus must be a great intellect and soul, one of the causes, and so on the level of intellect (En.3.5.8). Ambrose appears to follow Plotinus not only in his designation of the garden as "of the mind," but also in his summary of the different names for Zeus, which he attributes to Plato but which is actually found as a list of possibilities in Plotinus.

Second, and this is the most important point, when Ambrose summarizes Plato's myth, he says, "Into this garden the soul came, whom he [Plato] named Venus, in order that she might fill herself with the abundance and wealth of the garden, where Poros lay filled with drink pouring forth nectar."¹¹⁴ In Plato, Penia comes into the garden and gives birth to Eros; Aphrodite figures

¹¹² Courcelle, *Recherches*, 120-22:

¹¹³ *Questions & Answers on Genesis* 1.6,8.

¹¹⁴ in hunc introisse animam, quam Venerem nuncupat, ut se abundantia et diuitiis borti repletet, in quo repletus potu iaceret Porus, qui nectar effunderet (Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*, 5.19, 720,13-5)

only incidentally, since the festivities were in honor of her birthday. Plotinus, on the other hand, makes the connection between Aphrodite, or Soul, as the mother of Eros explicit throughout the whole of En.3.5. The title is “On Love”; Plotinus uses the myth of Poros to explain the birth of love *in* the soul. Penia is brought in as an adjunct of soul, in order to interpret the characters in Plato’s myth.

Third, though Plotinus interprets the myth of the birth of Eros, in actual fact he shifts the emphasis away from this myth to the birth of Soul. This is a greater shift than a simple substitution of Soul/Aphrodite for Penia. The title of En.3.5 notwithstanding, Plotinus’s focus is on Soul rather than Eros, or rather on Soul as the seat of *eros*. Ambrose inherits this shift. He has remembered the Christian claim that Plato took his garden of Zeus from the paradise of Genesis. He has read the myth as told by Plotinus. The association between Intellect and Soul transfers into a Christian context; and since one of the primary interpretations of the *Song of Songs* sees it as an expression of the love between the Word and the soul, which, in the text, is celebrated and consummated in a garden, the association between the myth as told by Plotinus, the garden of Zeus, and the garden of the *Song of Songs* is transparent.

THE BIRTH OF EROS IN PLATO AND PLOTINUS

The part of the original myth that concerns us is as follows. Diotima explains to Socrates the nature of true love (Eros): that he is neither mortal nor immortal, but a mean between the two, a great *daimon* who carries messages back and forth between the gods and men. Socrates then asks who are Eros’s father and mother:

On the birthday of Aphrodite there was a feast of the gods, at which the god Poros or Plenty, who is the son of Metis or Discretion, was one of the guests. When the feast was

over, Penia or Poverty, as the manner is on such occasions, came about the doors to beg. Now Plenty who was the worse for nectar (there was no wine in those days), went into the garden of Zeus and fell into a heavy sleep, and Poverty considering her own straitened circumstances, plotted to have a child by him, and accordingly she lay down at his side and conceived Love, who partly because he is naturally a lover of the beautiful, and because Aphrodite is herself beautiful, and also because he was born on her birthday, is her follower and attendant. And as his parentage is, so also are his fortunes. In the first place he is always poor [like his mother], and anything but tender and fair... Like his father too, whom he also partly resembles, he is ... fertile in resources; a philosopher at all times, terrible as an enchanter, sorcerer, sophist. (*Symp.*203b-d, trans Jowett).

In Ennead 3.5 Plotinus fits the Eros myth into his understanding of the structure of the universe, both on the highest level, the derivation of the All Soul from Intellect, and on the lower level of the traditional gods that govern the lives of men (where Aphrodite is the goddess of marriage). There are thus two Aphrodites. The higher or heavenly Aphrodite is the (motherless) daughter of Ouranos or Kronos, both of whom represent Intellect. She springs pure from the pure, she has no ability or desire to descend to the world below. Instead she is held more firmly by her progenitor than light is held by the sun. She is Soul, a great goddess, the child of Intellect. She is wholly turned towards Intellect and filled with passionate love for It; out of this love, “by a kind of delight and intense concentration on the vision and by the passion of its [the soul’s] gazing,” she brings forth Eros, as a being worthy of herself, and the two of them forever look on high at the Beauty that is Intellect. Eros is a substance sprung from a substance; he is “the eye of the desiring which through its power gives to the lover the sight of the object desired.” (5.2-3). This first Eros is a god; the second a *daimōn*. A similar process occurs at many different hierarchical levels, each level lower in being than the one that produced it.

The principle seems to be that every being that exists has an appropriate activity that is essential to its perfection. This activity is thought, or contemplation, that is diffusive and so

productive, creative in some way.¹¹⁵ It is a kind of outflow or emanation. The emanation is diffuse, real, though indefinite, intellectual substance, “looking out” from its source; and as it looks, it becomes separate from it. Hence it is “born” of the prior and more perfect being. This “child” takes cognizance, so to speak, of what it is as it looks back and gazes at the one from which it has come. What it sees are the emanations of the parent within itself. These emanations are intelligible forms of some sort, and in lower beings they are some kind of discursive reasoning that takes place in the “child” but is derived from the “parent.” As the “child” gazes and understands that these forms/ideas that are within it, but from above, are good, it conceives a desire for them in their source. Out of this vision with desire it produces another “child,” and this “child” is love inasmuch as it is a vision of the good from which its parent came. This is why it gazes at the good always in the company of its parent. Plotinus says, “So from the power which is intensely active about the object of vision, and from a kind of outflow from that object, Love [comes] to be as an eye filled with its vision, like a seeing that has its image with it” (3.5.3). Wherever this process (or procession) takes place Eros is born. The highest, Universal Soul, the “child” of Intellect, has her love; he is a great god. The World Soul has her love; he is a great spirit (*daemon*).¹¹⁶ Each individual soul has her love; he is her guardian spirit (also a *daemon*).

¹¹⁵ Plotinus’s universe is wholly intelligible in the sense that there is no clear distinction between the order of thinking (or contemplation: *theoria*) and the order of being. So although this may be a gross oversimplification, thought/contemplation produces all that is (3.8.8,25-26 and ff.). An endless and simultaneous derivation of different degrees (from highest to lowest) of intellectual reality is the structure of the universe, surrounding the One. At every level there is an intelligent being that thinks and from its thought (emanation) another being comes to be. As the being that is produced takes cognizance of that from which it has come, it produces out of this contemplation another being, born out of the return gaze, which stays by its side, so to speak, like a child. This being born out of the return gaze is love, i.e. a desire for the good. So everything that exists has a companion *eros*, by which it seeks the higher good. The “companion” is an aspect of itself, though perhaps also in some sense a *daimon* or *genius* or some sort of guardian spirit(?).

¹¹⁶ The Universal Soul is the third hypostasis. From it both the World Soul and the individual soul are derived. In the interpretation of En.3.5 the question is one of how to fit the Universal Soul and the World Soul into the scheme of

At every level the god or *daemon* gazes towards the good, looks to the higher order, and draws the soul upwards (3.5.4-6).

Plotinus's rereading of the *Symposium* myth tells the story of the birth of Aphrodite as the daughter of Zeus (as opposed to Eros born of Poros and Penia). Again, Plotinus says that Plato in the *Phaedrus* calls Zeus "a great leader" (246e) and in the *Philebus* "a royal soul and a royal intellect" (30d). So if Zeus has a great intellect and soul, and since "leader" and "royal" signify causality, he must be on the level of intellect while Aphrodite, who comes from him as his daughter, must be on the level of soul. Or since the mythological gods are paired with goddesses to represent the relationship Intellect–Soul, Aphrodite may be thought of as Hera. There is mythological precedent for this association (3.5.8.20). In any case, for Plotinus's purposes Zeus is Intellect and Aphrodite Soul (3.5.8). The garden of Zeus is filled with the glorious, beautiful, and abundant forms/images in which he as Intellect takes delight.¹¹⁷ Intellect possesses these beautiful forms in itself and is content in the possession of them; he is not drunk. Aphrodite/Soul is "born" out of his emanating and productive contemplation of the glorious and beautiful intelligible universe of forms. Viewed as an emanation, an indefinite outflow of Zeus's intelligible forms, she is in a relative state of poverty and want, and so she is Penia. The emanations in themselves coming from Zeus, as the products of his contemplation, are intelligible forms, rational principles, *logoi*. As such they are plentiful, rich, full of resource. The sum of them is represent-

the myth. See Plotin, *Traité 50 (III.5)*, introduction, traduction, commentaire, et notes par Pierre Hadot (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 50-56. See also Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1994), 62-3.

¹¹⁷ It is not clear whether Zeus here represents the Intellect of the Universal Soul (one would expect this to be Ouranos or Kronos) or of the World Soul, but I assume that the distinction between Ouranos or Kronos, on the one hand, and Zeus, on the other is maintained. Zeus then is the intellect of the World Soul and there are still two Souls/Aphrodites, the Universal Soul and the World Soul. But I think this is a secondary question in the sense that it is part of the working out and accommodation of the myth and not a strict explanation of reality. The main point is that intellect gives birth to soul and that she becomes a thinking living being through the contemplation of the *logoi* from the intellect but present in her, the *logoi* represented by Poros and her receptivity by Penia.

ed by Poros; but Poros, who is “the plenitude and wealth of [intellectual] beauties”(3.5.9), in the process of emanating outwards from Intellect, is full to overflowing with nectar, that is with *logoi*, and so he is no longer focused on, attached to, Intellect. He lies in the garden, drunk, diffuse, asleep, his “ideas” in profusion and confusion! As – at the same “time” as – he lies in the garden, Aphrodite is born (3.5.9). When she “awakes,” she gazes on the beauty and bounty of Poros. Longing for the good she contemplates in him and conceiving a passionate desire for it, she, as Penia, conceives and gives birth to Eros. This is the myth that tells the story; and in order to tell a story the characters must be introduced as separate beings (See below). The catch is that in reality they are not separate. Poros, the nectar with which he is drunk, the garden where he lies are all the same reality. They are the forms shining forth from Intellect. Penia also represents the emanations from Intellect but under the aspect of unreflective, that is, unaware of their own existence; but as Penia gains cognizance of who she is, Aphrodite is born. And as Aphrodite (Soul) looks back at Zeus (Intellect) from which she comes, she gives birth by her gazing to Eros. Putting it another way, the mythological figures, Poros, Penia, the nectar, and Aphrodite all represent different aspects of Soul.¹¹⁸ And Eros and Soul also always exist together, since for as long as Soul has existed and sought the good, love has always been at her side (En.3.5.9, 40-2).

One might ask, if all the characters are the same, what is the purpose of a narrative myth?

Towards the end of En.3.5, Plotinus gives his explanation for the appropriate use of myth:

But myths, if they are really going to be myths, must [1] divide into separate points of time the things of which they tell, and [2] separate from one another many things which in reality exist together as one, though they are distinct in rank or power; where even (Wolters: “seeing that”) rational arguments make up generations for things that are without generation and they also separate things which exist together. When they [myths

¹¹⁸ Wolters, 250.

and rational arguments] have taught as well as they can, they allow the man who has understood to put them together again.¹¹⁹

Plotinus seems to equate here the telling of myths with discursive reasoning. Although not all discursive reasoning would require reassembling, the kind of knowledge of which Plotinus speaks here does require a passing beyond the confines of rational argument. One has no choice but to use myth and metaphor. This is similar to Ambrose's use of them in his exegesis of Scripture. In both cases, therefore, it falls to the reader to reassemble the myth and decipher the metaphors. These run on ahead, as it were, and draw him after; but even if the knowledge they impart is intuitive and difficult to explain, he is delighted and he has a profound sense that he is reaching for and almost attaining something of the truth, goodness, and beauty that lies far above him.

I think this attitude, for lack of a better word, of standing on the threshold of higher reality – of being surrounded by an infinitely rich and deep world of spiritual reality – and of reaching up to participate in it in some way is a habit of mind and heart shared by readers and writers and crossing the boundaries of genres and creeds; it is like a main artery of the intellectual culture of late antiquity, and of Ambrose's cultural milieu in particular. This is one reason why the *Song of Songs* is such an important text for him. And is it not significant that both Plotinus and Ambrose chose as a representative image for the human soul the most beautiful woman in love they could find? So the *Song of Songs* functions in Ambrose's thought in much the same way as the myth of Aphrodite does in Plotinus's. And if one is serious about following this woman and entering into the higher reality, in whatever way one can, then moral purity, the separation of the intellect from the disturbances and distractions of the sensible world, and a continual

¹¹⁹ My adaptation of Armstrong's translation of 3.5.9.24-30. See also Wolters, li; 248-251. With regard to 1) temporal separation: in the myth Eros is the child born from Aphrodite; in reality Eros exists eternally, simultaneously with Aphrodite, he is an aspect of her. With regard to 2) dividing what exists as one: in the myth Poros and Penia are separate; in reality they are two aspects of one substance, Soul.

effort of contemplation – of the books of Plato and the philosophers or of Scripture – are the condition *sine qua non*.. When Plotinus “reassembles” the myth of Eros/Aphrodite at the end of En.3.5, he says:

Soul, which is with Intellect and has come into existence from Intellect, and then again been filled with rational principles and, itself beautiful, adorned with beauties and filled with plenitude, so that there are in it many glories and images of all beautiful things, is as a whole Aphrodite. (3.5.9,30ff.)

Who in Ambrose’s day would not wish to be like that Aphrodite? Change the language ever so slightly and one has a picture of the bride from the *Song of Songs*, who is “a garden enclosed... a sealed fountain; [her] fruits and spices are a paradise.” She is “the garden of the mind, in which there is an abundance of varied virtues and the flowers of discourse” (5.19, 721,2-3).

AMBROSE AND PLOTINUS: ON THE SOUL

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between Plotinus’s Aphrodite and Ambrose’s bride. First, with regard to the actual text of the *De Bono Mortis*, Courcelle thinks Ambrose made a mistake in translating the decorations of the garden, which in Plotinus are a description of the *logoi* (En.3.5.9,9-16), with “the flowers of words” (*flores sermonum*); he thinks Ambrose should have translated *logoi* by the Latin *rationes*.¹²⁰ I think, however, that Ambrose’s choice of *sermo*, as opposed to *ratio*, is intentional. Though *ratio* may imply spoken words, *sermo* emphasizes the differences between the Platonic and the Christian gardens. It shifts the imagery somewhat from rational thought and speech to the spoken word, specifically the words of Scripture. After all, he might have used the Latin *uerbum*, which would have been more generic and ambiguous. *Sermo*, on the other hand, has the nuance of *talk, conversation*; there is a

¹²⁰ Courcelle, “Plotin,” 44, n.4

reason why the bishop's homilies in Church are called *sermones* and not *uerba*: they are spoken out loud and addressed to an audience. For Ambrose, therefore, the garden of the *Song of Songs* is not filled with reasons or even rational speech as such, but with words (*sermones*) and as the long development in the following paragraphs show (no. 17 below), these words are indeed the words of Scripture. Throughout the entire section, when speaking of Scripture, Ambrose uses only *sermo* (a total of 12 times); *uerbum* is reserved for the subsistent Word of God (*Verbum Dei*), the Spouse of the bride whom she (the soul) invites to come down into her garden (5.19,721.10-15). The only exception is at (5.20. 722, 10-11) where Ambrose connects "food" (*cibum*) with "word" and "bread"(*pane*).¹²¹ This creates Eucharistic overtones, which fit the wider context of Ambrose's commentary in this section of the *De Bono Mortis* (see below). Surrounding this reference to *uerbum* are four instances of *sermo* (in only four lines of text; 722,11-14) Thus, following this reference to the food of the word, he says, "In this garden therefore, there are good words (*in illo ergo horto sermones boni sunt*).” Then, he describes in detail the beneficial properties of each (5.20, 722,14-723,8). This excursus has taken us beyond the present section, but it shows beyond the shadow of a doubt that Ambrose is changing direction, away from ideas of *ascesis*, ascent, and the mind with its ideas, which up to this point have been common ground with the Platonists, towards the life-giving words of the Scriptures. This is the first difference between Plotinus's Aphrodite and Ambrose's bride.

The second is that in En.3.5 Plotinus speaks of *logoi* largely in the plural except when he speaks of them as "gathered" in the mythical Poros (3.5.9,15). He is in fact speaking of the intelligible forms/ideas that exist in Intellect and emanate from It. Poros (the mythical repository

¹²¹ et fortiore cibo uerbi uelut pane (Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*,5.20, 722,10-11.)

of the *logoi*) lies in the garden in a drunken stupor, belching forth nectar. In Plato's myth he has no idea he has generated Eros. In Plotinus, also, he is unaware that Soul is being born. In Plotinus this is because he is really the *logoi* already within Soul. The point is that there is no reciprocal relationship, no betrothal, no conscious descent of the higher to the lower, of Poros to Aphrodite, when she is still Penia, and so no true love between any of the characters in the myth. Eros himself is a limited form of love; he must always look "up" and "back." This is only a myth, but the very terms of the myth show the radical and essential difference between Christianity and the Platonism of Plotinus. In Plotinus the One does not know that It has caused the universe to come into being. It is wholly perfect, self-sufficient, happy within Itself. Plotinus could never have known that the One would, or even could, look out, so to speak, beyond Its own unity and perfection. The God of the Christians, however, can and did send forth His Word; and this has made all the difference.¹²² Ambrose's bride of the *Song* has all the audacity of a woman who knows she is loved. The seal and fruit of this love will be, as we shall see, a free and reciprocal contract. The Word says, "She is a garden enclosed, my sister my spouse, a garden enclosed, a sealed fountain; your fruits and spices are a paradise." The soul responds, "Arise, north wind, and come, south wind, blow through my garden, waft about my fragrances. Let my brother come down into his garden." Ambrose comments, "Into her garden she invites the Word of God to descend, in order that, refreshed and nourished by the heavenly rain of the Word and his abundant blessings, she may bear fruit." She invites *and the Word comes*, he *feeds* upon her virtues, he *harvests* his fruits, he *delights* in them. When he descends into her (Latin: *in* not *ad*), *she bears* marvelous fruit, "aromatic spices of health-giving *words* flow out from her and redolent

¹²² Though the Good is the ultimate source of goodness in all things, it itself must not look to another nor be directed to another, but be quiet in itself; all things look back to it (Plotinus, En.1.7.1.14-21).

perfumes of varied graces spread their fragrance far and wide.” The theme in all of this imagery is reciprocity; and to forestall a protest that this is only poetic image, Ambrose, the ex-lawyer states in the following section, “The Spouse of the soul is the Word of God, to whom the soul has been joined by a certain legal, legitimate contract of marriage” (*sponsus autem animae deus uerbum est, cui anima legitimo quodam conubii foedere copulatur*). There is no one-sided relationship here, no drunkenness, no unrecognized love, but nuptials sealed by a contract.

We see now that Ambrose has taken the discourse to a new level; though the deeply personal and exuberant relationship between the soul and the Word remains in the forefront, the introduction of the idea of a contract that creates a legitimate marriage implies a social and institutional context – that is the Church – that leads to and fosters a stable, permanent relationship.¹²³ This is the second major difference between Plotinus’s Aphrodite and Ambrose’s bride. Unlike Penia/Aphrodite, Ambrose’s bride loves because she has been loved, and she is invited to a reciprocal romance that leads to marriage. The Word became flesh for this very purpose: to redeem her, purify her, and receive her into his love.¹²⁴ There are two differences, therefore, between Plotinus and Ambrose: Scripture and the Church.

DIVISION SEVEN (SECTION 17)

The Wedding in the Garden

17. “This is why the Spouse says – for the Word of God is the spouse of the soul, to which soul he is joined by a certain legal covenant of marriage (*legitimo quodam conubii foedere*) – ‘I

¹²³ Augustine says of Marius Victorinus: *legebat, sicut ait Simplicianus, sanctam scripturam, omnesque Christianas litteras investigabat studiosissime et perscrutabatur, et dicebat Simpliciano non palam, sed secretius et familiarius: “Noveris iam me esse Christianum.” et respondebat ille: “Non credam nec deputabo te inter Christianos, nisi in ecclesia Christi videro.” ille autem inridebat dicens: “Ergo parietes faciunt Christianos?”* (Augustine, *Conf.* 8.2).

¹²⁴ In the words of Paul: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph.5:25-7).

have come into my garden, my sister and spouse. I have harvested my myrrh with my spices, I have eaten my bread with my honey, I have drunk my wine with my milk. Eat, my friends (*proximi*), and drink and inebriate yourselves, my brothers. I sleep and my heart wakes.’ (Sg.5:1). Let us discern which fruits and foods God feasts upon and which delight him. He takes pleasure in this: if anyone puts to death his sin, wipes out his guilt, buries and abolishes his iniquities; for myrrh is the burial of the dead: our sins are dead, which cannot possess the sweetness of life. Some of the wounds caused by our offenses are poured all over with the ointments of the divine word (*sermonis*) and cured by a stronger food of the Word (*fortiore cibo uerbi*), like bread, and by a sweeter discourse (*suaviore sermone*), like honey. In another place Solomon teaches that there are foods made from words (*sermonum*), where he says, ‘Good words are [like] honeycombs’ (Prov.16:24). In this garden, therefore, *sermones*/words are good, one restrains a fault, another corrects a misdeed, another kills insolence and, as it were, buries it, when someone who is corrected renounces his error. There is also a stronger word, which fortifies the heart of man (Ps.103:15) with the more substantial sustenance of the heavenly Scripture. Then, there is a more persuasive word, sweet as honey, which nevertheless by its very sweetness pierces the conscience of the sinner. Then, there is a word of a more ardent spirit, which inebriates like wine and rejoices the heart of man (Ps.103:15). Then, there is a word like milk, pure and white. These foods of sweet and useful words are those which the spouse tells his friends they ought to feast upon (Sg.5:1). His friends are those who follow him and attend his nuptials. The soul, filled with this food and drink – for each one drinks water from his own vessels and from the sources of his own wells (Prov.5:15) – and in a drunken stupor, was sleeping¹²⁵ to the world, but was remaining alert and watchful for God (Sg.5:2a). And so, as the next verses show (Sg.5:2b), God the Word was asking that her door be opened to him, so that he might fill her by his entry. From this, therefore, come those Platonic banqueters; from this that nectar made from wine and prophetic honey; from this that sleep; from this that eternal life, upon which Plato said his own gods feasted, since Christ is Life (Jn.14:6). Therefore, by the seed of such words was the womb of his soul filled¹²⁶ and she herself went forth in the Word. And every soul that goes out from slavery and raises herself up from the body, follows the Word.” (5.20-21)

There are two themes I would like to address here. The first is the liturgical nature of the descriptions. The second is the exuberant, mildly unrefined atmosphere of the wedding party. Here in a nutshell is the sequence of the events outlined in the paragraph. Everything seems to be happening more or less simultaneously. (1) The bridegroom, now clearly identified as the Word of God, recounts what he has done. “I have come, I have harvested, I have eaten and I have

¹²⁵ The verbs here are imperfect. It is somewhat awkward to translate them into the English imperfect, but they give a nuance of vivacity to the Latin. Everything seems to be happening at once at an exuberant wedding.

¹²⁶ “his” is correct. It refers to Plato. See the discussion below.

drunk.” This is followed by a more detailed repeat than in the earlier section of the virtues and uses of the Scriptural foods. (2) The Spouse encourages his friends to eat and become intoxicated. (3) Someone says, “I sleep and my heart wakes.” It turns out later that this is the bride who “in a drunken stupor, fell asleep to the world, but remained alert and watchful for God.” (4) As she sleeps, her Spouse God the Word, asks that the door be opened to him, so that he might fill her by his entry.

First, the sequence and imagery of this section have marked liturgical overtones. The bridegroom enters and announces that he has eaten his bread and drunk his wine. There follows an allegorical description of the foods and spices in which he, the bridegroom, delights. These are myrrh, by which the soul buries her sin and is cleansed from guilt. Myrrh is one of the spices with which Christ was anointed at his burial. The overtones here are of his death and the soul’s baptism by which she too dies to sin and wipes out her guilt. Then there are other ointments and perfumes, bread (teachings), wine (persuasion and compunction), and milk, all of which refer to the ministrations of Scripture by which the soul is cleansed and fortified; and these are the feast which delight the bridegroom and to which he invites his friends. This is the feast that intoxicates the bride. Finally, after the feast comes the bridegroom himself, who fills the bride/soul with the fullness of life. The pattern here is the same as in the Eucharist: Scripture, the Feast, the reception of the Eucharist by the faithful. We will return to the sacramental elements present here in an observation below.

Second, like the *Song of Songs* itself, Ambrose’s commentary is lively. This is a wedding feast, where everyone should be filled to overflowing with joy and gladness. In a treatise such as the *De Bono Mortis*, however, where *ascesis* figures prominently, why would Ambrose take such

pains to dwell on such imagery? It is because he has a message here for his audience that lies in their affective response to this scene. They must decode the metaphors on a level deeper and closer to home, so to speak, than the details of the allegorical interpretation. For Ambrose we are flesh and blood human beings. We may rise to the heights of an ascetic and spiritual ideal; but the natural and inalienable basis for the ascent is the full reality of who we are. The joy of being in love and celebrating a marriage feast is a faint yet true image of union with God. Essential to this joy is the complete intimacy of the marriage bond and the reciprocity of love and life. This reciprocity belongs, of course, to the *Song of Songs* itself, but Ambrose brings it to the fore without scruple or excess. Though Ambrose would probably not put it this way, in modern terms we might speak of an integrated personality. This does not mean that he did not have a high idea of the ascent of the soul or of the purity required for that ascent, but rather that he had an instinctive sense of the whole of human life and an understanding that human love as it is portrayed in the *Song of Songs* was an essential part of that whole. In any case, the ease with which he handles the imagery from the *Song of Songs* and his great love for it gives us an insight into his own personality.¹²⁷ Plotinus also had something of the same understanding, and he had recourse to similar imagery in order to lead others to an understanding of the highest good. The greatest loves of our lives are for him an instructive image of the joy of union with the One: “The soul in her natural state is in love with God and wants to be united with him; it is like the noble love of a

¹²⁷ Peter Brown has a marvelous description of Ambrose in the pulpit, the “formidable Ambrose” turned mystical and talking about love. The passage is too long to quote in full here but it is excellent. Here it is in part: “[In the pulpit] we have the other side of Ambrose, a side far less well known than the man of action. It was this other side which was destined to influence Augustine. Here, the studied vehemence of his political life appears as a feminine intensity. At that time, Ambrose introduced exciting new Eastern melodies, so that his congregation should chant the Psalms as they were besieged by the Imperial troops. He had ‘bewitched’ the Catholics with his new hymns.... His sermons are studded with the language of the *Song of Songs*: ‘kissing’ – so seldom mentioned by Augustine – recurs constantly in Ambrose...He can describe the calmed sea: ‘When it no longer breaks upon the shore, but wins it over and greets it as a friend with peaceful caresses’” (*Hex. 3.5:21*). (Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a Biography*, a new ed. with epilogue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 73).

girl for her noble father” and “if anyone does not know this experience, let him think of it in terms of our loves here below, and what it is like to attain what one is most in love with” (En.6.9.9,33ff.).

What I have called Ambrose’s “integration” may also have a wider base. One senses that, in spite of political and religious uncertainties, Milan in the 380s still had the stability of a society where the institutions and the varied classes of people who participated in them formed some kind of harmonious whole. This climate encourages a kind of freedom within the institutions that more troubled epochs cannot allow. None of the anxiety that marks Augustine’s later theological thinking is present in Ambrose. Ideas that will loom on the horizon in the fifth century, largely due – I suspect – to the Pelagian controversy still lie dormant in Ambrose’s Milan. The harsh reality of sin can still be held at bay by the sacrament of Baptism. The chasm between grace and free will, that Augustine will examine so thoroughly has not yet fully opened. And on another front, the stimulating challenge of philosophical and theological confrontation had not yet subsided into a pursuit under the more uniform light of Christianity. I cannot say more than this, but I sense that on a large cultural and intellectual scale a climate change is about to take place and Ambrose is still living in the last days before the break.¹²⁸ With regard to the *Song of Songs* in particular, it is interesting that Augustine heard Ambrose preach on it; he himself mentions the delight he felt from such preaching.¹²⁹ But his personal history was much more stormy than Ambrose’s appears to have been. He also understood the original sin of Adam to be transmitted to his offspring through physical generation. This led him to impute a sense of

¹²⁸ I am not thinking of the more obvious changes that were caused by the destabilization of the Western empire over the course of the fifth century, though perhaps this was a contributing factor.

¹²⁹ At *De doctrina christiana* 2:6. We will discuss this passage in detail in part three.

sin and shame even to legitimate intercourse within the bonds of marriage. Ambrose happily predates this development.

Finally, at the end of section seventeen Ambrose returns to Plato (5.21). He says first that it was from the imagery presented in the garden scene from the *Song of Songs* that Plato derived his banqueters, the nectar, the sleep (of Poros), and the eternal life upon which he said his gods feasted. For Ambrose it cannot be otherwise, because Christ is Life in the fullest sense (*Christus est vita*). If someone were to show Ambrose clearly that Plato could not have had any direct contact with the Old Testament, he would have replied that in a real sense it does not matter, since there is no source other than Christ from which life and truth can come. In fact, this appears to be the import of his final statements here:

Therefore, by the seed of such words was the womb of his soul filled and she herself went forth in the Word. And every soul that goes out from this slavery and raises herself up from the body, follows the Word.

ideoque talium sermonum seminibus *animae eius* repletus est *uenter* atque ipsa exiuit in uerbo. quae autem exit anima seruitio isto et eleuat se a corpore uerbum sequitur. (5.21, 723, 13-15)

At first glance, it would make better sense to say *animae venter* alone, but Ambrose adds *eius*, which in the context can only refer back to Plato. The manuscript tradition is mixed, but the two sources Schenkl considered most reliable both have it. Ambrose seems to be saying that the womb of Plato's soul was filled with such words and that she – the soul is feminine – then “went forth in the Word.” Every soul, even Plato's, that raises herself up out of slavery to the body, follows the Word, whether she knows it clearly or not. If, therefore, this is a correct reading of the text, Ambrose associates Plato's soul with the soul of the bride. I had to read this last sentence over quite a few times and then check the apparatus before translating that *eius*. Perhaps

a new edition of the text will remove it. In any case, Ambrose came from a culture where the conceptual distinction between the sexes was clearly defined. The soul, *anima*, was feminine in gender and role, whether it belonged to a man or a woman. This application of the bride imagery to Plato is corroborated by another striking example in the funeral oration for Valentinian II. Here Ambrose addresses the living soul, of the dead emperor, in the second person singular with praises of the bride from the *Song of Songs*.

SIXTH OBSERVATION: WHY DO THE WEDDING GUESTS GET DRUNK?

Why do the bride and the guests get drunk? Plotinus uses the drunkenness of Poros to represent two different but complementary states.¹³⁰ The first is the one we discussed above, the “overflow” of intelligible reality from a higher being that brings to birth a lower being; this is Poros drunk. As this “overflow” – which is intelligible reality – begins the process of contemplation and self-cognition, the mythical Aphrodite is born. This is the first state of drunkenness. The second is the process of contemplation in reverse. As the soul progresses in purity and understanding, and perceives more and more clearly the beauty of intelligible reality, it reaches a point where it understands that the beauty it sees is not outside of itself but is rather within; the beauty has penetrated it through and through, it is no longer a spectator but again, drunk and filled with nectar, it in some sense knows what is within but not know it through a process of discursive reasoning (En.V.8.10,34-8; 11,33-8).¹³¹ When the soul united to Intellect

¹³⁰ See Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality,” 242-246; 248 for a beautiful description of these two processes in Intellect with regard to the One and the soul’s participation in them. In Intellect they are both eternal and simultaneous, always happening, and as such the foundation for the fleeting mystical ascent of the soul in this life back to its source in Intellect and finally in the One.

¹³¹ This is the condition of Paul raised up to the third Heaven, of Monica and Augustine at Ostia; see Ambrose’s description of Paul at *De Bono Mortis* 3.10, 712,9-13 (part 1, ch. 2, sect. 3 above).

reaches union with the One, “drunk with nectar, then it falls in love, simplified into happiness by having its fill; and it is better for it to be drunk with a drunkenness like this than to be more respectably sober.” (En.6.7.35, 25-8). Plotinus describes thus the state of the soul that seeks and sometimes attains union with God. Yet the soul is alone; aloneness is actually an essential part of the experience of union: she must be “alone with the alone” in order for union to take place (En.6.7.34). Ambrose’s bridegroom, on the other hand, seems to want everyone intoxicated. This is not to imply that the mystical union of a Christian soul with Christ does not require the intimacy that usually comes with solitude, but only that Ambrose speaks of a different kind of inebriation here. Hadot resumes brilliantly the differences between Plotinian and Christian mysticism:

The relation to the Good can only be one of love: it is essential that the Good excite desire and that it be the object of love (6.7 [38], 22, 1-36). But for Plotinus it is clear that this is not a reciprocal relationship. The Absolute cannot have a relationship with the relative. Only the relative is "relative" to the Absolute.... For Christians, the mystical experience is a grace, given to the soul by a divine initiative. For Plotinus, there is no divine initiative in the proper sense. But we should not conclude that, for Plotinus, human beings can attain to mystical experience by their own means. They have to wait for this experience and never know if it will come about. The soul has to do all it can to prepare for it. But, says Plotinus, when the Good comes to it and suddenly appears before it, it is a "chance" for the soul.¹³² (6.7 [38], 34, 8)

For Plotinus “drunkenness” is a useful term for describing what is essentially a mystical experience of union with Intellect or the One. The normal activity of the senses and of discursive reasoning is suspended.¹³³

In the Christian tradition drunkenness is also an image used of mystical experience.¹³⁴

But there is the all important difference Hadot signals above. It is the sign of a grace given, of

¹³² Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality,” 248.

¹³³ *ibid.*, 240.

the divine initiative, and of the divine operation within the soul. From the beginning of Christianity, one of the many roles assigned to the Holy Spirit was to fill the heart with a spiritual inebriation. Thus, the *Acts of the Apostles* records that on the day of Pentecost everyone heard the disciples speaking in tongues and thought they were drunk (Acts 2:13-15). Also, in his letter to the *Ephesians* Paul contrasts physical, and by implication, spiritual intoxication: “And do not get drunk with wine (*nolite inebriari vino*), for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Note also that in Latin, *ebrietas* is a strong word. In English we tend to use “inebriated” as a slightly more elegant alternative to “drunk.” But in Latin it is simply the opposite of *sobrietas*. Ambrose cherished this traditional metaphor. In his written works, he often refers to the influence of the Spirit with the term *ebrietas*, or even better *sobria ebrietas*. He could have found other ways to express the same idea, but this image of a kind of ecstasy, a joyous state of letting oneself be filled with the goodness and power of the Spirit, is dear to his heart. For example: the sixth strophe of the hymn *Splendor Paternae Glorae*, runs as follows:

Christusque nobis sit cibus,	And may Christ be our food,
potusque noster sit fides,	And our drink be faith,
laeti bibamus sobriam	With joy let us imbibe the sober
ebrietatem Spiritus	Intoxication of the Spirit. ¹³⁵

In the *De Noe*, Ambrose says, “The soul ought always to feast on thoughts of good works in order that the mind may get drunk and grow fat with the juice (*suco*) of prudence.”¹³⁶ In the *De*

¹³⁴ This is a common theme throughout the entire history of Christian (and pre-Christian) mysticism. See for example, Philo, *De Mundi Opificio*, 71; Origen, *In C. Ct.* 3.185; Augustine, *In Ps. 35:14*; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ct. Cnt.* 2:13 (J156), 5:1 (J310); Bernard of Clairvaux: *Sermones super Ct. Cnt.*, 49.1.4; John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), Stanza 25, 571-4; Blaise Arminjon, *The Cantata of Love: a verse by verse reading to the Song of Songs* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 231-3; 317-9.

¹³⁵ Fontaine, *Hymnes*, 198-99; H. Lewy, *Sobria ebrietas. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der antiken Mystik, Beischriften zur ZNTW*, 9 (Giessen 1929), p. 67. See also Courcelle, *Recherches*, p. 252 top and note 1.

¹³⁶ *semper epulari debet animus bonorum operum cogitationes, ut prudentiae suco mens inebriata pinguescat* (*De Noe*, 15.53,25).

Isaac he says, “He [Christ] drinks this cup [in the soul] and his drink, by its intoxication, incites us to make an exodus away from inferior things towards those that are better and [even] the best.”¹³⁷ One could multiply the examples.¹³⁸ But the identification of this image with Ambrose finds a striking corroboration in Augustine’s account of his first contact with him; clearly Augustine had been struck by the expression, and in general, by Ambrose’s food and drink imagery: “And I came to Milan to Ambrose the bishop... whose discourse at that time energetically ministered to your people the fatness of your grain and the joy of your oil and the sober intoxication of your wine.”¹³⁹

SEVENTH OBSERVATION: A NOTE ON THE SACRAMENTS

In a number of texts Ambrose uses imagery from the *Song of Songs* to refer to the sacraments. In part three of this dissertation we will look at his use of the *Song* in connection with Baptism. Here, in sections 16 and 17 of the *De Bono Mortis* he uses verses from the *Song* that elsewhere refer to the Eucharist. Anyone, therefore, in Ambrose’s audience familiar with his sacramental catecheses, would recognize Eucharistic associations and overtones in the imagery of these two sections. They would also make the connection, under the subtle guidance of Ambrose’s poetic imagery, between the spiritual life of the soul and the sacramental life of the Church. Ambrose certainly intended this connection; it is implicit in the marriage covenant to which he refers and in the metaphors of bread and wine that refer to the words of Scripture and then to the bridegroom himself. So although the marriage of the Word and the soul is a spiritual

¹³⁷ hoc poculum bibit et eius potus ebrietate nos prouocat, ut ad meliora et optima ab inferioribus faciamus excessum (*De Isaac*, 5.49).

¹³⁸ Such as this one from the *De Sacr.* 5.17: Et idea praeclara ebrietas, quae sobrietatem mentis operatur.

¹³⁹ Et veni Mediolaneum ad Ambrosium episcopum... cuius tunc eloquia strenue ministrabant adipem fruimenti tui et laetitiam olei et sobriam vini ebrietatem populo tuo (*Conf.* 5.13).

bond of interior love, the ecclesial dimension is present as well: baptism, symbolized by the marriage covenant and the Eucharist, symbolized by the rich and inebriating feast.

Some examples from the *De Sacramentis* and the *De Mysteriis* will show the close connection between these paragraphs from the *De Bono Mortis* and Ambrose's catechesis on the sacraments. Before looking at them, it may be helpful to gather here the verses from the *Song of Songs* we have seen in the *De Bono Mortis*. The sequence is as follows:

1. The bride enters with grace in her breasts (cf. Sg.8:10; 4:10).
2. She approaches the bridegroom who sits in the garden conversing with his friends (Sg.8:13).
3. She says "Flee, my brother" (Sg.8:14).
4. The garden is a Paradise, the mind, the soul. She is an enclosed garden (Sg.4:12-15).
5. The bride asks the winds to come waft through the aromas of her garden (Sg.4:16).
6. She invites the bridegroom to come (Sg.5:1a).
7. He comes and says that he has harvested his fruits and spices, eaten his bread and honey, drunk his wine and milk (Sg.5:1b).
8. Eat friends and drink (Sg.5:1c).
9. The bride sleeps but her heart wakes. The bridegroom knocks (Sg.5:2).

In both the *De Sacramentis* (5:2:5-3.17) and the *De Mysteriis* (9.55-8), after explaining the consecration of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist, Ambrose introduces a commentary on the same verses from the *Song of Songs* we have just seen. With these verses he shows the effects of the Eucharist in the souls of the faithful. In the *De Sacramentis* – closer to the actual sermons Ambrose would have delivered – he gives a more detailed interpretation that closely resembles the presentation here in the *De Bono Mortis*.

You came to the altar, you received the grace of Christ, you attained the heavenly sacraments. The Church rejoices at the redemption of a multitude and she delights with spiritual exaltation that her family clothed in white stands before her. You have this in the *Song of Songs*: joyous she calls upon Christ, having a banquet prepared that seems to be worthy of heavenly feasting. And so she says, "My beloved comes down into his garden and harvests the fruit of his orchard" (Sg.4:16). What are these fruit-bearing trees? You

were made dry wood in Adam, but now by the grace of Christ you spring forth as fruit-bearing trees.¹⁴⁰

Gladly the Lord Jesus receives [you] and with heavenly kindness he responds to his Church: “I have come down,” he says, “into my garden; I have harvested my myrrh with my perfumes. I have eaten my bread with my honey, I have drunk my wine with my milk. Eat,” he says, “my brothers, and be intoxicated (Sg.5:1).”¹⁴¹

“I have harvested my myrrh with my perfumes”: what is this harvest? Recognize the vineyard and acknowledge the harvest. “My vineyard,” he says, “I have brought out of Egypt” (Ps.79:9); that is the people of God. You are the vine, you are the harvest, as a vine planted, as a harvest that has yielded its fruit. “I have harvested my myrrh with my perfumes”; that is the odor that you have received.¹⁴²

“I have eaten my bread with my honey”: you see that in this bread there is no bitterness, but it is all sweet. “I have drunk my wine with my milk”: you see that joy and gladness of this sort is that which is polluted with no stain of sin. As often as you drink, you receive the remission of your sins and you are inebriated in spirit. Whence the Apostle says, “Do not be intoxicated with wine but be filled with the Spirit.” (Eph.5.18) He who is intoxicated with wine staggers and totters. He who is inebriated by the Spirit is rooted in Christ. This inebriation, therefore, is splendid and beautiful, which causes sobriety of mind.¹⁴³

The verses from the *Song of Songs* are the same and the interpretation is similar. Though non-Christians reading the *De Bono Mortis* might not have picked up the sacramental associations, catechumens and Christians would have. If it is true that the primary audience for the *De Bono*

¹⁴⁰ Venistis ergo ad altare, accepistis gratiam Christi, sacramenta estis caelestia consecuti. Gaudet ecclesia redemptione multorum et ad stare sibi familiam candidatam spiritali exultatione laetatur. Habes hoc in *Canticis canticorum*. Laetata invocatur Christum, paratum habens convivium, quod dignum caelesti epulatione videatur. Ideoque ait: *Descendat fraternus meus in hortum suum et capiat fructum pomiferarum suarum* (Sg.4:16). Quae sunt istae pomiferae? Lignum aridum factus eras in Adam, sed nunc per gratiam Christi pomiferae arbores pullulates (Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 5.3.14).

¹⁴¹ Libenter accepit dominus Iesus et dignatione caelesti respondit ecclesiae suae: *Descendi, inquit, in hortum meum, vindemiavi myrram cum unguentis meis. Manducavi panem meum cum melle meo, bibi vinum meum cum lacte meo. Edite, inquit, fratres mei, et inebriamini* (Sg.5:1) (Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 5.3.15).

¹⁴² *Vindemiavi myrram cum unguentis meis*: Quae est ista vindemia? Cognoscite vineam et agnoscetis vindemiam. *Vineam, inquit, ex Aegypto transtulisti* (Ps.79:9), hoc est populum Dei. Vos estis vinea, vos estis vindemia, quasi vinea plantati, quasi vindemia, qui fructum dedistis. *Vindemiavi myrram cum unguentis meis*, hoc est in odorem, quem accepistis (Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 5.3.16).

¹⁴³ *Manducavi panem meum cum melle meo*: Vides, quod in hoc pane nulla sit amaritudo, sed omnis suavitas sit. *Bibi vinum meum cum lacte meo*: Vides huiusmodi esse laetitiam, quae nullius peccati sordibus polluatur. Quotiescumque enim bibis, remissionem accipis peccatorum et inebriaris in spiritu. Unde et apostolus ait: *Nolite inebriari vino, sed implemini spiritu*. (Eph.5:18) Vino enim qui inebriatur, vacillat et titubatur, Spiritu qui inebriatur, radicans in Christo est. Et ideo praeclara ebrietas, quae sobrietatem mentis operatur (Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 5.3.17).

Mortis were catechumens, such as Augustine and his friends – a point we will argue in the conclusion – the invitation to transfer one’s allegiance from Plato to the economy of salvation in the Church is clear.

DIVISION EIGHT (SECTIONS 18-20)

*Warnings against those powers who seek to destroy the soul
followed by descriptions of the perfected soul: how she handles the flesh.
She plays (uses) the body as a musician the lyre.*

18. There are principalities of the air and powers of the world that seek to throw us down from the wall of the soul or impede our progress. Yet we must elevate our minds all the more to the heights, following the Word of God. [Ambrose gives a litany of temptations proposed by the principalities and the powers; included in them are the images we have already seen of bait (*esca laqueorum*) and the snare (*lauqueus*)]. By all of these the soul that wishes to fly is pulled down. “But you like a good soldier of Christ Jesus, despising what is below, forgetting earthly things, strive for what is heavenly and eternal....” Let us subject our souls to Christ alone. (6.22-25a)

After this rich and exuberant pause in the garden, Ambrose returns to the more sober and austere project at hand. He joins the garden scene to the wider context of the *De Bono Mortis* by returning to the image of the soul as a wall from section fourteen. There he had described the soul as a walled city, with beautiful virtues painted by God on her walls, but also with enemies; she was under siege. Now, turning again to the same image, and as if gazing up at Christians standing on the top of the city walls, exposed to every danger, he speculates on the enemies who will try to bring them down. He sees the usual ploys (the snare and the bait) and warns us of them. He proposes again the only solutions: flee all sensual attachments, draw near to God in prayer, and be subject to Christ alone. He also tries to look beyond the tactics of the offense and defense, in order to discern who are the real enemies. They are those mysterious principalities of

the air and powers of the world, to which Paul refers in his epistles.¹⁴⁴ These are the hidden foes from which temptations come. The principalities seem to have worldly goods as their special domain, where the powers of this world specialize in the acquisition of honors, tempting us to exalt ourselves like Adam and despise the divine commands. With finesse Ambrose lists the attacks they launch when we are at prayer. This passage is reminiscent of the surveillance of thoughts so characteristic of early monasticism: “How often the enemy tries to insinuate into our heart whatever will turn us back from a life of holiness and pious devotions.... How often he inflames us with bodily passions; how often he causes the eyes of a prostitute to meet ours by chance.”¹⁴⁵ When a monk comes to his spiritual father and says, “My thoughts tell me such and so,” it is not always clear whether the thoughts come from within the monk himself or from some exterior evil influence, nor does it always matter.¹⁴⁶ Here, however, Ambrose seems to lean towards the connivance of exterior powers, since the eyes of a prostitute – a classic ambush – fall upon the victim as he passes by.

19. “The soul of the just man uses the body as an instrument or tool; like an illustrious artist he directs the service of the body where he will, makes out of it a form that he chooses, and makes resound from it those virtues he wishes, composing melodies now of chastity, now of temperance, a song of sobriety, the sweetness of integrity, the mildness of virginity, the gravity of widowhood. At times, however, the musician has sympathy with – is affected by (*compatitur*) – his instrument. Make honorable music, therefore, that your affection may be honorable. For he who sees is generally affected by what he sees, and he who hears by what he hears. Thus Scripture says, ‘Let your eyes look at what is right (Prov.4:25).’” (6.25b)

¹⁴⁴ For example, Rom.8:38, Eph.2:2, 3:10, 6:12; Col.1:16, 2:15.

¹⁴⁵ quotiens in oratione nobis, qua maxime deo adpropinquamus, offunduntur ea quae plena sunt obprobrii alicuius aut sceleris, quo nos a studio precatationis auertant! quotiens inimicus cordi nostro conatur inserere quo nos reflectat a sanctitatis proposito et piis uotis! quotiens corporeos inflammat ardores, quotiens occursare facit oculos meretricios, quibus castum iusti temptet affectum, ut inproviso amoris spiculo feriat inparatum! quotiens inserit animo tuo uerbum iniquum et cogitationes cordis absconditas! (Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis* 6.23).

¹⁴⁶ One of the *Apophthegmata* gives the sense of what Ambrose may be saying here. Macarius saw the devil pass by one day dressed as an old man with a tunic covered with little vials of potions. He said he was going in order to stir up the memories of the brothers. He succeeded with one and when Macarius visited the troubled monk, he asked him, “Do your thoughts war against you?” (Alphabetical Collection, Macarius 3).

This is the conclusion to a long list of temptations and snares. The soul succeeds in avoiding them if she remembers that she is the user and the body is her tool or instrument. This is classic Platonic doctrine that comes straight from the *First Alcibiades*.¹⁴⁷ This dialogue was considered authentic in late antiquity and used as the introductory course in the study of Plato. Socrates uses the metaphors there of the shoemaker and the harp player: each uses various tools, including eyes and ears, to exercise his art.¹⁴⁸ The conclusion to which Socrates leads Alcibiades is that the man is not the same as his own body; he is user of the body. Since the user of the body is the soul, man must be soul. There are three degrees: the man himself is his soul; his instrument is his body; his possessions, money and the like are a further step removed. A corollary to this is that if someone loves the body of another, he loves what belongs to the other, not the other himself. These ideas figure in this section but also to an even larger extent in the next.

Plotinus also refers to this argument from the *Alcibiades* in the first *Ennead*. At En.1.1.3, he says that the soul uses the body like an instrument and also that it [the soul] is affected by sensible reality. Here it seems that the soul is affected because it is turned too much towards the body.¹⁴⁹ Elsewhere, in his discussion of beauty for example, Plotinus considers delight, pleasure,

¹⁴⁷ See Part I ch.2, sect. 2.

¹⁴⁸ *Alcibiades I*, 129. The idea that the rightly ordered soul governs the body and produces a harmony out of its movements and sensations, or *is herself* the harmony, is a philosophical *topos* Ambrose would also have known from the *Phaedo* (80a) or from Cicero (Tusc.I.10.10-19). He might also have read the well-known passage from En.I.4.16 (see below) where Plotinus says that one should use the lyre [of the body] as long as it is serviceable; but when it fails, one abandons it and continues to sing without it.

¹⁴⁹ Now if soul uses body as a tool it does not have to admit the affections which come through the body; craftsmen are not affected by the affections of their tools. Perhaps one might suggest that it [the soul] would necessarily have sensation, if a necessary accompaniment of using the tool is knowing by sensation the ways in which it is affected from outside; for using the eyes is just seeing. But there can be harm in seeing, and it can bring sadness and pain and in general anything that may happen to the whole body; and so desire [also may bring sadness, etc.], when the soul seeks the service of its tool (Plotinus, En.1.1.3,3-12). The soul ought to use the body as a musician uses his lyre. The body was given to him not without reason (οὐ μάτην). So the wise man will use his instrument and care for it as long as he can but then continue without it when it is no longer serviceable (En.1.4.16 end).

reverence, *eros* even, as rightly ordered reactions to intelligible form in sensible reality.¹⁵⁰ Pierre Hadot thinks Ambrose's references to the soul as a musician in this section and section 20 below are inspired primarily by Plotinus,¹⁵¹ since Plotinus and Ambrose both take note of the fact that in the case of feelings and sensation the soul is affected by the feelings and sensations of the body, its tool, and they both use the example of sight. Since section 20 is in large part a repeat of 19, we will look at Ambrose's dependence on Plotinus in greater detail below.

20. "And why do I speak of external snares? We have internal snares to avoid as well. In this very body of ours (*ipso hoc corpore*) snares surround us, which we must avoid. We must not trust ourselves to this body (*huic corpori*), we must not mix our soul with it. 'Associate with a friend,' it says, 'not an enemy.' (Prov.25:9) Your enemy is your body, which fights against your mind; its works are enmity, dissension, litigations, disorderly conduct. Do not associate your soul with it, lest each become confused. Because if you mix your soul with it, then the flesh (*caro*) that is inferior, becomes better than the soul that is superior, since the soul transmits life to the body (*corpori*), but the flesh (*caro*) pours death into the soul. The operation, therefore, of each becomes confused; the substance of each is nearly confused. The soul takes on itself the insensitivity of the dead body; and the body performs the operations of the virtues, proper to the soul. Lest perhaps one think that because the soul is in the body, the two are a blend, we may use light as an example, since light flows into a terrestrial place without blending with it. Where the substance, therefore, is disparate, do not let the activity be blended and confused. Rather, the soul must be in the body to give life, govern, and illumine. We cannot deny that the soul suffers (or shares experience: *compatitur*) with her body. Jesus felt anxiety before his passion (Mt.26:38) and wept at the death of Lazarus (Jn.12:27). Just as a musician by his expressions and his attitude shows that he is affected by (*compatitur*) his melodies and the sound of his flute or lyre or organ – in sadder sounds he is sadder, in joyful he is more joyful..., so that he himself makes the sounds of his song attractive and as it were modulates the affect produced – so also the temperate soul in this body (*hoc*) gently plucks the passions of this flesh (*istius*) like strings of an instrument. She uses only the tips of her fingers, so to speak, to produce an accord of virtues and mores, a harmonious symphony, such that in all her thoughts and activities she maintains harmony between her intentions and actual events (*consilia et facta*). The soul, therefore, is the one who uses, the body the one that is used. And so, one is in command, the other is in service,

¹⁵⁰ For example, the soul becomes conscious of beauty through sensible reality, which is like an instrument by means of which the soul perceives with delight the form of beauty (En.1.6.3), Again, when the musician hears beautiful melodies and recognizes intelligible beauty in it, he is moved (En.2.9.16). The idea of the attunement of the body to external impulses, that are beautiful and enchanting, seems to be found also in Porphyry's *De Abstinencia*, I.43. The wise man recognizes the natural bond and is cautious.

¹⁵¹ See Hadot, "Platon et Plotin," 214.

the one is what we are, the other what belongs to us. If others love the beauty of our soul, they love us, if they love the beauty of the body, they love not the person but the beauty of the flesh, which moreover will quickly wilt and fade.” (7.26-27)

This transition here to internal snares reinforces the idea that in section 18 Ambrose was concerned with external sources of temptation. Here, he explains that the internal snares not only come from within, but specifically from the body. One might be tempted to think that “body” here means fallen, sinful body, as in Paul’s use of the word “flesh.”¹⁵² The sinfulness of the body is clearly significant, and Ambrose often thinks of it as tainted by sin. In this passage, however, we find again an ambiguity (see below), which it is best to leave in place. When he says with no qualifiers, “Your body is your enemy” and when he says that “the substance of each is nearly confused,” I think he is looking at the body itself as somehow dead and burdensome. Of course, the addition of sin makes things worse.

Throughout the *De Bono Mortis*, we have already heard much of what is contained in this section. One repeat, however, is of particular interest. In two successive paragraphs (6.25 and in 7.26), Ambrose has referred to the body as the instrument and to the soul as the musician, who must play his instrument with beauty, control, and empathy. This second paragraph is a repeat of the first but with elaboration. Ambrose goes into more detail about how the temperate soul gets the best music out of her instrument; and he ends with a warning, found in Plato, that true love is directed to the soul rather than the body. I think this is an example of Ambrose joining two blocks of homiletic material. Both cover the same ground but with variation, and so both are worth keeping. Assuming that the reader will ponder them, or at least take his time to read and compare, he will catch the different perspectives. By joining them with the transitional question

¹⁵² This is another example of the ambiguity we discussed in ch.4 (the present chapter), sect. 4 above.

“And why do I speak of external snares?” Ambrose points out the difference and justifies a more extended treatment of the same themes. If the purpose of the *De Bono Mortis* is in part to prepare for death by meditative exercises, this extended repetition fits nicely into place.

Pierre Hadot takes Plotinus’s En.I.1.4 as the source for the first part of this section.¹⁵³ I think that the *Phaedo* is also a source, where Socrates describes the difficulty of arriving at a knowledge of the truth when the soul is “saturated” with the body.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, though it seems clear that Ambrose has read this *Ennead* of Plotinus, or excerpts from it, he makes changes in such a way that the same ideas lead to different conclusions. Does this mean that Ambrose did not understand Plotinus? Perhaps. I think, however, that it means that Ambrose liked Plotinus’s imagery and used it for his own purpose.¹⁵⁵ It may also mean that Ambrose read this particular passage, or remembered it, from an anthology, from which the context was missing. There are two instances in this paragraph where Ambrose steers Plotinus in a slightly new direction. Put simply, the differences come from the fact that Plotinus is conducting a metaphysical inquiry, where Ambrose is seeking a moral standard.

First, En.1.1 is entitled: “What is the Living Being and what is man?” Plotinus conducts an investigation; it is a metaphysical inquiry in the course of which he tries out various possibilities and then either rejects or modifies them. He concludes his inquiry with a twofold definition of man:

So “we” is used in two senses, either including the beast or referring to that which even in our present life transcends it. The beast is the body¹⁵⁶ which has been given life. The true man is different, clear of these affections; he has the virtues which belong to the sphere of

¹⁵³ Hadot, “Platon et Plotin,” 215.

¹⁵⁴ *Phaedo* 79c, for example.

¹⁵⁵ In his *Ambroise devant Philon*, Hervé Savon has shown admirably and in detail that Ambrose often transformed and adjusted his sources. He learned much from Philo but had a different agenda.

¹⁵⁶ See sect. 25 below for the significance of this image of the beast.

intellect and have their seat actually in the separate soul, separate and separable even while it is still here below. (En.1.1.10)

In chapter three Plotinus asks whether the soul is separate as the user of the body, its tool, or whether it is mixed in with body. If it is mixed in, is all of it mixed in, or is there one part that remains separate, the part that uses the body, while another part inheres in the body and is on the same level with it? Then, Plotinus begins chapter 4 with a hypothesis: “Let us assume, then, that it is mixed in.” What will follow?

The worse element, the body, will be improved and the other element, the soul, will be made worse. The body will be improved by sharing in life, the soul made worse by sharing in death and unreason. How then can that which has its life reduced in any way whatever acquire thereby an additional faculty, that of sense-perception? The opposite is true; it is the body that receives life, and so the body that shares in sensation and the affections, which come from sensation. So too, it will be the body that desires – for it is the body that is going to enjoy the objects of desire – and is afraid for itself – for it is going to miss its pleasures and be destroyed. (En.1.1.4)

This sounds like Ambrose’s statements above, but in the end Plotinus rejects it as impossible.¹⁵⁷

For Plotinus, from a metaphysical standpoint the soul in its essence cannot be related to the body as a mixture, at least not wholly. From a moral standpoint the soul may be “sunk” into the body and so become a kind of mixture; the role of philosophy is to bring it out. This is not, however, what he is discussing here. My point is that he tries out this hypothetical possibility of a total mixture. Later in the treatise, he will argue to a partial mixture; a lower soul does form a composite living being with the body (En.1.7-10). The intellectual soul is separate, though joined in this life to the composite, and the true man. Ambrose, on the other hand, glosses over the hypothetical and metaphysical nature of Plotinus’s investigation and takes the same idea of mixing the better with the worse as actual fact. Where Plotinus is looking for a definition of

¹⁵⁷ “And we must investigate the way in which this ‘mixture’ takes place, and see if it is not really impossible; it is like talking about a line being mixed with white, one kind of thing with another kind of thing.” (En.1.1.4, 11-13)

“living being” and trying to figure out how the soul fits into this definition, Ambrose turns the same texts away from philosophical inquiry towards moral exhortation. So where Plotinus does not call the body an enemy – though he has clear ideas about staying away from it – Ambrose does; he is concerned with the effects of it not the nature of it. Thus, after stating that mixing the body and the soul results in confusion, he introduces a subtle play between *corpus* (body) and *caro* (flesh). When he speaks of the beneficial role of the soul in relation to the body, he uses *corpus*, but when he speaks of the adverse effect of the body on the soul, he uses *caro*.¹⁵⁸

Second, where Plotinus uses the metaphor of light to elucidate another possible metaphysical relationship of soul to body, which he will subsequently partially reject, Ambrose uses it as an example of the moral stance the soul ought to take with regard to the body. Plotinus says, “It is possible... for the soul to pass and repass through the body without being touched by its affections, just like light, especially if it is interwoven right through the whole.”¹⁵⁹ Ambrose says, “We may use light as an example, inasmuch as light flows into a terrestrial place without blending with it. Where the substance, therefore, is disparate, do not let the activity be blended and confused. Rather, the soul must be in the body to give life, govern, and illumine.”

Finally, a gentler Ambrose, thinking of the musician who respects the nature of his instrument, softens the harshness of the separation of soul from body. He mentions two instances in the life of Christ where he showed anxiety and sorrow, as a normal part of human existence. The essential responsibility of the soul is to handle such affections delicately, so that a harmonious relationship is maintained between thoughts, desires, and actions. This is the spiritual counterpart

¹⁵⁸ nam si miscetur, ergo melior fit caro, quae inferior est, quam anima, quae superior, quia anima vitam corpori tradit, caro autem mortem animae transfundit (7.26,4-7).

¹⁵⁹ En.1.4, 14-20. This image may be a fitting description of the higher soul present in, and governing, the composite living being (En.1.7); but this distinction does not come into the discussion here.

or complement to the qualities of decorum and *urbanitas*, so essential to Ambrose's moral teaching in the *De Officiis*. In his introduction to that treatise, Ivor Davidson comments, "Civilized behavior correlates, in the end, with spiritual and theological soundness."¹⁶⁰

DIVISION NINE (SECTIONS 21-24)

*Death is only an evil for the evil. Dread of it belongs to life not death.
Life is a stormy sea, death the port.*

21. [Again: the vain and unsatisfying pursuit of the goods of this world]: "The eye shall not be satisfied with seeing not the ear with hearing." (Eccl.1:8). Ecclesiastes praises the dead over the living, and especially those never born and says (Eccl.7:25) that life is more bitter than death. Ambrose corrects: death is only bitter for the impious. The wicked man continually accumulates sin. If he dies, it stops. Many rejoice in absolution: that is fine as long as they intend to reform. Those who approve the actions of sinners, or condemn in them what they themselves do, are also worthy of death. They seem to escape punishment now, but later theirs will be worse. So death is not evil: it does not yet exist as a bitter reality for the living; the others have already passed through and feel nothing in their body and their souls are free. (7.28-30)

Ambrose takes up the theme of the last lines of section 20 (7.27) and dwells on the instability of the goods of this world. They never satisfy completely. He refers again to the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, where the dead are praised over the living (see 2:4). Added here is the idea of the bitterness of life, greater than that of death. Again, for those looking for homiletic material and joiners, here is another repetition.

22. If the living consider death terrible, it is not death itself that is terrible, but their opinion of death: each interprets it according to his disposition or dreads it because of his conscience. "The wound of each one's conscience accuses him, not the bitterness of death. Indeed, for the just man death is a harbor of peace and quiet; for the wicked it is imagined as shipwreck. In reality, for those who greatly fear death, it is not grievous to die but grievous to live under the fear of death. So death is not grievous but the fear of death; and fear belongs to belief and opinion/imagination (*opinio*). Opinion belongs to our infirmity; it is the opposite of truth. For from truth comes strength, from opinion comes weakness. And opinion does not come from

¹⁶⁰ See Ambrose, *De Officiis*, ed. Ivor Davidson, 1.67; 222-225; 228-230 and the introduction, 81 (cf. 1.72). In part three, we will return to this question of the relation between decorum and virtue in Ambrose.

death at all but from life. So what is grievous is found to belong more to life. Thus, it is clear that the fear of death should not be referred to death but to life. We have nothing to fear in death if our life has incurred nothing fearful. Now, the wise dread punishments for sin, but sins are acts of the living and so in our power; but death means nothing to us (*mors autem nihil ad nos*). It is the separation of body and soul; the soul is released (*absolvitur*), the body deceased (*resolvitur*). What is released rejoices, what is deceased and returned to the earth feels nothing. What feels nothing is nothing to us (*quod nihil sentit nihil ad nos*).” To those who think death an evil one may reply that through life there is a passage to death; but through death, and only through it, is there a return to life. The wise await death as rest after their labors and as an end to evils. (8.31-2)

This section is filled with philosophical and classical allusions recognizable to any of Ambrose’s readers. (1) The first line is a reference to the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus, no.5,¹⁶¹ as is the idea that sin is one of those things that are in our power, and therefore something we can change and control (*Ench.*no.1). (2) Several lines down there is again the metaphor of death as a harbor of peace and tranquility (see section 11 above). (3) In the whole of paragraph 8.31 Ambrose plays on the contrast between knowledge and opinion.¹⁶² He associates opinion with fear, and it signifies ideas that are vague and as much the fruit of anxiety as of thought. This is why Ambrose says that opinion comes from life not death. Finally, (4) there are the Epicurean maxims: “Death is nothing to us” and “What senses nothing is nothing to us.”¹⁶³ This paragraph ends with a “surprise” reference to the resurrection of the dead, surprise because it is an effective argument mainly among Christians, embedded in a series of philosophical maxims, which have nothing to do with resurrection. This shows how closely woven the traditional philosophical attitudes towards death were with the attitudes of fourth-century Christians towards death. One small point, however, may be significant here. In the first of my Observations, on the penalty of

¹⁶¹ Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death that it is terrible. When therefore, we are hindered, or disturbed, or grieved, let us never attribute it to others, but to ourselves; that is, to our own principles. (*Ench.*5)

¹⁶² This is a common theme in Plato. See for example *Theatetus* 161; *Meno* 97-8.

¹⁶³ Hermann Usener, *Epicurea*, 338; 341; 500. *Principal Doctrines*, 2; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 3.830.

death, I said that Ambrose interpreted the Genesis text in such a way as to accommodate a positive view of death. While this interpretation does not necessarily contradict the Biblical text, this is not the obvious meaning of it. The literal sense, without interpretation, is that God made suffering followed by death the punishment for Adam's fall. Ambrose does not say here that this last group he addresses imagines (*opinor*) death to be evil, but rather they think it is (*puto*). This is a small difference, but it may reflect the fact that some in Ambrose's audience did not accept his interpretation of death as a good. Here, therefore, he is addressing them also and saying, even if you think death is in fact a punishment for sin and so a bad thing, you cannot come to the resurrection without it. So even for you death is, in one sense at least, a good.

23. The foolish fear death as the greatest of evils for two reasons: [1] they call it total destruction, though there cannot be a total destruction of man, since the soul survives the body, with the provision that resurrection is in store for the body itself. [2] they are terrified by punishments, elaborated in the stories of the poets. [Ambrose gives classic examples: Tartarus, Cerberus, Charon, the Furies, etc.; he is weighing in on an old *topos*] I would not deny that there are punishments after death, but why do we attribute to death what happens after death? If what happens after death should be referred to death, the same things which happen after life may be ascribed to life.... As we said before, death is a separation of soul and body, not a bad dissolution since to be dissolved and be with Christ is better by far. So indeed, death is not the worst thing that can happen generally speaking; it is the worst for sinners (Ps.33:22), but precious for the just (Ps.115:6). From this it is clear that bitterness belongs not to death but to guilt. (8.32b-33)

The first reason is an irrational fear of "total destruction," the second is a fear of the punishments recounted by the poets. Ambrose answers the first by stating that the soul survives the body and that death contains within it a provision for the resurrection of the body itself. He brings in a reflection from Plotinus's En.1.7, which he followed closely earlier: "Even if there are punishments in Hades, it will be again life that is an evil for it, there too, because it is not simply life." But note the casuistic turn: "I would not deny that there are punishments after death, but why do

we attribute to death what happens after death? If what happens after death should be referred to death, the same things which happen after life may be ascribed to life....” From this it follows that the real fear and bitterness come not from death itself but from guilt. No doubt Ambrose is right here, but his argument does not sit well. It is like a verdict rung from the defense. In this regard it is interesting that the final argument Augustine gives after years of hard confrontation with Julian of Eclanum, is that physical death, the separation of soul from body, is not natural but a punishment for sin and a sign of this is that it instills fear in all, even in good men.¹⁶⁴

24. The Greek term for death is excellent; they call it “end” (τελευτή), because it is the end of this (*istius*) life. The Scriptures also call it “sleep,” as in “Lazarus our friend sleeps, but I go to rouse him.” (Jn.11:25) Sleep is good because it is repose, as it is written: “I have slept and taken my rest and I have awakened, because the Lord will uphold me.” (Ps.3:6) Sweet is the repose of death; the Lord rouses those who rest, because the Lord is Resurrection. We should not praise anyone, however, before they are dead (Sir.11:28), because all may fall as long as they live. “Death, therefore, is a witness to life.” For if the captain may not be praised before he has brought the ship into port, how can you praise a man before he has come into the anchorage of death? He himself is his own pilot and he is tossed about on the deep of this life: as long as he is on these billows, he sails in the midst of shipwrecks. The general does not take the wreath before the battle is won; the soldier does not lay down his arms or receive his pay until the enemy is vanquished. So death is the completion of service, the fullness of pay, the favor of discharge.... Job esteemed death highly and coveted the blessing of the man on the point of death. We should always remember this and when we see others on the point of death, we should help them and say, “May the blessing of the one about to die come upon us” (Job 29:13). (8:34-37)

The use of τελευτή for death is common in Greek;¹⁶⁵ we often use “end” in the same sense. Ambrose points out that it is an excellent usage because it signifies the end of *this* life (only, and not of life in general) and so it agrees with Scripture, in which death is called sleep. Ambrose is still focused on a philosophical argument (*humana ratio*; paragraph 10.43) for the

¹⁶⁴ O vocem naturae, confessionem poenae! (Augustine, Serm.299.9), cited by Rebillard, 44; see also, 37-8.

¹⁶⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 7.104, XVI.787; Heroditus, *Hist.*I.3031 and 31.15; Plato, *Phaedo* 91b and 118, *Gorgias* 516a; etc. as well as numerous examples in the LXX (eg.Gen.6:17; Ex.9:6) and the Greek New Testament (eg.Mt.9:18; Jn.11:39)

goodness of death, but the tenor is changing. As indicated in the earlier Observation on the Resurrection he speaks more of the Resurrection in this last half of the treatise as the final outcome of a life well lived, though the moral urgency is maintained until the end. Ambrose uses beautiful and classical images here to illustrate the maxim: Praise no one before he is dead. If life has been well lived, then death comes as a safe anchorage after a stormy voyage,¹⁶⁶ a wreath given to the victorious general, the pay and discharge for the soldier once the battle is won.

DIVISION TEN (SECTIONS 25-27)

A visual commentary on the event of death and the separation of the soul from the body followed by the concluding argument that the soul does not die at death.

One final salvo on the snares of the flesh (a description of the process by which a young man is captured by a harlot)

25. “Who would doubt the goodness of death, since it quiets down and subdues what is restless and anxious, what is shameful, what is hostile to us, what is violent, what is furious and incites us to all vices; and the wild beast, as it were, is shut up in the cave of the tomb. Its fury is abandoned lifeless and the dead structure of the organs dissolves into the earth (*emortua compago viscerum in terram resolvitur*); but that which is kindred to the virtues, a friend of discipline, eager for glory, a follower of the good, subject to God, flies out and up to that (*illud*) sublime height and remains with that (*illo*) pure, eternal, and immortal Good; it adheres to it [the Good] itself¹⁶⁷ and is with it [the Good] itself from whom it has [received] a bond of kinship, as someone has said, ‘of whose offspring we are’ (Acts, 17:28).” (9.38a)

Our intellectual custom is so radically different, it is difficult to imagine the interior attitude of one who believed sincerely and deeply that the *man is the soul* and the body an unruly covering. It seems to me, however, that this section, more than any other in the *De Bono Mortis*, shows us how Ambrose and his contemporaries felt about the body and death. After death we will finally be rid of this horrid beast, it will be definitively shut up in the tomb, where it will

¹⁶⁶ See 1Cor. 1:22-25. See also sect. 11 above.

¹⁶⁷ The pronouns here are *ipsi* and *ipso*, not *ei* and *eo*. This may not be significant here, but the nuance is “to the Good itself, as it is in itself. Note also the use of *illud* here where Ambrose consistently uses *hoc* or *istud* in reference to the physical body before death, in this life.

decay into nothing. We ourselves, on the other hand, will be free to see and enjoy pure Goodness as it is in itself. And why would anyone wish to receive the body back again in the next life? Even if it were well controlled, what would be the point? This paragraph shows why it was so difficult for the Greeks (in the Pauline use of the term) to see the resurrection of the body as a significant and *good* outcome for the human race.¹⁶⁸ We saw earlier that Plotinus uses the same metaphor of the beast for the body (section 20 above). It comes from Plato's *Republic* IX, 588b-90b, where the soul is likened to an imaginary animal made from (1) a many headed, protean beast, (2) a lion, and (3) a man, all combined inside the form of a man. The task of the just man is to nourish his interior menagerie, reconciling the heads of the manifold to one another, strengthening the lion over the manifold, and finally encouraging the interior man to rule them all. There is no question of death in the *Republic*. Plotinus, in En.1.1.7,21, has no need to distinguish there between the interior lion and the manifold beast; they both represent the lower regions of man, in opposition to the part we should consider to be the real man: "the beast is the body which has been given life; but the true man is other, pure of these [bodily affections], having the virtues." (En.1.1.10,7-9). Following Plato (*Rep.* V,518e), Plotinus says that some of the basic virtues resulting from habit and early formation do belong to the enlivened beast, that is, the combined living being. The principle virtues, however – all those requiring thought – belong to the real man, the intellectual soul.¹⁶⁹ Ambrose here looks back at Plato through Plotinus's lens, but adds a dimension of the definitive liberation caused by death.

In addition to the beast imagery, this section begins an intense dialogue between Socrates and Ambrose. Hadot presents parallel texts that show the relation between passages from the

¹⁶⁸ 1Cor.1:22-5.

¹⁶⁹ See Plotinus, En.1.3.10-11 and Armstrong's notes, *Plotinus I* (Loeb), 115-7.

Phaedo and sections 25 through 29 (9.38-9.42) of the *De Bono Mortis*.¹⁷⁰ He lines up the passages and leaves it at that. I think, in fact, this whole section does show an unmistakable appeal to Plato on Ambrose's part, though he rarely translates word for word. Rather, he has read the *Phaedo* and transfers the general drift of the argument, with alterations, to a new, though related, context. The first parallel is similar to the one we saw earlier in section eight, though the section of the *Phaedo* is different. It occurs here in the second sentence of section 25 (above). In the *Phaedo* 79-81a, Socrates is arguing from the condition of the soul in a state of wisdom to a similar but eternal state of the soul after death. Ambrose only wishes to describe the state of the soul after death. He takes the phrase at 79d for the result of Socrates' argument at 81a. At 79d Socrates says, "Whenever she [the soul] investigates with herself alone, she arrives at what is pure, eternal, immortal, and unchanging;¹⁷¹ and as she is kindred to it, she comes to be with it more and more (γίγνεται)."¹⁷² The idea that the separation of the soul from the body allows it to adhere to the divine, to which it is naturally related, is the same in Ambrose, who refers to Paul's citation at Acts.17:28. The attributes, the kinship, and the inherence is the same.

The vivid and poetic representation of the separate courses of body and soul after death is a distillation of what one finds throughout the *Phaedo*. It is more intense in Ambrose than in Plato, but the fundamental idea is the same. To what extent is the description here a true picture of Ambrose's personal conviction? His pointed references to the language of Plato throughout this and the following sections seem to indicate that he intends his audience to be reminded of the *Phaedo* and of the dialogues in general, though as always his examples come from Scripture.

¹⁷⁰ Hadot, *Platon*, 215-217.

¹⁷¹ The Greek is ὡσαύτως. This is more than unchanging. It means always such as it is and fully so. See the *simile sibi* in sect. 34 below.

¹⁷² See also *Phaedo*, 84b. See also numerous passages from Plotinus, eg. En. 1.6.7, 6.7.34.

26. So clearly, the soul does not die with the body, because it does not belong to the body. Scripture shows this in many ways: [1] Adam received from the Lord our God the breath of life and “he became a living soul (*animam uiuentem*)” (Gen.2:7). [2] And David says, “Return, my Soul, into your rest... for [the Lord] has freed my feet from the snare. I shall be pleasing to the Lord in the land of the living.” (Ps.114:7-9). Rest for the soul is the land of the living, where sin cannot penetrate. [3] This region below (*ista*) is full of the dead because it is full of sin; it is well said, “Let the dead bury their dead” (Mt.8:22)... [4] Also, “His soul shall linger among the good and his descendents shall inherit the earth” (Ps.24:13). That is: the soul of one who fears God shall dwell among the good, in such a way that he shall always be with them and shall live like them. This may be taken to refer to one who is physically dead but also to one who is still in the body, so that he also, if he fears God, may dwell among the good and be taken with heavenly things. He may have full possession of his body, master it and reduce it to a kind of slavery (cf. 1Cor.9:27); he may [already] possess the inheritance of glory and the heavenly promises. (9.38b-39)

If the total disparity between body and soul is such as described above, it is clear that the soul cannot die with the body because it has nothing in it that belongs to the body. We must wait until section 29 (9.42) for the logical development and conclusion based on the final argument of the *Phaedo* from opposites and the non-reception of one opposite (e.g. heat) in a form (e.g. snow) of which its opposite (cold) is an essential property. Ambrose summarizes this well known argument there. In the interim he gives four examples from the Scriptures of the opposition between death and life. At the end of this section he returns to the duality present in the *Phaedo*: the wise man already enjoys in this life to some degree at least the same immunity to death as his soul will enjoy in life after death.

27. “Thus, if we wish after the death of this (*huius*) body to be among good things (Ps.24:13), let us take care lest our soul be glued to this (*huic*) body, mix with it, inhere in it; lest it be lured by the body and inebriated, as it were, by its passions, reel and stagger. She must not entrust herself to it and its pleasures and thus hand herself over to its senses. For its eye is error and fraud, since the sense of sight is fallible, and its ear is deceit, since the sense of hearing is fooled, and its taste delusion. Not without good reason is it said, ‘Let your eyes see what is right; do not let your tongue say what is perverse.’ (Prov.4:24-25); this would not have been said, unless they frequently stray. You saw a harlot, you were captivated by her face and you thought she had a lovely figure: your eyes have erred, they have seen what is perverse but have reported something different. For if they had seen truly, they would have seen the

misshapen countenance of a prostitute, her horrifying impertinence, her licentious insolence, her jaded wantonness, her fowl impurity, the wounds of her character (*animi*), the scars of her conscience. ‘He who looks,’ it says, ‘at a woman lustfully....’ (Mt.5:28). You see that this man sought what was false, who was looking not for truth but for adultery. He sought to see, that he might lust, not that he might know the truth. So the eye wanders, when the emotions wander. The emotions, therefore, deceive, the eye deceives, – and so it is said to you, “Nor shall you let yourself be caught by the eyes” (Prov.6:25); that is, do not let your soul be caught; “for a woman seizes the precious soul of a man” (Prov.6:26). The ear deceives; indeed, with many caressing words the prostitute often captures the heart of a young man. She seduces, deceives, makes sport of him.” (9.40)

After the examples from Scripture Ambrose returns to the *Phaedo* and presents the image Socrates gives at 79c of the soul reeling and drunk, staggering under the influence of the body. Where Plato attributes the cause of her drunkenness to her use of the body as an instrument of perception, Ambrose shifts the emphasis away from faulty knowledge derived from sense perception to erroneous judgment derived from temptations of the flesh. He “plays” a verbal video of a man tempted by a harlot. Then, he assesses the error: “your eyes... have seen what is perverse but have reported something different.” Ambrose has taken Socrates’ argument to a new level. The paragraph ends with a young man held in the snares of a *mulier fornicaria*; she is like a giant spider. This is the first half of a spiritual exercise.¹⁷³ The second half comes in the next paragraph.

¹⁷³ For Ambrose, conducting the exercise belongs to his episcopal office. The goal of the exercise is to know oneself, to see the operation of God within the soul by contemplating one’s inmost thoughts and affections, and finally to “attend to oneself.” See Ambrose, *Hex.* 6.49-50: “iusti anima dicit uel ecclesia: *ego ciuitas munita, ego ciuitas obsessa* (Is.27:3), munita per Christum, obsessa per diabolum. sed non debet obsidionem uereri cui Christus adiutor est; munitur enim gratia spiritali et saecularibus periculis obsidetur. unde et in Canticis habes dictum: *ego murus, et ubera mea turres* (Sg.8:10). murus est ecclesia, turres eius sunt sacerdotes, quibus abundat et de naturalibus uerbum et de moralius disciplina. cognosce ergo te, decora anima. quia imago es Dei. cognosce te, homo, quia gloria es Dei. audi quomodo gloria. propheta dicit: *mirabilis facta est cognitio tua ex me* (Ps.138:6), hoc est: in meo opere tua mirabilior est maiestas, in consilio hominis tua sapientia praedicatur. dum me intueor, quem tu in ipsis cogitationibus occultis et internis affectibus deprehendis, scientiae tuae agnosco mysteria, cognosce ergo te, homo, quantus sis et adtende tibi.”

DIVISION ELEVEN (SECTIONS 28-29)

*Exhortation to adhere to the good; the soul that has no sin does not die.
An introduction of Socrates' concluding remarks to his arguments in the Phaedo
for the immortality of the soul*

28. "So we must not trust these snares and nets which deceive and mock us because our hearts are tempted and our discernment blocked. Our rational thinking is impeded by sight, impeded by hearing, smell, touch, taste.¹⁷⁴ We must not follow things that are lascivious and seductive. Let us follow instead that (*illud*)¹⁷⁵ which is good, let us adhere to it, imitate it. Let its presence, its communication make us better and color our moral actions, Let its society form us; for he who adheres to the good receives from it that by which it is good. For it is written: 'With the holy you shall be holy and with the perverse, perverse, and with the innocent you shall be innocent' (Ps.17:26-7): by assiduous application and imitation, an image of a likeness (*similitudinis imago*) is formed. And so the psalmist adds: 'For it is you, Lord, who light my lamp.' (Ps.17:29). Indeed, he who draws near to the light is more quickly illumined and the splendor of eternal light shines more brilliantly in him, if it is nearby. The soul, therefore, that adheres to that invisible, good, and immortal God, flees these corporeal things and abandons terrestrial, and mortal concerns. She becomes like him whom she desires and in whom she lives and is sustained; and because she tends towards what is immortal, she is not mortal. The soul that sins dies; not, clearly, by some kind of dissolution of herself, but she dies to God, and rightly so, because she lives for sin" (Ez.18:4). (9.41)

This is classic Platonic teaching. Hadot mentions the *Phaedo* 84a-b as a source.¹⁷⁶ Plato says here:

But she [the soul] will calm passion, and follow reason, and dwell in the contemplation of her [philosophy], beholding the true and divine (which is not matter of opinion), and thence deriving nourishment. Thus she seeks to live while she lives, and after death she hopes to go to her own kindred and to that which is like her.

Ambrose says:

But let us follow that (*illud*) which is good, let us adhere to it, imitate it. Let its presence, its communication make us better and color our moral actions, Let its society form us; for he who adheres to the good receives from it that by which it is good.

¹⁷⁴ See sect. 8 above.

¹⁷⁵ From this point on, some form of *ille* is at the head of each phrase.

¹⁷⁶ Hadot, *Platon*, 216. There are other well-known places in Plato, however, where a similar teaching is found; for example, the allegories of the sun and the cave in Books 6 and 7 of the *Republic*.

Ambrose corroborates his statement with the verses from Ps. 17 in which the psalmist says that God acts towards man in the same way as man acts towards him: “You are holy with the holy....” Then he continues to develop the idea that with “assiduous application and imitation” the image of the divine is gradually formed in us; it is the light of God shining within: “The soul, therefore, that adheres to that invisible, good, and immortal God, ... becomes like him whom she desires and in whom she lives and is sustained.”

I think we see Plotinus here as much as Plato. In En.I.6.8-9, which we know Ambrose uses in the *De Isaac*, Plotinus describes in detail the process represented by “assiduous application.” He also emphasizes the advent of divine light within the soul: the soul must become light in order to see light.

And if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop working on your statue till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you.... For one must come to the sight with a seeing power made akin and like to what is seen. No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty. (En.I.6.9,8- 15; 29-34)

The rhetorical build up through sections 27-8 is beautiful and effective. If we have allowed ourselves to be drawn into the spiritual exercise, we see the importance of the step by step development: the process of falling into fornication and adultery and then the reverse process of purification and enlightenment.¹⁷⁷ The conclusion of the exercise is: if it is true that the good infuses light and life into us, and by cleaving to it we become like it, then all the sensuality that clouds that light absolutely must be removed. Adultery seems to be the sin that receives the

¹⁷⁷ The exercises of St. Ignatius have a similar structure in the program for the first and second week.

most vivid descriptions from Ambrose, perhaps because it is the sin most opposed to the kind of purity he counsels for the soul. Perhaps this is one reason why Ambrose loves the *Song of Songs* so much; rightly understood, it is an exquisite combination of purity and true love.

At the end of 9.41 (section 20 above) Ambrose broaches the subject of mortality for the soul. First he states that by tending towards what is immortal, the soul is “not mortal.” Then, he ends the paragraph with, “The soul that sins dies; not, clearly, by some kind of dissolution of herself, but she dies to God, and rightly so, because she lives for sin.” As we saw earlier, Ambrose follows Origen in his ideas about the three types of death (section 3); and Origen is not clear about the soul’s native, essential immortality.¹⁷⁸ Earlier in the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose makes a remark that seems to point in this same direction. He says that David hastened to ask for the forgiveness of sins, while he was still in this life, because “he who has not received remission for his sins here, will not be there (*illic non erit*); indeed he will not be there, [he] who is unable to come to eternal life, since eternal life is the forgiveness of sins.”¹⁷⁹ Here Ambrose says that the soul is “not mortal” because she tends towards what is immortal.¹⁸⁰ He then brings in the idea that the soul who sins truly dies, but that it is a death to God not a death that causes the physical dissolution of the soul.¹⁸¹ What kind of a life can there be after death for the soul of one who died to God in this life? It seems that the soul may only be considered fully alive and immortal in the full sense of the word when she is without sin.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ See Puech and Hadot, 221 with notes 38 and 39.

¹⁷⁹ qui enim hic non acceperit remissionem peccatorum illic non erit; non erit enim, qui ad uitam aeternam non potuerit peruenire, quia uita aeterna remissio peccatorum est (2:5).

¹⁸⁰ He uses the same expression at *In Luc.* 7.39.

¹⁸¹ The soul is created by God, but by nature immortal. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1a Q.75 a.6.

¹⁸² See Puech and Hadot, 207; Augustine develops this idea as the “second death,” *Civ.dei*, 13 *passim*.

29. “The soul, therefore, that does not sin does not die, since she persists in her essential nature (*substantia*), she remains in virtue and glory.¹⁸³ For how can her substance perish, since indeed it is the soul which infuses life [into the body]? To the one in whom the soul is infused, life is infused (cf. Gen. 2:7); and from the one from whom the soul departs, life departs. So the soul is life.¹⁸⁴ How can it admit death, when it is death’s contrary? For just as snow cannot receive heat, but dissolves immediately, and light cannot receive darkness, but dissipates it immediately – for as soon as light is infused, the grimness of darkness is removed, just as when fire is brought near, the icy cold of snow vanishes. – so also the soul, which makes life, does not admit death, it does not die.” (9.41c-42)

This is the conclusion to Ambrose’s argument about death as a good. If the soul does not sin, even though she dies the natural death common to all men, she persists in her essential nature. So if the soul cleaves to God, death cannot hurt her, because she will retain her integrity in death as she has acquired it in life through participation in the Good. Yet, then, Ambrose continues arguing to the *fact* of the immortality of the soul from contraries, so that at the beginning of the next paragraph he comes to his final conclusion: “So we have our argument” (*Habemus ergo rationem*). This is a rhetorical shift to trouble and alert a thoughtful reader.

What the is the argument and what is the conclusion? Socrates’ last argument from the *Phaedo* only attempts to prove that the soul is immortal, in the limited sense that it does not dissolve when death comes, but rather it leaves and goes elsewhere (because life is an essential quality of soul and death is the contrary of life).¹⁸⁵ Socrates’ conclusion, however, says nothing about the goodness of death for the soul. On the contrary, he has argued throughout the *Phaedo* that souls will survive death and receive a just reward. Evil souls either undergo corrective punishment or, if they are incurable, have an evil afterlife. That his last argument only shows the imperishability of the soul and not the goodness of death is borne out by the continuation of the

¹⁸³ Because – from the previous paragraph – she adheres to the Good and becomes like it: *fitque illius similis quod desiderat et in quo uiuit et pascitur* (41).

¹⁸⁴ *anima ergo uita est* (42).

¹⁸⁵ See the *Phaedo* 102b-106e.

Phaedo, in which Socrates encourages his listeners to take great care of their souls, so that they may come through death safely and enter the afterlife in a state of purity and goodness. So again, what is Ambrose doing here? The final paragraphs of the *De Bono Mortis* will answer this question, but before proceeding, we should take a brief look at Socrates' last argument in the *Phaedo*.

EIGHTH OBSERVATION: THE FINAL ARGUMENT OF THE *PHAEDO*
AND AMBROSE'S PRESENTATION OF IT

This short comment on the *Phaedo* is my reflection on the last argument of the dialogue as it pertains to Ambrose's presentation in the *De Bono Mortis*. Part of the effect, however, of Ambrose's development derives from the character of the dialogue itself as a testament to Socrates. Plato himself did not participate in the dialogue of Socrates' final day; and since he signals this fact, we may infer that the dialogue is Plato's creation, the purpose of which was to perpetuate the memory of Socrates, beyond the particular arguments set forth for the immortality of the soul.¹⁸⁶ None of the arguments is convincing, though in some sense the final one comes close. Yet, the dialogue has fired the imagination and love of centuries of readers. In Ambrose's day, it was a well-known and revered text. Consequently, if Ambrose were to create a caricature of Socrates' final argument for the immortality of the soul, he would be sending a message to his readers that they would interpret as confrontational with regard to Plato.

Here briefly is Plato's argument followed by Ambrose's reconfiguring of it. After Socrates gives several arguments for the immortality of the soul, which do not convince all

¹⁸⁶ My point is not that the dialogue in the circumstantial details is pure fiction, but only that Plato's purpose in writing was to present a portrait of Socrates on his last day. The portrait is perhaps even more significant than the particular arguments. If Ambrose, therefore, minimizes the final argument and myth, he may be viewed as engaging in a frontal attack on Socrates himself.

present. Cebes objects that, although the soul may be immortal in the sense that it survives multiple deaths, the day may come when, exhausted from the effort of animating body after body, it finally gives out and dies. This requires Socrates to change his approach and argue that the soul is by nature, or definition, immortal. He does this by returning to the idea of the Forms, to which all of his interlocutors subscribe. The Forms exist and they are absolute qualities such as beauty, goodness, tallness, odd, even and the like. Particular things exist inasmuch as they participate in these absolute Forms. Existing things may sometimes have one form and sometimes the opposite of that form; we are sometimes hot and sometimes cold. Also, existing things may show evidence of having opposite forms in relation to other things that exist; Simmias is tall with respect to Socrates but short with respect to Phaedo. The Forms, however, in and of themselves, never become the opposite of what they are but always remain the same. In order to make this point clear, Socrates brings in some examples. These examples do not bear the weight of the argument, they only illustrate his point. One such is fire and snow: fire and snow are not opposites but they have as qualities Forms that are. So when heat is applied to snow, cold does not become hot but instead it vanishes – since the Form of Cold never changes – and the snow will either perish or “retire” and go somewhere else.

Now, if something exists that participates in a form *by essence*, in such a way that if the form disappeared the thing would cease to exist, then the form would always be present in the thing, as long as that thing exists. Socrates gives the example of the number three. The form “odd” belongs to the number three and the two can never be separated. Taking the argument one step farther, things that have an inseparable form – as the number three has “odd” and the numbers two and four have “even” – though the numbers are not opposites, still they cannot exist to-

gether because they have inseparable Forms that are opposites. So although the number four is not the opposite of three, if “even” is applied to three, it cannot remain three but must become the number two or four.

Likewise, the existing thing that we call “soul” is in the same relation to the form “life” as the number three is to “odd.” The two are always found together: the soul is a principle of life for the body. Now death is the opposite of life; but since life is an inseparable form of the soul, death cannot come into the soul. If by definition the soul does not admit death, then the soul is by definition immortal.¹⁸⁷ So when death comes to the body, the soul cannot stay but must “retire” and go elsewhere. The problem with this argument is that the soul in the presence of death may be like three, which simply perishes when “even” comes to it. We know that life and death are incompatible opposites, but we still cannot know for certain whether, when death comes, the soul disappears or whether it “retires” and goes elsewhere. If, however, the soul is one of the imperishable Forms, or somehow participates in the Form of Soul, which is not the stated argument but is implied by it, then it cannot die. The strength of this argument lies in the association Socrates makes between the soul and the Forms. We still do not know what the soul is really, but if we find a way to show that it is essentially unchanging and incorruptible, in whole or part, then it does begin to look as if it may be immortal.¹⁸⁸

Little of this argument is of interest to Ambrose in paragraph 9.42 (section 29) of the *De Bono Mortis*. His own argument is rhetorical and not philosophical. That is, he is arguing to his audience instead of addressing the real issue of death as a good or even the issue of the soul as

¹⁸⁷ But one cannot argue from the definition of something to actual existence.

¹⁸⁸ It is not enough to argue to the immortality of the soul from the fact of the contraries: life and death. We need to argue from the causes of life and death. If we can show that the soul is by nature immune to the cause of death – corruption – then we can see that the soul, or that part of it that is immune, is immortal.

immortal. As we saw above, he switches from an argument in paragraph 41 about the soul's *moral* survival of physical death to the argument from the *Phaedo* about the soul's survival of *physical* death, regardless of its moral state. The other move that Ambrose makes is to start out saying that Life is an essential quality of the soul and then, after some filler, to say that the soul is life itself. Socrates had kept these two separate: one is the thing that has the form, the other is the form. By equating "soul" with "life," however, Ambrose can state glibly that it (the soul/life) cannot possibly admit death because it is the contrary of death. Then, he parades the same kind of opposites given in the *Phaedo* as illustrations of a premise. These same contraries are nothing more than rhetorical flourish in Ambrose, so that he may conclude with a measure of scorn, "And so we have our argument; but this proof is according to human reasoning."¹⁸⁹

Finally, why would Ambrose empty Plato's argument of content in order to dismiss it as a merely human account (*humana ratio*)? Not because he disagrees with Plato and wishes to present a better argument. This is an important point. Ambrose is not being anti-philosophical here; on the contrary, he has engaged in Platonic argument throughout the whole of the *De Bono Mortis*. Plato's Socrates, however, after concluding his arguments goes on to describe the better world to which he is going. The description is a myth, a magnificent detailing of the afterlife in terms of a most beautiful world, like our own, only infinitely better and more beautiful. But Ambrose, the Christian bishop, has in the Fourth Book of Esdras a better alternative to this description. He considered 4 Esdras to be a canonical book of Scripture, and so – in contrast to the musings of Plato – it gives an authoritative and true picture of the afterlife of the soul. By

¹⁸⁹ Habemus ergo rationem. sed *haec* humana, *illud* diuinum, quod ait dominus: *potestatem habeo ponendi animam meam et potestatem habeo iterum sumendi eam* (Jn.10:18). uides igitur quia non moritur cum corpore quae et ponitur et resumitur et in manus dei patris commendatur (Ambrose, *De Bono Mortis*,10.43). (my italics. Pronouns again: the pejorative *haec*).

turning away from Plato towards Esdras, Ambrose shows in the starkest terms possible the limits of Platonism in contrast to the Christian Scriptures.

DIVISION TWELVE (SECTIONS 30-33)

*Ambrose turns from the uncertainty of human argument to the authority of Scripture.
He introduces the Fourth Book of Esdras.*

30. “So we have our argument; but this proof is according to human reasoning; that one is divine, where the Lord says, ‘I have power to lay down my soul and I have power to take it up again.’ (Jn.10:18). So you see that she does not die with the body, if she is both laid down and taken up again, and commended into the hands of God the Father. Perhaps you will say, ‘This is a special case, since it deals with Christ.’” [Ambrose answers this objection with texts that show that some form of immortality is intended by God for all: Lk.12:20; Mt.10:28; Ps.118:109; Prov.21:1]. “If the soul is in the hand of God, our soul is not shut up with the body in the tomb nor held by the funeral pyre, but it is established in a holy and reverent rest. So in vain do men construct costly tombs, as if they were receptacles for the soul as well as the body.”¹⁹⁰ (10.43-44)

For Ambrose, the real proofs worth retaining come from Scripture and are divine. In this paragraph and in the rest of the *De Bono Mortis*, he speaks of souls after death, both the good and the evil. He clearly envisions an interim period of waiting and preparation for the last judgment. The taking up of one’s life again is not a special case with Christ, but is for all men. For example, he cites Lk.12:20 where the spiritually improvident man who stores up his rich harvest to take his ease, but God says to him, “Fool, this night your soul is required of you” (Lk.12:20) and Ambrose adds, “The soul will be asked back, not destroyed.”¹⁹¹ At the end of the paragraph he says that the souls of the dead will be established “in a holy and reverent rest.”¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Cicero, *Tusc.*1.43.

¹⁹¹ qui scis an nocte a te tua anima reposcatur? (Lk.12:20) numquid dixit: moriatur in te anima tua? sed: *reposcatur a te*. quae data est *reposcitur* uel repetunt a te. repetitur enim anima, non interimitur. quae repetitur manet, quod interimitur non manet (10.43, 740,7-8).

¹⁹² si anima in manu Dei est, non utique anima nostra sepulchro simul cum corpore includitur nec busto tenetur. sed quiete pia fungitur (10.44, 741.4).

For those among his readers who revered Plato, Ambrose's approach must have felt like a snub. The last argument in the *Phaedo* introduces a solemn moment in one of Plato's most moving dialogues. After much labor Socrates has finally convinced Cebes that the soul will not perish and that he (Socrates) will soon depart for a better life. Before the final preparations are made for his death, Socrates can now describe the better world his friends are prepared, by the previous arguments, to appreciate. Then he drinks the hemlock and his friends lose one who "of all men of his time was the wisest, the most just and the best" (*Phaedo* 108).

Here and in the following paragraphs Ambrose attacks all this solemnity. The subtle implication is that if this is all Socrates can come up with at such a moment, there is no point in wasting one's time with him. Ambrose does here to Socrates what Augustine does to Lucretia in the *De civitate dei* (1.19). They both deconstruct treasured icons. Henceforth, Ambrose leaves Plato behind, only returning to the *Phaedo* to show how incomplete and distorted the views of Socrates and the Platonists are when compared to the Christian Scriptures.

31. "That there are higher dwellings for souls is clearly shown from the testimony of Scripture. Thus, in the books of Esdras, we read that when the day of judgment comes, 'The earth shall give up the bodies of the dead and the dust shall give up what sleeps in the tomb, the remains of the dead. And the dwellings will give up the souls that have been committed to them and the Most High shall be revealed upon his throne of judgment.' (4Esd.7:32-33). These are the dwellings of which the Lord says there are many mansions in his Father's house, which he goes to the Father to prepare for his disciples (cf. Jn.14:2). I have used the writings of [the Old Testament] Esdras, so that the pagans may understand that what they admire in the books of philosophy are transferred there from our books. And, if only they had not mixed in superfluous and useless additions, so that they say that souls are common to both men and beasts and that the highest reward for the souls of the great philosophers is to migrate into bees or nightingales. Thus, those who formerly would have nourished the human race with their discourse, would afterwards console them with the sweetness of their honey or the charm of their singing. It would have been enough for them to say that souls, liberated from their bodies, seek *Hades* (*Αἰδης*), that is the place that is "not seen" (*ἀίδη*), which place in Latin we call *infernus*. Scripture calls those dwelling places repositories, or chambers, for souls (4Esd.7:32)." "[In these dwellings] souls anticipate their due reward: punishment for

some, the palm of victory for others....” In answer to an anti-Christian objection that those who lived good lives long ago need to wait for an unjust amount of time before receiving their reward (at the last judgment), Ambrose says that many of those who have waited long will be seen to be greater, like children born to parents in the vigor of youth (4Esd.5:52-55). “For this world has weakened due to the great number of generations, like the womb of one who gives birth and like some creature growing old, who lays down the vigor of her youth, since now the strength of her vital powers is withering.” Nevertheless, the intervening time before the last judgment is not without some reward or punishment. The souls of sinners dread the splendor of God’s radiant light, before which as before a witness they will remember that they have erred. The joy of just souls is arranged according to certain orders. [According to Esdras there are seven orders of increasing glory distributed according to merit. Ambrose describes them and also 1Cor.15:22-24].¹⁹³ (10.45-11.48)

Just as Plato made Socrates describe in a myth the journey and state of the soul after death, so Ambrose refers to the statement of Christ: “In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (Jn.14:2). Then he says that he will not use this statement from the New Testament but rather “the writings of Esdras, so that the pagans may understand....” The pagans have debased the truth by saying that souls are common to beasts and men and that the souls of good men will return in the next life to the bodies of bees, nightingales, swans, etc. They would have been better advised to stick with the facts, that the souls of the dead go to *Hades*. All of this is a critique of the *Phaedo*.¹⁹⁴

NINTH OBSERVATION: THE *PHAEDO* MYTH AND THE FOURTH BOOK OF ESDRAS

The parallels between the *Phaedo* myth and the Fourth Book of Esdras are striking. One can easily see Ambrose making the connection between the two. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates maps out a mythical itinerary of the soul after death and describes her possible dwellings. He begins by

¹⁹³ Note that the joy of the fifth dwelling consists in release from the prison of the corruptible body: Quintus autem ordo exultationis habet uberrimae suavitatem, quod ex hoc corruptibili corporis carcere in lucem libertatemque pervenerint (11.48).

¹⁹⁴ See *Phaedo*, 80d, 81e-82c and 113a: the myth of Er, Republic 619e-620c. See also Hadot, “Platon et Plotin,” 217-9. Hadot gives some of the relevant texts from the *Phaedo* and the *De Bono Mortis* in parallel columns. My analysis is more detailed and different. It is not enough to give parallel texts.

saying that the only things she can take with her are nurture and education. After judgment souls go their separate ways. Every pure soul who has lived her life under the guidance of the gods has her proper home (108). At 109 Socrates begins the famous description of the earth and all its regions. Deep in the middle are the great rivers of Tartarus and the Acherusian lake that receives the dead and from which they depart again for their next life on earth. In this life we dwell in a middle region, like ants or frogs around a pond, in one of the hollows where water, mist, and lower air have collected. The true surface of the whole earth is far above in the ether. We are deceived in thinking that we live on the surface. The fair and lustrous region above is the dwelling for those who have lived good and holy lives. For those who have purified themselves through philosophy, even fairer mansions are prepared, where they will live forever totally free of the body. It is a beautiful, enchanting description. Socrates concludes by saying that his description – referring to good souls – of “our souls and our dwellings” (οἱ κήσεις; 114 d3) may not be exactly as they are in reality, but since the soul is immortal, a man of sense may think that something like it is true: “The prize is noble and the hope is great” (114c8). Plato appeals to the imaginations of good men, in order to encourage them in the arduous ascent.

In the Fourth Book of Esdras Ambrose has something similar and as beautiful. It belongs to the tradition of Biblical apocalyptic literature.¹⁹⁵ It provided him with the Biblical counterpart to the dwelling places of the soul in the *Phaedo*. In chapter seven Esdras has a prophetic vision of what happens to souls after death and before the final judgment. It is the interim period, the ‘time’ between lives (Plato), or between time and eternity (Esdras). The fate of those who have scorned the law of God is described first (4Esd.7:78-87). These will not enter into the dwelling

¹⁹⁵ For detailed discussion of origin and complex transmission of the Fourth Book of Esdras (Ezra), see Stone, 1-43.

places and find rest; instead they wander about over seven ways, according to their sins: in the first way because they have scorned the law of God, in the second because they have lost the ability to repent, in the third they see the rewards prepared for the just, and so forth.

In the *De Bono Mortis* Ambrose seems to describe only the fate of the good according to Esdras, though there is a lacuna in the text (at 10.47, p.743,3). Those who have faithfully kept the law of God shall be ushered into the dwellings (*habitacula*) of the dead. They are called *promptuaria*, storerooms or chambers, for souls, where they are lodged until the final judgment. These dwellings are arranged according to a sevenfold order of increasing joy and glory, according to the perfection of the souls, or perhaps according to a process of purification?¹⁹⁶ The souls in the first dwelling have vanquished the flesh and not given in to its enticements. Those in the second, free from anxiety, enjoy the security of the anticipated reward for their diligence and innocence. In the third they rely on the divine testimony that they have kept the law and need have no fear of an uncertain verdict on their actions. In the fourth they begin to foresee their future glory; they rest in great peace, supported by a guard of angels. In the fifth, they have the sweetness of the richest exultation because they have come out of the prison of the corruptible body into light and liberty and they begin to possess their promised heritage. This is the order of peace, because it is that of resurrection. In the sixth order they see that their faces shall shine like the sun and they shall be compared to the moon and stars. In the seventh they shall exult with confidence and hasten to see the face of Him to whom they have offered a faithful and devoted service. Ambrose follows Esdras closely in this magnificent description of the anticipated joys of eternal life and glory.

¹⁹⁶ 4Esdr. 7:91-99 and *De Bono Mortis* 10.48.

The composition and naming conventions of 4 Esdras are complex. It may appear in modern Bibles among the apocrypha as 2 or 4 Esdras (Ezra).¹⁹⁷ Jerome named it 4 Esdras (since the Vulgate has three other books named after Esdras) and this number has remained attached to the scholarly name. The book, as it appears at the back of the Vulgate, contains a central section, chapters 3-14, that is regarded as a Jewish apocryphal text, originally composed in Hebrew about thirty years after the destruction of Jerusalem (around the year 100 A.D.). Chapters 1-2 and chapters 15-16 are later additions.¹⁹⁸ They are considered to be Christian additions and though they appear in the MSS in varying configurations with the central section, they also may have separate names; 5 and 6 Esdras.¹⁹⁹ Chapters 3-14 form 4 Esdras proper. The composite 4 Esdras was never admitted into the Canon in the Western Church; though it was used in Christian circles, perhaps as early as the time of Clement of Alexandria through the Middle Ages.²⁰⁰ Ambrose appears only to use the central section, 4 Esdras proper. He uses it primarily here at the end of the *De Bono Mortis*, but also in the *De Spiritu Sancto*, the *De Fide* (a reference to the angel Uriel), and the first funeral oration for Satyrus.²⁰¹ In letter 21 (34) he responds to questions Horontianus has asked him about the nature of the soul: "I advise you to read the book of Esdras who disregarded those petty opinions (*nugas*) of the philosophers and with a deeper and more

¹⁹⁷ We will use the form "Esdras," since this most resembles Ambrose's "Hesdras."

¹⁹⁸ Ch.15-16 (6 Esdras) before the fifth century; ch.1-2 by mid-fifth century at the latest. See Theodore A. Bergen, "Christian Influence on the Transmission History of 4, 5, and 6 Ezra," *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, ed. James VanderKam and William Adler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 126-7. See also Stone, 43.

¹⁹⁹ Bergen, 116-7.

²⁰⁰ At the Council of Trent a definitive decision was made against the canonical status of 4 Esdras. The composite was included, however, at the back of the Vulgate, reaffirmed by Clement VIII (1592-1605). See Stone, 43. It passed into the English Biblical tradition among the Apocrypha of the King James Bible and is still found at the back of the Revised Standard Version. The original Hebrew text is lost, as is the Greek translation (presumed source of the later translations). But versions exist in Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Georgian, Arabic (2 independent translations), Armenian, and Coptic. Bergen, 104 and Stone, 1-8.

²⁰¹ Interestingly, these are all early works.

hidden wisdom, which he gathered from Revelation, has succinctly shown them [souls] to be of a higher substance.”²⁰²

32. “Since, therefore, the just have this reward, that they see the face of God and that light which illumines every man (cf. Jn. 1:9), let us, from now on, clothe ourselves with zeal of such a sort, that our soul may draw near to God, that our prayer draw near, that our desire may cling to him, [and] that we not be separated from him. And here in this life, by meditating, reading, seeking, let us join ourselves (*copulemur*) to God; let us know him as we are able. Here we know in part, because here all is imperfect; there it is perfect. Here we are of little account; there we are strong. ‘We see now,’ he [Paul] says, ‘in a glass dimly but then face to face’ (1 Cor. 13:12). Then his face shall be revealed and we will be allowed to gaze upon the glory of God, which now, enmeshed as they are in the compacted entrails of this body and darkened by various stains and deposits of this flesh, our souls cannot see without impairment (*sincere*). ‘For who,’ it says, ‘shall see my face and live?’ (Ex. 33:20). And rightly; for if our eyes cannot endure the rays of the sun and if someone gazes too long in the direction of the sun, conventional wisdom says he becomes blind: if a creature cannot look at a creature without distortion and harm to himself, how without danger to himself can he look at the radiating countenance of his eternal Creator, while he is still covered with the skin of this body?” (11.49)

Our response to this vision of future happiness must be to increase our zeal and our dedication. Ambrose describes each soul as he would the bride of the *Song of Songs*: we must draw near to God, our desire should cling to him, let us join ourselves to him. The means are the staple activities of the ascetic life: prayer, desire, meditation, and reading. Again, we are presented with the stark contrast between the glorious vision of light and the weakness and obscurity of our sight in the present life. The cause is always the same: the engulfing weight of the body and the flesh. By emphasizing this contrast and bringing in the image of the sun, Ambrose keeps his reflection within the general confines of Platonic and Plotinian imagery.²⁰³

²⁰² *Ep.* 21(34), 2: De quo tibi Hesdrae librum legendum suadeo, qui et illas philosophorum nugas despexerit et abditore prudentia, quam conlegerat ex revelatione, perstrinxerit eas substantiae esse superioris.

²⁰³ See, for example, Plato, *Phaedo*, 99d; Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.30; Plotinus, *En.* I.6.9 where Plotinus says that no one can see the sun without first becoming sun-like. One thinks also of the myth of the cave in the *Republic* 7, where the souls turned towards the sun are at first blinded by the light.

33. “So let us not be afraid to be taken from among men, let us not dread that end which is the common debt for all, in which Esdras found the reward for his devotion, when the Lord said to him, ‘For you shall be taken from men and you shall dwell thenceforth with my Son and with those like you.’ (4Esd.14:9). Now if it was glorious and joyous for him to dwell with his peers, how much more glorious and more joyous shall it be for us to go and live with our betters, with those whose deeds we admire. Indeed, who is first (*prior*), Esdras or Plato?²⁰⁴ For Paul followed the sayings of Esdras not of Plato. Esdras revealed, according to the revelation conferred upon him, that the just would be with Christ and with the saints. From this (*hinc*), Socrates says that he is hastening to those (*illos*) gods of his, to those most excellent men. Thus, it is our sayings that are more excellent and take precedence in the writings of the philosophers. And he (Plato or Socrates) posited things of which he had no real proof of his own, but we have the authority of divine teaching and precept: [1] Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ (Mt.17:1-13). [2] Abraham received two others along with God as guests (Gen.18:1-15). [3] Jacob saw the encamped army of God (Gen.32:1-2). [4] Through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, Daniel declared that the just shine like the sun and stars in Heaven (Dan.12:3). Relying on these [the just in Heaven] let us go forth undaunted to the council of the patriarchs, undaunted to Abraham our father; when the day comes, let us go without anxiety to that crowd of the saints and the gathering of the just. We shall be going to our fathers, to our instructors in the faith, so that even if our works are deficient, our faith shall assist us and our heritage be preserved.... In Heaven there will be no light from the sun or moon or stars, but ‘only the brilliance of God will shine forth.’ (4Esd.7:10). For the Lord will be the light of all (cf.Rev.21:23), that true light that illumines every man (Jn1:4,9) shall shine resplendently for all. Let us go there, where the Lord Jesus has prepared dwellings for his servants.” [no.54 answers the objection that Christ prepares dwellings only for his disciples, so that Heaven is only for a few]. (11.50-12:54)

By now Ambrose’s strategy is perhaps clear enough. He uses Esdras to show that Christians have the same wisdom, ends, and hopes as the Platonists. The only difference between them is that the Christians have received from divine Revelation the authoritative truth, where Plato can only speculate. Ambrose says:

Thus, it is our sayings that are more excellent and take precedence (*praestant*) in the writings of the philosophers. And he (Plato or Socrates) posited things of which he had no real proof of his own, but we have the authority of divine teaching and precept. (11.50,22- 11.51,11)

Ambrose goes on to give, in addition to the prophecy of Esdras, four examples from Scripture in which “more excellent men,” that is saints from the Old and New Testament, appear to men in

²⁰⁴ Throughout this passage, there is a double meaning to *prior* and *praesto*, both temporal and qualitative.

the company of God (e.g. Moses and Elijah with Christ at the Transfiguration). He does not debate the temporal aspect of the borrowing controversy here. Rather, he emphasizes that “our sayings,” that is the Christian teachings, are more *excellent* than theirs, not just prior in time. The real conflict is over the truth and the definitive, authoritative source for it so that – regardless of chronology – Ambrose may contrast his divine revelation to Socrates’ tentative hopes. Plato himself admits that there are large elements of incertitude in his views on the afterlife (*Phaedo* 63b-c). Likewise, in the *Apology* (40a-41d), Socrates expresses a magnificent hope but he cannot be entirely certain things will be as he imagines; death may be after all a long sleep (40d-41d). This is the best he can do. The comparison shows the power of the alternative Ambrose has to offer under the divine authority of the Scriptures.

DIVISION THIRTEEN (SECTIONS 34-36)

Final prayer and exhortation

34. “We follow you, Lord Jesus, but draw us to you that we may follow,”²⁰⁵ since without you no one shall ascend. For you are the way, truth, life (cf. Jn.14:6), power, faith, recompense. Open to us that Good of yours, which David wished to see by dwelling in the house of the Lord (Ps.26:6). Thus, he said, ‘Who shall show us good things?’ (Ps.4:7) and in another place, ‘I believe I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living’ (Ps.26:13). David repeated this often, that you might know that it was from here that the philosophers took that Good they assert to be the highest.²⁰⁶ Open to us, therefore, that true Good of yours, that divine Good, in which we live, have our being, and move (cf. Acts 17:28). Show us that Being which is good, equal to itself (*simile sibi*), indissoluble and immutable forever, in which we shall be eternal, in the recognition of all good. In this Good is pure rest, immortal light, eternal grace, the kindly inheritance of souls, and secure tranquility, not subject to

²⁰⁵ Sequimur te, Domine Iesu: sed ut sequamur accerse, quia sine te nullus ascendet. Does this sound like Augustine? See, for example, *Conf.* 10.17: vocasti et clamasti et rupisti surditatem meam: coruscasti, splenduisti et fugasti caecitatem meam: flagrasti, et duxi spiritum, et anhelus tibi, gustavi et esurio et sitio, tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem tuam.

²⁰⁶ The Latin has “ut scires.” We often translate “ut” as “in order that,” but it also means “with the result that,” or both together, as in a phrase such as, “Come here that I may see you better.” (purpose and result). Purpose alone would be too strong here; both is better. Ambrose would say that David was a prophet and so foresaw the future in some way; but additionally, if you know your Scriptures you should be aware that the philosophers took the idea from us.

death but rescued from death; where there are no tears, no weeping, where your saints are absolved and freed from error and anxiety, folly and ignorance, fear and dread, lust and all the impurities and passions of the body, where there is the land of the living; and that we may add authority to this assertion: of this Good the prophet says, ‘Return, my soul, into your rest, for the Lord has been kind and bountiful to you, since he has rescued my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from falling. I shall please the Lord in the land of the living’ (Ps.114:7-9).” (12:55)

Though this prayer is addressed to Christ, it is odd that the language and the tone are from Plato. It has three main petitions: “Open to us that good of yours. Open to us, therefore, that true good of yours, that divine good, in which we live, have our being, and move. Show us that being that is good, equal to itself (*simile sibi*), indissoluble and immutable forever.”²⁰⁷ Clearly Ambrose describes here the Christian vision of God and blessedness in Heaven in terms of the Platonic good. The petitions, however, are substantiated with texts from Scripture, mainly from the psalms; and Ambrose mentions David by name as the great and primary seeker of the Good, the authoritative paradigm.

Ambrose could not be more explicit. We sense here that the Platonic “Good” is in some sense a rival to the Christian God, and Ambrose is addressing the issue. The following passage from Plotinus may give us some idea of the opposition Ambrose and Christians in general faced. The Neoplatonists who heard Ambrose from time to time had another way that was as beautiful but which did not involve the inconveniences of an incarnation, death, and resurrection of their God. In response Ambrose must make it clear that Christians not only have a better and more authoritative understanding – the original understanding – of the afterlife than Plato, but they also have a known and authoritative way to attain this eternal life. Plotinus had said:

²⁰⁷ Pande illud tuum bonum, quod uidere desiderabat Dauid inhabitans in domo domini, ideoque dicebat: *quis ostendet nobis bona?* (Ps.4:7; cf.Ps.26:13) ... pande ergo illud uere bonum tuum, illud diuinum, in quo *et uiuimus et sumus et mouemur* (Acts 17:28). mouemur quasi in uia, sumus quasi in ueritate, uiuimus quasi in uita aeterna. demonstra nobis illud quod est bonum, simile sui, semper indissolubile atque inmutabile, in quo simus aeterni in agnitione omnis boni (12:55, 750,9-21).

Intellect is, certainly, beautiful, and the most beautiful of all; its place is in pure light and pure radiance and it includes the nature of real beings; this beautiful universe of ours is a shadow and image of it; and it [intellect] has its place in all glory, because there is nothing unintelligent or dark or unmeasured in it, and it lives a blessed life. So wonder would possess him who saw this too, and, as he should, entered it and became one with it. As certainly, one who looks up to the sky and sees the light of the stars thinks of their Maker and seeks him, so the man who has contemplated the intelligible world and observed it closely and wondered at it must seek its Maker, too, and enquire who it is who has brought into being something like this, and how, he who produced a son like Intellect, a beautiful boy filled full from himself. He [the Maker] is most certainly neither Intellect nor fullness, but before Intellect and fullness. For Intellect and fullness came after him.... But that which is before them neither needs nor has; or it would not be the Good. (En.3.8.11)

This description of the desire for the Good perceived as a source of intelligible beauty in the universe is marvelous. In one sense, it has an advantage over Christianity: there is no real need for faith. It is based on nature alone. Yet there is no one to lead, rescue, console; no savior, no absolution (12:55,751,11); nor does the Good care or even know that he is loved and sought.²⁰⁸ David, on the other hand, may say, “I shall please the Lord in the land of the living.” (Ps.114:9)

35. “‘I shall please,’ he said, not ‘I please.’²⁰⁹ this means that he is consoling himself with the future. The future is opposed to the present and eternal realities to the temporary. And so, since *there* is the land of the living, *here* indeed is the land of the dead. Could it be other than the land of the dead, this region of the shadow of death,²¹⁰ the gate of death,²¹¹ the body of death?²¹² Indeed [assurance] is granted to Peter that the gates of hell shall not prevail against him.²¹³ These gates of hell are earthly, whence it says, ‘You who lift me up from the gates of death...’²¹⁴ Just as there are gates of justice, in which the just praise the Lord,²¹⁵ so there are

²⁰⁸ the Good must not look or aspire to something else, but stay quiet and be the “spring and origin” of natural activities, and give other things the form of good, not by its activity directed to them – for they are directed to it, their source. It must not be the Good by activity or thought, but by reason of its very abiding. For because it is “beyond being” (Plato, *Rep.*6.509b9), it transcends activity and transcends mind and thought. (Plotinus, En.1.7.1)

²⁰⁹ Ps.114:9 (Vulgate). Cf. sect. 6 above. Note that the following references are taken from the Vulgate as the closest convenient equivalent to Ambrose’s Bible. The verses are such that they would have been well-known to many in his Christian audience, even with variants in translation.

²¹⁰ Is. 9:2; Mt.4:16; Psalms: 22:4; 43:20; 87:7; 106:10 and 14; Job 3:5, 10:22, 34:22; Lk.1:79.

²¹¹ Is.38:11; Ps.9:15, 106:18; Job 38:17; Wisdom 16:13

²¹² Rom.7:24

²¹³ Mt.16:18

²¹⁴ Ps.9:15

²¹⁵ Ps.117:19

gates of iniquity, in which the wicked deny the Lord.... Those who are unfaithful go down into hell still alive.²¹⁶ Even if they seem to us to live, they are in hell: if someone lends at interest, he steals; he does not live life, as Ezekiel says.²¹⁷ But if someone is just and keeps in mind the precepts of God, in order to fulfill them,²¹⁸ 'he shall have life and live by them [the precepts].'²¹⁹ This one, therefore, is in the land of the living, where life is not hidden but free, where there is no shadow, but glory. Here, indeed, not even Paul himself lived in glory; he used to groan in the body of death.²²⁰ Hear him saying, 'For the present, our life is hidden with Christ in God, but when Christ our Life appears, we shall also appear with him in glory.'²²¹ (12:55c-56)

The Scriptural resonances of these two final sections (35 and 36; Ambrose's paragraphs 56-57) are completely permeated with a Biblical idiom. Many other passages of Ambrose have a similar density of Scriptural allusions, but these two paragraphs read like a final crescendo and cadence. The commentary to section 35 follows section 36.

36. "Let us hasten, therefore, to Life. If one touches Life, he lives. Indeed that woman touched it, who touched the fringe of his [Christ's] cloak and she was freed from death, to whom it was said, 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace.'²²² For if he who touches a dead [man] is unclean, without a doubt whoever touches the living one is saved.²²³ Let us seek, therefore, the living One.²²⁴ But again, let us take care not to seek him among the dead and it be said to us, as to those women, 'Why do you seek the living with the dead? He is not here but has risen.'²²⁵ And the Lord himself showed where he wished to be found, saying, 'Go to my brothers, and tell them: I ascend to my Father and your father, to my God and your God.'²²⁶ There let us seek him, where John sought and found him. For he sought him in 'the beginning'²²⁷ and he found the Living with the Living,²²⁸ the Son with the Father.²²⁹ Let us seek him at the end of the ages,²³⁰ let us embrace his feet and adore him,²³¹ that he may say

²¹⁶ Prov.5:5-6

²¹⁷ Ez.33:18; cf. Eccl.9:3

²¹⁸ Ps.118:5, 8, 34, 44, 55, 134, 146 and passim. *iustificatio* and *custodio* are key words in Ps.118; cf. Mt.19:20

²¹⁹ Ez.33:19

²²⁰ Rom7:24

²²¹ Col.3:3-4

²²² Mt.9:20-22; Lk.8:43-48

²²³ Num.19:11-14,16; Ag.2:13-4

²²⁴ Rev.1:18

²²⁵ Lk.24:5-8

²²⁶ Jn.20:17

²²⁷ Jn.1:1

²²⁸ Rev.4:10, 10:6

²²⁹ Jn1:1-2, 18; 1Jn.1:2

²³⁰ 1Cor.10:11; Heb.1:2, 9:26; 1Pet.1:20, 4:7

²³¹ Mt. 28:9

to us, 'Be not afraid.'²³² That is, 'Do not fear the sins of the present age, the iniquity and evil of the world,²³³ the surging passions of the body;²³⁴ I am the remission of sins.²³⁵ Do not fear the darkness; I am the light.²³⁶ Do not fear death; I am life.²³⁷ Whoever comes to me shall never see death.'²³⁸ For he is the fullness of the divinity;²³⁹ and to him belong beauty, glory, eternity, from ages past, now, and throughout all the ages."²⁴⁰ (12:57)

These final paragraphs are a kind of peroration. They contain a recapitulation of the central themes of the *De Bono Mortis* and an intense emotional appeal to seek true, eternal Life where it may be found. Ambrose creates an intricate web of Scriptural allusion. Those not steeped in the language of Scripture may become confused by what appears to them a rambling jumble of bits and pieces. To return to Irenaeus' image, explained by O'Keefe and Reno, they see the *tesserae* without quite getting the whole picture. The Christians in Ambrose's audience, however, would have been delighted and amazed by the beauty of his mosaic.²⁴¹ The picture here is one of real darkness: we live now in the shadow of death, where evil is endemic. We have a daily struggle. We are surrounded by those who seem to be alive, but they are already living the death to God in sin. If a man strives for justice and goodness, he is in some sense already in the land of the living. Even Paul groaned under the weight of the "body of death" (Rom.7:24), though he knew the goal: "Our life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ our life appears, then we also will appear with him in glory." Let us hasten, therefore, to Life,²⁴² where He may

²³² Mt.28:10. But also in the wider context of the repetitions of "nolite timere": Mt.14:27, 17:7; Lk.12:7, 24:36 and the well-known passage from Is.35:4

²³³ cf. Mk.4:19; Lk.16:8; Jn.1:29; James 4:4

²³⁴ 2Cor.7:1, Gal.5:16, 19; Eph.2:3

²³⁵ Mt. 26:28 (from the words of consecration in the Eucharist); Mk.1:4 (John the Baptist); Lk.1:77 (*Benedictus*); Lk.3:3; Acts 2:38, 5:31; 10:43, etc Col.1:14; Eph. 1:7; Heb.9:22

²³⁶ Jn.8:12, 9:5

²³⁷ Jn 11:25, 14:6

²³⁸ Jn 8:51. See also Jn.6:44, 55

²³⁹ Col.2:9

²⁴⁰ Rev.5:13, 7:12; cf. Ps.92:1, 95:6, 45:3-5

²⁴¹ Schenkl has only touched the surface in his notes in the CSEL.

²⁴² Puech and Hadot, 214: this sequence from *umbra* to *festinemus* is reminiscent of Origen.

be found: in the beginning, the Living with the Living, the Son with the Father. Let us banish all fear, that last and greatest obstacle to the attainment of true life. Do not fear the sins of the present age, the iniquity and evil of the world, the surging passions of the body, “for I [Christ] am the forgiveness of sins. Do not fear the darkness, I am the Light. Do not fear death. I am Life....” This is the universal way of salvation Porphyry sought without finding it.

CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

I would like to conclude this long commentary by thinking about several questions, We know the answers to some degree already; but addressing them directly here will clarify and summarize Ambrose's procedure in the *De Bono Mortis*. The questions are: what are Ambrose's personal convictions in the *De Bono Mortis*? Who was the intended audience? Since this treatise is about the soul, what is the soul for Ambrose?

AMBROSE

Reading through the text of the *De Bono Mortis* leaves little doubt about Ambrose's engagement with philosophy. He is not a philosopher by profession,¹ but his text is filled with ideas and images from Plato, Plotinus, Cicero, and others. Many of these would have belonged to the philosophical patrimony received by educated men and women of the fourth century, but Ambrose has assimilated them well enough to present them as his own, integrated into a view of death formed by the Christian faith and the Scriptures. He is convinced of two Platonic principles: first, that the man *is* his soul; his body is his instrument (what he possesses, not what he is); and, second, that union with God requires a fundamental *ascesis*, by which the soul is kept pure and free from the undisciplined body and the sinful flesh. This is his deep personal conviction, and he hammers it home throughout the *De Bono Mortis*. But he also has clear ideas

¹ But see Yves-Marie Duval, "Ambroise de son élection à sa consécration," *Ambrosius Episcopus*, ed. Giuseppe Lazzati (Milano: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1976), 263-72:

about the benefit and the reward of *ascesis*. It is the vision of God in the next life, and for the good man the vision begins to some degree in this life. Even though we live here under the shadow of death, our lives are nevertheless hidden in Christ and will be transformed, after death, into eternal glory and happiness. This does not mean, however, that our interior life here (Ambrose's *hic*) is radically different from what it will be there (Ambrose's *illic*). The idea is not that we work under contract here, to receive remuneration there. It is instead like the growth of a plant, where the hidden work of the seed and roots is being accomplished here and the full flowering will be revealed there.¹ Ambrose has the same intense, personal, interior desire for God we see in Plotinus. This is perhaps that aspect of Plotinus that most appealed to him. It is significant that he never caricatures or criticizes Plotinus.

With regard to morals, therefore, and the way of spiritual ascent, Ambrose is a Platonist. He exemplifies the form of Platonism Rist qualifies as open to a Nicene Christian.² In one sense he is an even better example than Basil of the kind of Christian Platonist Rist speaks of because his exposure to the writings of Plotinus was greater than Basil's. Further, though there is no subordinationism in Ambrose, his openness to Platonism, mediated through Philo and Origen, led him to think of death as a good in a way that would be untenable fifty years hence, after the Pelagian controversy had run its course.

Finally, I think Ambrose is drawn to Plotinus because the Good for Plotinus is immanent; He is found within. Ironically, this allows the Christian to combine an intense interior life with

¹ At Col.3:3-4 Paul says, "mortui enim estis et vita vestra abscondita est cum Christo in Deo; cum Christus apparuerit vita vestra tunc et vos apparebitis cum ipso in gloria (Col.3:3-4)." When Christ appears, we shall appear with him. The idea is not so much that we will be changed as that what we have become will appear definitively. Paul does not speak of a radical transformation between this life and the next, but of a manifestation. Ambrose develops this contrast between the hidden present and the fully revealed future at 12.56c- 12.57a. I am indebted to Dr. Philip Rousseau for pointing out this essential distinction.

² Rist, 181.

the exterior and historical reality of the Incarnation and the Church. In a sense Plotinus provided Ambrose with a model for maintaining a focus on the soul, while imposing no obstacles to the sacramental and institutional structures of Christianity. Paul, therefore, in the hands of Ambrose may become a model of the Plotinian ascent, a herald of Christ crucified, and a guide to true life in Christ.

WHO IS THE INTENDED AUDIENCE?

It must have been a pleasure to hear John Henry Newman preach his Parochial and Plain Sermons at St. Mary's on Sunday mornings. The message and the beautiful language would combine into inspiration and delight, and I imagine that something similar happened when Ambrose preached in Milan. At least, this was Augustine's experience, as he remembered it.

Ambrose had a rare talent for painting vivid pictures with words; he spoke the language of Scriptural allusion; he knew well how to create attitudes and sentiments – of longing for the Good, for example – in the hearts of his audience. This wonderful delivery was part of his success as a bishop. If it is true that the *De Bono Mortis* was composed out of homiletic material, then we may be seeing in it traces of the oral delivery, as well as learned editing. One wonders, though, what Monica would have thought if indeed she heard God regularly called “the Good” in the bishop's sermons. Nevertheless, it is probable that the first audience of the *De Bono Mortis* would have been Ambrose's Sunday morning congregation; much of the “drum roll” of moral exhortation was probably intended for them. This is the first track we mentioned at the beginning of this study of the *De Bono Mortis*.

Again, assuming that the *De Bono Mortis* grew out of homiletic material, the second track may have come into the treatise during the process of compiling and editing homilies into a written whole, a treatise destined for wider circulation beyond the confines of the Milanese congregation. We might call this second tract Ambrose's "outreach" to the Platonists. This would explain the references to God in the neuter singular as "the Good" and also explain his portrait of Paul as a Platonic model. But what is more significant, through the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose shows a picture of Christian Platonism that is a true religious counterpart to the alternative Neoplatonism. Would anyone like to know what a Nicene Platonist looks like? He could find out by reading Ambrose's treatise. Here he would see that the same intense love of the Good, and interior search for it, are found under the guidance of Paul and Christ. But the Christian path is better and more secure because instead of relying on the speculations of men, it is backed by the divine authority of the Scriptures. Further, if the effort of personal *ascesis* is too difficult, lonely, and costly, the Christians have Christ, who is the Word but who is also the way, truth, life, power, and recompense (sections 14-17). The way that for the Neoplatonists is open to only a few who are strong enough to return to the intellectual world from which they have their remote origins is open to all Christians, who have full assurance that if they live well in this life – and this means living as the bride in the garden of the sacraments and of the Scriptures – they will "please the Lord in the land of the living" (section 34). Scriptural examples of those who have succeeded are abundant. So the *De Bono Mortis* is Ambrose's cordial, encouraging appeal to those who have Platonic sympathies but who are either Christians or open to Christianity, such as the catechumens, men like Victorinus or perhaps Bellicius (*Ep.* 9), a friend and procrastinator (for Baptism). Two of Ambrose's correspondents, Horontianus, a priest ordained by Ambrose,

and Iraneus, the Milanese layman mentioned earlier, would definitely fall in this category. They are Christians interested in matters pertaining to philosophy.³

For the others Ambrose is more heavy handed. He attacks the Platonism that stands against Christianity as an alternative and finishes up with a subtle, ironic deconstruction of their icon, Socrates. By his dismissal of the final argument for the immortality of the soul and his replacement of the myth of the *Phaedo* with the apocalyptic 4 Esdras, he reduces to a matter of little importance the greatest efforts and the most sacred moments of Socrates' life as Plato presents him. Ambrose is like a steel clamp. Though the procedure is more subtle, he has removed Socrates from his pedestal as surely as he removed Palladius from his episcopal see at the Council of Nicaea. So the non-Christian Platonists would be another element of Ambrose's audience. Ambrose has torn down their icon, Socrates, but he has not touched Plato or Plotinus. He has been careful, as he is writing for a well informed audience.

³ Letter 11(29) is a contemplation of the Good, filled with echoes of Plotinus' En.6 and resembling in some respects the ecstasy at Ostia. It is an informal sharing of Ambrose's thoughts and aspirations with his friend Irenaeus, a partial résumé of the *De Bono Mortis*. I think it is an important document because it shows Ambrose embracing as his own personal ideal the substance of the more formal treatise. Following are excerpts sufficient to make my point: Nos quantum possumus, intendamus illo animum et in illo simus, illud animo teneamus, quod est pulchrum, decorum, bonum, ut fiat inluminatio et fulgore eius speciosa anima nostra et mens dilucida! Nam si oculi nostri, cum aliqua obducuntur caligine, pascuntur agrorum viriditate..., quanto magis hic mentis oculus, 'cum illud summum intuetur bonum et in eo versatur adque eo pascitur' (Plot. En.1.6.7,25), splendescit adque enitet (2) Ad illum igitur properemus, in quo summum est bonum, quoniam ipse est bonitos... Ipse est summum bonum, qui "nullius indigent" (2Mac.14:35) et abundat omnibus. Facile abundat in qua plenitudo divinitatis habitat corporaliter (Col.2:9). Facile abundat, de cuius plenitudine omnes accepimus (Jn.1:16) et in illo repleti sumus (Col.2:10) (9). Festinat etiam interna mysteria videre, ipsam requiem uerbi, ipsam boni illius summi habitationem et lucem eius et claritatem in illo sinu ac recessu patrio. Festinat audire sermones eius, et cum audierit, super omnem suavitatem accipit (11).

Anima igitur quae illud videt, corpus hoc non requirit, minimamque sibi familiaritatem cum eo esse debere intellegit, renuntiat saeculo, adhuc se abducit a vinculis carnis, exuit omnibus voluptatum istarum nexibus (12). Ergo anima nostra quae deo vult adpropinquare, eleuet se a corpore, semper illi summo adhaereat, illi bono quod est divinum, quod est semper et quod erat ab initio et quod erat apud deum, hoc est dei uerbum (Jn.1:1). Ipsum est illud divinum, in quo vivimus et sumus et movemur (Acts 17:28). Ipsum est, quod erat in principio, ipsum est, quod est (14).

Est enim lux mundi, non utique lux visibilis, sed animarum quae in hoc mundo sunt intellegibilis claritudo quibus se splendenti lumine rationabilis infundit prudentiae.... Intus ergo esto, intra Hierusalem, intra animam tuam "pacificam," mitem adque tranquillam. (20).

One might ask why Ambrose would think it worth his while to mount such an attack? Did he have particular targets in mind, as he had in the Arian conflict? If so, we do not know who they were. There is one figure, though, who presents tantalizing possibilities. Given the dearth of sources, we are obliged to return again and again to the account of Augustine in the *Confessions*. I do not wish to milk this information for more than it is worth. But one thing is certain beyond the shadow of a doubt, and that is that Augustine was a man who surrounded himself with friends of one sort or another. It is safe to say that he never did anything alone. Even in book six, when he describes his visits to Ambrose in his study, Augustine's mind, according to his account, is in serious turmoil. Yet he cannot go to Ambrose alone. In this way, we see through Augustine the most interesting and challenging members of Ambrose's audience. They are the young intellectuals of Milan, not crusty die-hard Platonists, but men with education and prospects, who are interested in the more serious questions of life. Augustine himself describes beautifully in the *Confessions* the appeal Platonism had for one such as he; and although he may have been unique in the depth of his intellect, in most respects he was a conventional young man. So why would Ambrose not have been thinking of Augustine and his friends when he composed the *De Bono Mortis*? Why would we not say that this treatise – whatever else it may have been – was Ambrose's outreach to them? Did the bishop not notice them as they sat looking at him as he read in his study? As he silently “drew his eyes across the page,” he must have done some fairly shrewd sizing up of his guests, who kept coming back, often (*saepe*), and just sat there silently.⁴

Simplicianus probably told him something of his conversation with Augustine. Another interest-

⁴ sed cum legebat, oculi ducebantur per paginas et cor intellectum rimabatur, vox autem et lingua quiescebant. *saepe*, cum adessemus – non enim vetabatur quisquam ingredi aut ei venientem nuntiari mos erat – sic enim legentem vidimus tacite (*Conf.* 6.3). My italics. The *saepe* means that when they came they often found Ambrose engaged in silent reading. The use of the word, however, implies that they also came often enough for the silent reading to be a common occurrence.

ing dimension comes, again, from Monica's reading of the *De Bono Mortis*. Augustine says in the *Confessions* that he learned after her death that she had been discussing "the contempt for this life and the good of death" (*de contemptu vitae huius et bono mortis*) not with her friends but with his (*amicis meis*).⁵ The *De Bono Mortis* appears to have been the sort of treatise one could discuss in an atmosphere of friendship in which Monica was included, similar perhaps to the household at Cassiciacum.

Finally, we may conclude that if the account given above of Augustine and his friends as audience for the *De Bono Mortis* represents in some way the actual situation, then the question with which Goulven Madec began his study of Ambrose's engagement with philosophy has been answered. Madec had asked whether philosophy was a pastoral concern for Ambrose. His answer, based on Ambrose's rhetoric against pagan philosophers, was negative.⁶ I think, however, that a careful look at the evidence for Ambrose's audience, as well as at the contents of the *De Bono Mortis*, yields a different response.

The philosophical questions raised by the *De Bono Mortis* were not only intended for the young intellectuals of Milan. Another audience comes into view from Ambrose's comments about the sympathy that should exist between the soul as user and the body as instrument. Again, at 7.27 (section 20), he says:

The temperate soul in this body (*hoc*) gently plucks the passions of this flesh (*isitus*) like strings of an instrument, She uses only the tips of her fingers, so to speak, to produce an accord of virtues and mores, a harmonious symphony, such that in all her thoughts and activities she maintains harmony between her intentions and acts (*consilia et facta*).

⁵ *Conf.* 9.11.

⁶ See Madec, part 2, ch. 3, sect. 1, entitled "The authority of Scripture over Philosophic Inquiry."

A “harmonious symphony of virtues and mores.” Where would such a harmony of virtue and custom be most needed, if not in the households of Milan? Ambrose may also have been thinking of the laity, men and women who live within the framework of family and society. For them the emotional life is an essential element of communication and order. Asceticism should help them “get it right” but not stifle the social, emotional, and familial obligations that are the framework of their lives. Ambrose was a practical man, who had high standards for his interior life; but he also insisted on the importance of decorum in his public and social life and in that of his priests. This is one of the major themes of his *De Officiis*. According to Porphyry, Plotinus also had this balance to a high degree (*Life*.9).⁷ Rousseau notes that “This was an age that successfully combined formality and emotion.”⁸ Though I may be concluding too much, it seems to me that Ambrose is trying to map out for his readers a form of asceticism that creates the desert within, while maintaining a normal life in the city and the family. This requires the balance, and kindness, that come from a combination of interior discipline and the gentle “plucking of the passions” as the strings of one’s own interior lyre. Ambrose and Augustine are both examples of this integration.

WHO IS THE SOUL?

In the *De Bono Mortis*, the soul is the essential part of the human person. It is the subject of this treatise; for the soul, preparation for death is the all important activity of life. In some respects the treatise is a somber piece; it is marked by strong contrasts between this life and the next; all of the pitfalls of living in the body are made clear; the ascent towards the Good is shown

⁷ See the interesting discussion and assessment of Hadot – including his critique of the opinion of Bréhier – in *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, 74-93.

⁸ Rousseau, *Augustine*, 155.

to be arduous. This comes in part, I think, from the nature of Platonism itself. But when Ambrose reaches paragraph 5.17, there is a change. It is as if the sun comes out and we see for a few paragraphs the joy and hope of Christianity breaking through the austerity and intensity of the effort of ascent. Christianity has been present from the beginning through citations of Scripture and the example of Paul. But here, the soul is shown as having received the gift of the image of God imprinted on her with the help of God himself. Adorned with grace and beauty, she enters the garden of the *Song of Songs* and there is a wedding feast, with all the accoutrements: guests, good food, plenty of wine, inebriation, flowers, perfume, beauty and loveliness everywhere. Then, at 6.22 we return to the realities of life. What is the purpose of this inclusion of the *Song of Songs*?

One central aspect of the Christianization of Platonism as a way of life is the addition of the social and temporal dimensions: social in the institution of the Church, temporal in the history of salvation and the definitive end of this history in the vision of God (no reincarnation). This is a radical departure from a way that is essentially a personal return to a higher state of being. For Plotinus there is no real difference between the soul in ecstasy before death and the soul in ecstasy after. Before death the body is suspended for a brief moment, afterwards it will be discarded and union with the Good will be uninterrupted; but the experience is essentially the same before and after. Ambrose comes close to echoing the same position: the way to God is through one's own soul. Monica and Augustine certainly took such a "flight" in the ecstasy at Ostia. But this is only one dimension. The other is the life of the Church by which the soul receives purification and grace from the Word. For Ambrose the Christian lives a twofold spiritual life marked by a continual effort of moral asceticism and contemplation, on the one

hand, ecclesial and sacramental life, on the other. This is one reason why consecrated virginity is such a powerful symbol for Ambrose. The Christian ascetic and woman of prayer (the bride), integrated into an ecclesial life that is larger and holier than herself, represents the ideal that all should seek. For Ambrose no one can make the spiritual ascent without the Church.

What does it mean, then, to ascend within the Church? First, if we follow Ambrose's imagery, the soul is a bride. This is the basis for everything else. She is in love and, most important, she is loved by the Word, God in human flesh. She is betrothed; she is filled with grace and joy, one of the hallmarks of the Christian life. Christ is already in this life the "joy of her salvation" (cf. Is. 12:3). He has already in his humanity come down to her and made the ascent on her terms; he has, to use Ambrose's image, already run the course.⁹ She has only to follow him. He has also provided the means in the Scriptures and the sacraments; these nourish her mind and heart with light and grace and give her strength for the ascent. Finally, he has revealed himself as her goal and as an attentive lover, ready to give a helping hand – through his sacraments and his ministers as well as through prayer – and always leading her on, until she reaches him. The bride is like a woman who has been given everything, and this brings us to another significant contrast between Christianity and Platonism.

If Plotinus were describing the garden scene from the final verses of the *Song of Songs*, it would be a picture of bliss. But, as it turns out, Ambrose's garden scene is not an environment of rarified perfection at all. This perfect, wonderful soul, who is both in the garden and the garden herself, has much work to do in it: burying her sin, repenting, dressing her wounds, regaining her strength on the bread of the Word, and letting herself be persuaded by the inebriating wine, the

⁹ Proceat e thalamo suo, / pudoris aula regia, / geminae gigas substantiae / alacris ut currat uiam (Ambrose, *Veni Redemptor Gentium*, vv.16-20), Fontaine, *Hymnes*, 275.

honey, and the milk of the gentler words (*sermones*) of the Scriptures. If this is the work she does once she is in the garden, then the purity and the grace she attained, which allowed her to say on entering, “Flee, my brother,” must be some sort of a beginning rather than the final end. Since this entire section is filled with sacramental imagery, we may perhaps conclude that the grace and purity of the bride have come from the sacraments: from baptism on entry, from the Eucharist within the garden. By introducing the imagery from the *Song of Songs*, Ambrose has given an affective and persuasive picture of the great difference between Christianity and Platonism. One may keep much of Plotinus, but the fullness of truth and life are found in the Church. It is interesting to note that Ambrose returns to this same vision of the truth, without imagery – as he had done in the *De Isaac* – in the final paragraph of the treatise.

Finally, though this theme has already run through these paragraphs, I would like to emphasize here the one most essential difference between Platonism as a way of life in the fourth century and in Christianity. The difference is the gift of salvation: the Good has looked out with compassion – something Plotinus could never conceive as either possible or desirable – the Good has seen and loved the homely creatures at the far reaches of his universe, where, in Platonic terms, the evil of matter and non-being are a continual threat. He has added human nature to his own divine nature and so become the universal way, so desired by Porphyry. This one astonishing fact can only be known through a divine revelation, and so through the authoritative texts of the Scriptures; and it raises Christianity far above all prior philosophical speculation. In addition, where Platonism must always require an arduous return to a higher state of interior reality, Christianity inaugurates a reciprocal engagement between Christ and the Church with interior and social implications.

Of course, these differences between Platonism and Christianity are essential and permanent. In other periods, they took on different proportions or were overshadowed by other concerns. In the late fourth century, however, as Ambrose wrote the *De Bono Mortis*, they were a topic of immediate interest and significance. To Ambrose's mind, the Church was coming into a position of assured authority. This authority rightfully belonged to her, and his duty as a bishop was to safeguard and further that authority and the autonomy it required. This is why Ambrose returns again and again to the *Song of Songs*, and also why he marries the bride and bridegroom with the free and legal engagement of a marriage contract. The contract implies freedom, stability, and social coherence – the couple enters into a relationship that has far reaching social obligations and privileges, found only in the Church. The joy and exuberance, therefore, of the garden scene from the *Song of Songs* are not extras but rather part of the essential message. The love of the *Song of Songs*, and of the bride who is the Church, is a successful love. It is a story that contains sorrow, seeking, and sometimes loss; but in the end, the bride and bridegroom live together in security and happiness. It is a story with a happy ending. This optimism reflects the condition of the church of Milan under the authority of Ambrose and in the climate of the Nicene triumph.¹⁰

¹⁰ McLynn, 377.

PART THREE
THE *EXPOSITIO PSALMI 118*

INTRODUCTION

After the *De Isaac* and the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose's *Expositio Psalmi 118*, is the third major treatise in which he uses the *Song of Songs* as an integral, structural element. Unlike the other treatises, the *Expositio Psalmi 118* is an exegetical commentary in a stricter sense. Nothing, however, in Ambrose even remotely resembles the kind of exegetical commentary one might expect from Jerome, for example. Ambrose is more interested in giving a spiritual exposition of significant verses from the psalm than in providing a systematic account.

Part three is divided into two sections. The first is a consideration of questions related to Ambrose's exegetical method in general and his exegesis of Psalm 118 in particular. Since he viewed the *Song of Songs* as both an allegory of divine love and as an Old Testament prophecy of the fullness of the love brought by Christ, we need to examine his approach to the exegesis of Biblical metaphor before turning to the commentary itself. Section one, therefore, is entitled "Ambrose the Exegete." It is divided into five chapters: (1) Metaphor and Allegory: Keys to the Hidden Mystery of Scripture; (2) Ambrose's Exegetical Method 1: the Exegetical Process; (3) Ambrose's Exegetical Method II: A Reworking of Origen; (4) The *Song of Songs*: a *Somatic* Text?; and (5) Ambrose's Exegesis of Psalm 118.

Section two provides an application of the principles laid out in section one through a detailed analysis of Ambrose's use of the *Song of Songs* in his commentary on Psalm 118. After a brief introduction, I analyze the Prologue and five stanzas of Ambrose's *Expositio*: stanzas 1, 11, 16, 17, and 22. The section is divided into five chapters: (1) The Prologue to Psalm 118;

(2) Stanza 1(*Aleph*): the Longing of the Bride; (3) Stanza 11(*Caph*): Fainting with Desire; (4) Stanzas 16(*Ain*) and 17(*Phe*): The Praises of the Bride; and (5) Stanza 22 (*Tau*): The Prayer of the Lost Sheep and the Marriage of the Bride. These chapters are followed by a conclusion to the whole of Part three.

SECTION ONE

AMBROSE THE EXEGETE

CHAPTER ONE

METAPHOR AND ALLEGORY: KEYS TO THE HIDDEN MYSTERY OF THE SCRIPTURES

In the introduction to this dissertation we gave a general description of metaphor, allegory, and typology as they were understood by the early Christian tradition. We said that in general, typology is considered to differ from allegory inasmuch as it refers to historical events, primarily Old Testament events, as prophetic figures of other events found in the New Testament and in the sacramental economy of the Church. Allegory, on the other hand, is thought of as referring to texts, without regard for historical fact or accuracy. For Ambrose this distinction between typology and allegory is largely irrelevant. He operates according to other principles, and we could say most generally that his primary criterion for judging the prophetic aptness of an Old Testament event or image is Christ himself. If something is a true prophecy or foreshadowing of the salvation brought by Christ, it is a legitimate figure or type of what is to come.

For Ambrose, therefore, typology is more a method for reading the Scriptures than an approach to historical data, as opposed to textual content. The type (*figura*) and the antitype (*veritas*) are two manifestations of the same reality: one is the foreshadowing, the other the full realization, but on the deep level of divine revelation the same divine gesture of salvation is present in each. This is true if the type is a fact or if it is an image. Let us look at a few examples. First, for Ambrose and the whole tradition, the flood, the passing through the Red Sea, the cure

of Naaman (2Kg.5:1-19) are all types, in the strict sense, of the sacrament of baptism instituted by Christ, through his own baptism and through his passion and death.¹ Second, for Ambrose, Psalm 22 (23) is also a type, in the strict sense. This psalm belonged to the early Christian tradition of texts used in connection with the Easter rites of initiation.² Ambrose tells us that David had a prophetic vision of the institution of the Eucharist and so composed this psalm as a commemoration of this prophetic event. “And David foresaw these mysteries in the Spirit and he rejoiced, saying ‘that he would lack nothing’ (Ps.22:1). Why? Because he who has received the body of Christ, ‘shall never hunger’” (Jn.6:35).³ According to the strict distinction between typology and allegory, we could say that Ambrose’s understanding of Psalm 22 makes it a type, since David wrote it expressly to commemorate an event in which he received a revelation of the future gift of the Eucharist. If, on the other hand, an early exegete thought that David composed Psalm 22 as a metaphorical contemplation – using the image of the shepherd – of God’s providential care, it would be an elaborated metaphor or an allegory, placed by God through the inspired prophet in the Psalter as a foreshadowing of the sacrament. The point is that it hardly matters whether one thinks of Psalm 22 as a type or an allegory. It is still a truth-bearing figure of the Eucharist. This example of Psalm 22 also shows that whether something is a type or an allegory depends to some degree at least on the thinking of the exegete. Third, we have already seen Ambrose engage in what he himself and the tradition generally would recognize as pure

¹ See Ambrose, *De Myst.*3.12, 4.20, 4.22-4; *De Sacr.* 1.4.11-12, 1.5.15, 1.6.20-23. See also Craig Alan Saterlee, *Ambrose of Milan’s Method of Mystagogical Preaching* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 227-30.

² Psalm 22 was one of the traditional psalms used during the rites of initiation and in the mystagogical catecheses. See Ambrose, *De Myst.*8.43; *De Sacr.* 5.12-3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.Cat.*4.7. It seems that Ambrose’s neophytes recited this psalm as they passed from the baptistery to the basilica, though he says that they have said it many times. So it was even in the fourth century part of the common fund of Scriptural texts.

³ Et ille [David] in spiritu haec mysteria praevidebat et laetabatur et nihil sibi abesse dicebat. Quare? Quia, qui acceperit corpus Christi, non esuriet in aeternum (Ambrose, *De Sacr.*5.12).

allegorical interpretation, for example: his rendering of the fruits and spices in the garden of the *Song of Songs* as different kinds of Scriptural text, which we saw in part two. Even here, however, the fruits and spices are a transparent device by which Ambrose describes the different kinds of Scriptural text and their different functions in the spiritual growth of the soul. They also have sacramental overtones that keep the allegory tied down, so to speak, to Ambrose's main message: that the true perfection of the soul lies in the reading of Scripture within context of the sacramental life of the Church.

These examples show us the Red Sea as a type, the fruits and spices as an allegory, Psalm 22 as one or the other depending on what one thinks David was doing when he wrote the psalm. With a large number of cases where an Old Testament *figura* was connected by the Fathers with a New Testament *veritas*, the distinction between type and allegory is difficult, if not impossible to make. Take, for example, Aaron's rod. At a moment of crisis in the desert, when the Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron, God instructed Moses to gather rods from each of the tribes along with Aaron's rod. The man whose rod blossomed was the one God had chosen to minister to him (Num.17:1-10). The rod of Aaron blossomed. It was placed in the inner tabernacle along with his censor and some manna – this inner tabernacle would become, in the Temple, the Holy of Holies. Ambrose explains to his neophytes that the inner tabernacle is the baptistery, into which the priest (the bishop) enters once a year; and the rod that was withered and then bloomed is all of the baptized, who were once withered in sin but have now blossomed through the sacrament of baptism. The censor that emits a good odor is also the baptized who now emit the “good odor of Christ” (cf.2Cor.2:15).⁴ Is this typology or is it allegory? There are innumerable

⁴ Ambrose, *De Sacr.* 4.1.1-4.

examples like this one: the pillar of fire and the pillar of the cloud, the rod of Jesse, the dimensions of Noah's ark, the tree of life, even Paradise itself, and the temple of Jerusalem: all are truth-bearing, prophetic images – figural or typological metaphors – of a higher spiritual reality.

Both Craig Saterlee and Enrico Mazza, in their analyses of Ambrose's mystagogical catecheses, maintain a conceptual distinction between typology, on the one hand, and allegory and metaphor, on the other. In detail, however, they recognize that the distinction between them is blurred.⁵ Saterlee makes an interesting "mistake" – perhaps intentional – that makes this point. He mentions in two places Ambrose's interpretation of the pillar of light that illuminated the Israelite camp at night. First, he mentions it as an example of a typological figure and then, a few pages later, he introduces it as an example of allegory.⁶ Mazza directly addresses the problem of the confusion between the two. He notes that for Paul, the terms "type" and "allegory" were synonyms. He also notes that:

It is extremely difficult to distinguish in a patristic passage between the elements that depend on an allegorical method and those that depend on a typological method. J. Daniélou was correct in saying that "what is proper to the Alexandrians is not typology but allegory," but it must be added that for the Alexandrians, allegorizing was their way of practicing typology. This was due not so much to the specific exegetical method used by the Alexandrians as it was to the inherent closeness between typology and allegory.⁷

⁵ Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: a Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 10-13. The use of typology vs. allegory only becomes a question of significance where extreme cases of allegory are thought to destroy the integrity of the base texts. As Mazza says, too much allegory undermines the process of mystagogy (13). Saterlee, 225-232, uses the distinction between typology and allegory as a matter of convenience but see 226, note 116: "Thus the modern distinction of typology as distinct from allegory, an affirmation that requires the historical reality of an event as a foreshadowing of another event, its antitype, is born of historical consciousness and has no basis in the patristic material." See also O'Keefe and Reno, 19.

⁶ Saterlee, type: 229; allegory: 232.

⁷ Mazza, 12; see also the discussion, 10-13. He also notes that Ambrose applies the term "type" to allegory (21). In his discussion of Ambrose's term *species* he says: "*Species* is a historico-typological category; that is, it expresses a relation between a past and a present (the Church), a relation based essentially on external aspects that are alike and therefore suggest one another." (citing Francesconi). This phenomenon allows Ambrose to cite a large number of passages from the Bible, solely because a certain external similarity exists. He is able to make a heavily allegorical use of typology precisely because of the "external aspect" meaning of the term *species* that belongs in the area of typology and serves also to indicate the relation between the Old Testament and the realities of the New (18).

On the basis of readings in Ambrose, therefore, and on the comments of Saterlee and Mazza we may say that typology in Ambrose refers to the whole process of relating the Old and New Testaments as well as the post-New Testament life of the Church into one unified revelation of divine intervention and salvation. It is the unified whole that Ambrose seeks through the gradual unfolding of the divine plan. Though Ambrose takes seriously the historical reality of the Old Testament events – as we saw in David’s Psalm 22 above – still, he passes seamlessly and effortlessly between typology and allegory. Both are legitimate ways in which to interpret the prophetic mission of the Old Testament. As Saterlee points out (citing Leslie Barnard), Ambrose’s use of allegory is wholly centered on Christ and also on the history of salvation. This keeps it within reasonable bounds.⁸ The use of the term *typology* is useful, nevertheless because it signifies the intent to read the Testaments as complementary revelations of the same divine mystery that underlies both.

What does this reveal about Ambrose’s use of the *Song of Songs*? For Ambrose the *Song of Songs* is a prophetic allegory; the metaphor of the bride and bridegroom is a primary, fundamental prophecy of the love of God for mankind. Although Ambrose makes no attempt to create an historical base for the *Song* – a marriage of Solomon, for example– he takes the metaphors within it as serious prophetic images of the coming of Christ and his work in the Church and in the individual soul. Some of his elaborations of the imagery of the *Song* may seem far-fetched, but these are of secondary importance. In Ambrose’s hands, the whole becomes an allegory of divine love, not only as it is worked out in the historical setting of the coming of Christ in the incarnation, but also as an expression of the relationship Christ offers to Christians

⁸ Saterlee, 233-4.

living out the fruits of the incarnation in the sacramental economy of the Church. The metaphors of Ambrose's *Song of Songs* are indeed prophetic. They interpret the entire continuum from the Old Testament through the New Testament to the final fulfillment of the *eschaton* as a magnificent story of God's love.

Before turning to a consideration of Ambrose's exegetical method, I would like to look here at *De Isaac* 4.17. As he comments on verse 1:9 of the *Song of Songs* (where the bride is compared to the chargers and chariots of Pharaoh), Ambrose says:

This mare is precious and the chariots of Pharaoh are swift, which some refer to the Church and to the people. But of this mystery (*mysterio*) we have spoken often elsewhere, primarily in *Psalm 118*. Here, however, we have undertaken to speak of it in reference to the soul.⁹

This passage is of interest for several reasons. First, the mare and the chariots of Pharaoh are examples of pure metaphor; yet for Ambrose and for others – he inserts himself in an interpretive tradition without giving names – they are prophetic.

Second, Ambrose calls the metaphor of Pharaoh's chariots a *mysterium*. In his mystagogical catecheses, this is a technical term. It is also significant for his thought in general, however, as an exegetical term. In his study of Ambrose's mystagogy, Mazza begins with a brief account of Ambrose's vocabulary. He says that for Ambrose, as for Origen, exegetical method – and so terminology – and mystagogical method are the same.¹⁰ The reason for this is that when Ambrose explains the sacraments, he does so by elucidating the mysteries hidden in the Old Testament figures. There is ambiguity and overlap between the terms that Mazza identifies, though each does have a particular emphasis and use. He says that *mysterium* may be thought of

⁹ haec ergo equa pretiosa est et currus Pharaonis ueloces, quod aliqui ad ecclesiam referunt et ad populum. sed de hoc mysterio alibi saepius diximus et maxime in psalmo CXVIII, hoc autem loco de anima dicendum suscepimus (*De Isaac*, 4.17, CSEL, 32.1, 654).

¹⁰ Mazza 22. See also Saterlee 223.

as the hidden reality behind the *sacramentum*. The search for the *mysterium* is the primary duty of the mystagogue and exegete. “Discovery of the *mysterium* brings the realization that God has a single plan which shows itself as a history of salvation.”¹¹ For Ambrose Scriptural images are like capsules that release the perfume of divine revelation in every direction. The effective work, for example, of the Holy Spirit in baptism may be seen in Genesis 1:2 where the Spirit of God is said to hover over the waters.¹² The Spirit hovering is already at the beginning of the world a figure, containing within it the actual mystery hidden within the sacrament of baptism. In his analysis of this passage Mazza comments:

We must bear in mind that the chief characteristic of typology is the superposition of one datum on another – in this case, the Old Testament event and the sacramental action – so that one may pass from one to the other in either direction: what holds for the first holds for the second as well, and vice versa.¹³

Though the Spirit hovering over the waters may look like a metaphor to us, God, the author of the Scriptures, included it in the Book of Genesis; and Ambrose, looking backward and forward, saw that it revealed the mystery and showed that the reality of baptism had been in the divine plan from the beginning. The metaphors of the bride and bridegroom have a similar scope and power for Ambrose, since they also reveal the hidden mystery of God’s approach to and love for mankind.

Third, Ambrose establishes a conceptual link in the passage above between the *De Isaac* and the *Expositio Psalmi 118*. He implies that his treatment of the image of the horse and chariots in the *De Isaac* differs from his treatment of it in the *Expositio*. We might assume that in the

¹¹ Mazza, 16 and 22.

¹² *De Myst.*, 3.9.

¹³ Enrico Mazza, 26. There is a close connection, almost an identity, between revelation in Scripture and our participation in that revelation through the sacraments. See also Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 151-2.

commentary on the psalm he refers the imagery to the Church and the people *as opposed to* the soul in the *De Isaac*, but Ambrose does not actually say this.¹⁴ I think the ambiguity is significant because although he often refers to the Church at large in the *Expositio*, the distinction between the two types of exegesis – that is, the distinction between an interpretation of the *Song* referring to Christ and the Church and an interpretation referring to Christ, or the Word, and the individual soul – is elusive. Ambrose appears to have no great interest in maintaining it. Although this mixing of the metaphors does not pertain directly to our discussion of prophetic metaphor here, it is well to state clearly from the beginning that for Ambrose there is no hard line between levels of interpretation. The “play” between them contributes to the richness of his exegesis.¹⁵

Finally, it is important to remember that Ambrose’s typological exegesis of metaphor and allegory grew out of a wide context of Hellenistic and late antique culture. Though his use of metaphor and allegory may seem like an uncomfortable blend of poetry and theology to us, he came from a cultural tradition in which the allegorical interpretation of traditional texts was common fare for pagans and Christians alike. It was based on the school techniques used in the

¹⁴ If Ambrose had maintained an exegetical distinction between *ecclesia* and *anima*, without introducing *populum*, the text would have been clearer. *Populum* may imply a collection of individuals in a group, something between *ecclesia* and *anima*. In any case *populum* adds a dimension of concrete time and place to the abstract idea of *ecclesia*. It also concretizes the idea of *anima*. There is a kind of “cross fertilization” between *ecclesia* and *anima* by way of *populum*. This happens in the *De Isaac* as well. For example, at 4.27: Christ and the Church repose upon the good works of the people; at 4.29 the bride asks to be let into the wine cellar of the bridegroom (Sg.2:4) and to have charity established within her, and Ambrose comments that the Lord Jesus like an eternal vine embraces the people with charity.

¹⁵ Origen, on the other hand, maintains fairly consistently the distinction. In his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, he interprets the Song in two separate senses. According to the psychic or moral sense it speaks of the love of Christ for the Church; on the spiritual (*pneumatic*) or mystical level it speaks of the love of the Word for the individual soul. This is consistent with Origen’s metaphysics and anthropology. “For each portion [of the opening scenes], Origen interprets the bride, bridegroom and maidens in two different ways: on the one hand, as the church, Incarnate Christ and young churches in the world and, on the other hand, as the individual, perfected soul, the Word of God and young souls who are not yet perfected.” Elizabeth Dively-Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture within Origen’s Exegesis* (Boston: Brill, 2005) 198.

interpretation of Homer and Vergil, as well as on the philosophical interpretations of the classical myths. Christian exegetes like Ambrose belonged to a long and well developed tradition of the reading and interpretation of traditional texts.

On the pagan side, to take only one well-known example, there is Porphyry's allegory on the cave of the nymphs (*Odyssey* 13.102-12). In his introduction to the text, Lamberton says:

Porphyry is concerned here with Homer to the extent that Homer is a source of truth, a theologian, a definitive and authoritative witness to a revelation shared by Pythagoras and by Plato and containing the key to the mysteries of the structure of the universe and the fate of souls.... not only the details of the text but the poem as a whole constitutes a screen of poetic fiction masking a general truth about human experience.¹⁶

In his text Porphyry actually refers to Homer as “the theologian” and looks to the *Odyssey* as an authoritative, inspired text, much as Christians viewed the Scriptures.¹⁷ He argues for an allegorical reading of the text by pointing to all the contradictions and incoherencies on the literal level of the text.¹⁸ The allegory he finds hidden within is a story about the journey of man from the material world of the senses to the spiritual world beyond the “crash of the sea.” The cave represents the world, the olive tree at the head of the harbor the thoughtful providence of the god – it was sacred to Athena – who was the noetic principle at the foundation of the world. Porphyry says:

Odysseus in the *Odyssey* was the symbol of man passing through the successive stages of γένεσις and so being restored to his place among those beyond all wavecrash and “ignorant of the sea”.... “Open sea” and “sea” and “wavecrash” are expressions which likewise in Plato refer to the material universe.¹⁹

It is astonishing how Porphyry resembles Origen.

¹⁶ Robert Lamberton, *Porphyry on the Cave of the Nymphs*, trans. with introductory essay (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1983), 5, 7.

¹⁷ Porphyry, 32, Lamberton, 38.

¹⁸ Porphyry asked many questions, setting up a whole series of contradictions intended to show that the cave of the Nymphs could not possibly be read on a literal level (Porphyry, 3, Lamberton, 22-3).

¹⁹ Porphyry, 34, Lamberton, 39.

On the Christian side, therefore, when Origen says that a text has no somatic (literal) sense, he, like Porphyry, means that the plain text as we read it on the page either has no spiritual significance or no particular edifying content or perhaps no sense at all. For example, how could there be morning and evening for three days without sun or moon? Porphyry had asked: how could the cave be both lovely and murky? Origen's position is that the Holy Spirit placed inconsistencies and incoherencies in Scripture in order to show us that we must raise our sites to a spiritual level and look for a psychic/moral and/or a spiritual/mystical depth of meaning in the text. This was just what Porphyry said Homer had done. By this method, Origen continues, the Holy Spirit leads us gradually to deeper insight and greater perfection.²⁰ So also Homer. This brief comparison of Origen with Porphyry shows the role of the typological and allegorical interpretation of stories and images in the large cultural milieu in which Christian exegetes, like Ambrose, were brought up and educated. They applied to the Scriptures the same interpretive tools and techniques they had learned to use on Homer and Virgil. Though some used them more freely than others, they all decoded, by way of allegorical exegesis the figures and images they found in the sacred texts – some historical some not – in order to understand the underlying divine *mysterium*.²¹

How does this discussion apply to Ambrose in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*? Psalm 118, dedicated to praise of the Law, does not lend itself to allegorical interpretation. It is largely a collection of moral petitions and injunctions. When the psalmist says, “Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes” (Ps.118:12), no allegorical interpretation is necessary because the ob-

²⁰ See the *De Principiis* (Butterworth, 288-95) for other examples of what Origen would call non-somatic texts. See also Young, Ch.9: *The Question of Method*, 186-212; esp.187-92 on allegory and 206-212 on the differences between the Antiochene and Alexandrian methodology.

²¹ Young, 212.

vious, straightforward text makes perfect sense and edifies as it stands. Marguerite Harl says that the excerpts from Origen's commentary in the Palestinian *Catena* show that even he provides little allegorical interpretation in his exegesis of the psalm.²² His David stands as an Everyman in the petitions and struggles of the soul to fulfill the Law; his commentary is primarily an exposition of the spiritual progress and trials of the soul that seeks perfection. New vistas open for Ambrose, however because he attunes Psalm 118 to the imagery of the *Song of Songs*. The *Song of Songs* becomes a dramatic parallel to the psalm. An allegory of love that gives access to the rich tapestry of Biblical typology, understood in the broad sense, becomes an interpretive key to the significance of the Law praised in the psalm.

²² Marguerite Harl, *La Chaine Palestinienne sur le psaume 118: introduction, texte grec critique et traduction*, Sources Chretiennes, 189 (Paris : Cerf, 1972), 157-159.

CHAPTER TWO

AMBROSE'S EXEGETICAL METHOD 1: THE EXEGETICAL PROCESS

Ambrose, as we said, inherited a sophisticated wealth of exegetical methods from his early education in the grammar and rhetorical schools, from the Platonic philosophical tradition, and from his Christian sources. In the present chapter, I would like to mention three aspects of his inherited exegetical method: first, his intertextuality; second, his concept of participative reading and interpreting of texts; third, his use of the multiple senses of Scripture. In the following chapter we look at some significant ways in which he reworked the tradition.

INTERTEXTUALITY

First Ambrose is a master of intertextuality; he interprets Scripture by means of Scripture. His interpretations often take the form of allusions to words, phrases, ideas from one text in the context of another. His command of the Biblical texts is, by our standards, phenomenal. By his standards and those of his congregation it was no doubt satisfactory. Gérard Nauroy says, "Ambrose speaks the Bible, no longer through the juxtaposition of citations of differing styles but in a unified discourse."¹ He gives as an example the passage from Ambrose's *De Joseph*

¹ Gérard Nauroy, "L'Écriture dans la pastorale d'Ambroise de Milan. Les sens de l'Écriture, les formes et styles de l'exégèse: mimétisme biblique" in *Ambroise de Milan : écriture et esthétique d'une exégèse pastorale* (New York : Peter Lang, 2003), 296.

where Joseph's brothers take Benjamin with gifts down to Joseph in Egypt (Gen.43:11).² Joseph is a figure of Christ, Benjamin of Paul, the gifts symbolize varied aspects of the Apostolic preaching and of pastoral exegesis. Nauroy's point here is that because the references to the gifts are both partial, the reader must figure out the full meaning for himself; and they are described in Ambrose's own words but woven with Scriptural allusions.³ We saw an example of this procedure at the end of part two (sections 35 and 36), where Ambrose creates a rich mosaic of Scriptural texts largely in his own words. This mosaic effect shows that Ambrose was not only steeped in the Scriptures, but also that he read them as a coherent whole, a "context for divine meaning, the perfect language that instructed even in its apparent difficulties."⁴ This idea lay behind his exposition of the meanings of fire and winged fire in the *De Isaac*. O'Keefe and Reno give a similar example from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, where the spiritual interpretation of Aaron's rod turns around other references in the Scriptures to "rod" and "snake."⁵ So the first task of the exegete, according to Ambrose's methodology, is to possess the Scriptures so well that he may "speak" them even without citing them. This requires an understanding both of individual texts and of the relationship between texts according to the rules of allegorical or historical typology.

PARTICIPATIVE READING

Second, Ambrose's concept of participative reading and interpreting of texts is similar to the idea of the Spiritual Exercise we saw in part two. In an article on the role of place and time in

² *De Joseph* 9.46 (CSEL, 104-5).

³ A l'énumération appliquée, condamnée à n'atteindre que la surface de la réalité, pratiquée par l'exégèse encyclopédique qui répertorie, Ambroise préfère les sondages suggestifs du poète (Nauroy, "L'Écriture," 297).

⁴ O'Keefe and Reno, 12.

⁵ *ibid.* 14-18. "The meaning of the text was sought within the text" (17).

the deciphering of Biblical allegory, Hervé Savon draws an interesting conclusion from the point we have just mentioned, namely that the allegorical interpretation of historical events recounted in the Scriptures requires the juxtaposition and association of Biblical texts. More than one text is required, since one text is seen in the light of another; and this means that the *process* of gathering and interpreting has both a spatial and temporal aspect: it is a process of detour (space) and delay (time).⁶ He refers to statements Ambrose makes about exegetical technique that refer to space and time: the “secrets of the deeper/higher sense” (*altioris sensus arcanum*: 58) and the “inner chambers of Scripture” (*penetralia Scripturarum*: 59). In his commentary on Luke, when the woman caught in adultery is left alone with Christ, Ambrose says that the Jews have gone away outside, since the letter is without, the mysteries within (61).⁷ Other references are temporal, signifying the time it takes to go from the outside to the inside of the Biblical texts. It is a process of painstaking and diligent deciphering of the allegory and metaphor, a process that should augment and refine desire in the reader.⁸ In his commentary on verse 81 of Ps. 118 – “My soul languishes with longing for your salvation” – Ambrose brings in the Ovidian heroine Phyllis and combines this reference to *Heroides* 2 with verses from the *Song of Songs*. We will examine this section in detail below; but Savon’s general point is that for Ambrose, carefully reading the Scriptures, asking questions about obscure passages, sorting through the metaphors, and seeking the inner sense of a text takes time. This process feeds our *desire* for truth, and increases our

⁶ Hervé Savon, “Le temps de l’exégèse allégorique dans la catéchèse d’Ambroise de Milan,” *Le temps chrétien, de la fin de l’Antiquité au Moyen Âge (III^e-XIII^e siècle*, Colloques internationaux du CNRS, 604 (Paris: CNRS, 1984), 353.

⁷ *ibid.* 353-4. Savon also mentions here Ambrose’s evocation of the well-known exegesis of the “wheel within a wheel” from Ezekiel: the New Testament is within the Old.

⁸ *diligentia* is a cherished virtue for Ambrose. One senses that he speaks of it from hard experience, thinking back perhaps on his early days as a young bishop: *Aperit sibi diligentia ianuam veritatis* (*In Luc.* Prol.6); *Non igitur mihi apostolorum gloriam vindico ... non pastorum circumspeditionem; sed tantummodo intentionem et diligentiam circa Scripturas divinas opto adsequi...et hanc ipsam ut docendi studio possim discere* (*De Officiis* 1.3).

longing for Christ as he reveals himself through the sacred texts. This is one way by which the Christian participates in – that is, how he or she relives and is transformed by – the long process of salvation. Far from a purely intellectual activity, the reading of Scripture should redefine the spatial and temporal axes of the Christian life into a prolongation in the *hic et nunc* of the saving truth of divine revelation. Savon writes:

Scripture is a gymnasium. Allegorical exegesis can be understood only if one envisages it as a spiritual exercise, only if one grasps it in the present, in the *nunc* where it unfolds. Scripture is a paradise, wrote Ambrose to Sabinus: whenever I read the Scriptures, God walks in Paradise.⁹

For Origen also, as we shall see in the case of the *Song of Songs* in the following chapters, reading the Scriptures and assimilating them was one of the primary – perhaps *the* primary – means of perfection for the soul. Since for both Origen and Ambrose, as for the entire early Christian tradition, the heart and center of the Scriptures was Christ, the process of reading brought Christ, therefore, from the Scriptures into the life of the reader, as an all-transforming fulfillment of knowledge and desire.¹⁰ All of this took time and, like physical exercise, required a commitment to regular habits of reading and practice.

So now we have two principles of the exegetic process: (1) the best commentary on a Scriptural text comes from another part of Scripture and (2) the process of reading and interpreting is a spiritual exercise, which is accomplished over time and brings spiritual health and

⁹ L'Ecriture est une palestre (*Exp.Ps.118* 4.13). L'exégèse allégorique ne se comprend que si on l'envisage en tant qu'exercice spirituel, que si on la saisit dans son présent, dans le *nunc* où elle se déploie: l'Ecriture est un paradis, écrivait Ambroise à Sabinus; au moment où je la lis, Dieu s'y promène (*Ep. 33(49).3*) (Savon, "Le temps," 357).

¹⁰ See the General Introduction; also Young, 15-21. See also Karen Jo Torjesen: "Scripture is both a mediating activity of the Logos and at the same time has doctrines of the Logos as its content.... The treasures of knowledge when they are opened always contain Christ hidden within. The content of Scripture is nothing other than the Logos incarnate in language, for the doctrines in Scripture disclose each in a partial and progressive or sequential way the nature of the Logos who is fully disclosed in his incarnation. But it is in the contemporary form of doctrine, not flesh, in which he makes himself accessible to the individual." (Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and the Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 119-120); Nauroy, *Ambroise*, 297; Savon, *Le Temps*, 352.

vitality (knowledge and desire) to the reader. The exegete, therefore, is not merely an informant but more like a trainer and guide. With regard to the *Song of Songs* in particular, this means that in Ambrose's presentation, it is an allegory that reflects the whole of Scripture; and he intends his audience to take the imagery to heart as a mirror of their own Christian lives. The third aspect of the exegetical process is the deciphering of the multiple senses of Scripture.

THE MULTIPLE SENSES OF SCRIPTURE¹¹

Three classifications of the senses of Scripture concern us here. The first is the distinction between the spiritual and the literal level, common to the whole early tradition of Biblical exegesis. The second and third classifications are from Origen. These last two are of particular interest to us because Origen was a primary exegetical source for Ambrose. Though Ambrose's method of presenting the multiple senses differs considerably from Origen's, traces of Origen's are nevertheless clearly discernible in his writings. Looking at the way in which Ambrose reworked Origen reveals much about his goals, his audience, and his approach to the *Song of Songs*.

In principle the first division concerns the reading of a single text: are we to understand it on a spiritual or literal level? The second division – Origen's first – concerns the levels of meaning in one and the same text *in reference to* the ability of the reader or listener to penetrate these meanings. This is Origen's tripartite division of the Scriptures according to human

¹¹ The development of this section reflects my own thoughts on the senses of Scripture as they apply to Ambrose's exegesis of Psalm 118. But I am greatly in debt to Gérard Nauroy and Hervé Savon for their sensitive and perceptive reading of Ambrose's texts, to Karen Jo Torjesen, Dively-Lauro, King, and others for their interpretations of Origen's method, and most recently to David Dawson for his insights into the reading and deciphering of allegorical texts. See Nauroy, "L'écriture,"; Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant Philon*, Ch.3 "Philon et le programme exégétique d'Ambroise," 55-81; Torjesen, *Hermeneutical*, ; David Dawson, "Allegorical Reading and the Embodiment of the Soul in Origen," in *Christian Origins: Theology Rhetoric, and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayers and Gareth Jones (New York: Routledge, 1998), 26-43.

anthropology into the body (*soma*), soul (*psyche*) or spirit (*pneuma*) of a text. The pertinent question here would be: how far can the reader go into the text? Must he stop at the surface (the *somatic* level), may he obtain moral excellence from it beyond the bare meaning of the text (the *psychic* level), or has he attained enough perfection to perceive the hidden treasures of divine truth in it (the *pneumatic* level)? The task of the exegete, of course, is to discover and disclose – to the degree that he is able – these three levels of any given Scriptural text.¹² The third division – Origen’s second – is based on his classification of the books of Solomon into *moral*, *natural*, and *mystical*. This classification concerns the branches, so to speak, of the divine science into ethical, natural, and mystical. So where the first two divisions of the senses of Scripture apply to single texts – different ways of reading one and the same text – the third classification applies to different texts, different Biblical books, or to different Biblical figures as exemplary of different kinds of knowledge derived from the Scriptures. In practice, however, these three classifications work together, and there is a considerable overlap in terminology.

The following discussion falls into three parts. First, we will look at each classification of the Scriptures. Second, we will consider how Ambrose modified Origen in order to form a new and larger synthesis, appropriate for his exegesis of Scripture in the context of a cosmopolitan city congregation at the end of the fourth century.¹³ Finally, in chapter 4, we will see how Ambrose adjusted Origen’s principles of exegesis, in order to fit his own radically different understanding of the *Song of Songs*.

¹² It is interesting to note that there are places where Origen admits that he does not yet see all three levels in a text. See Elizabeth Ann Dively-Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture within the Origen’s Exegesis* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 60, 189-91.

¹³ That this is the environment in which Ambrose preached – as opposed to the fairly close and elite school circles of Origen – becomes abundantly clear from the particular points Ambrose makes in his exegesis of Psalm 118 in connection with the *Song of Songs*. We will see this aspect of his preaching in the chapters on the particular stanzas.

1. THE SPIRIT BEYOND THE LETTER.

The primary distinction for all who engage in some form of allegorical and typological interpretation is that between the surface, literal meaning of the text and the spiritual mystery hidden within. We have already spoken of the significance of the idea of *mysterium* for Ambrose, and we saw an example of it in Ambrose's comments on the woman caught in adultery: the letter is without, the spirit, or mystery, within. This distinction is based on New Testament exegesis. Christ used spiritual interpretations of Old Testament events and persons to explain his saving work: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (Jn.3:14); "The queen of the south... came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold a greater than Solomon here" (Mt.12:42). The disciples continually look back at the Old Testament for verifications of the authenticity of Christ's life and work.¹⁴ Paul distinguishes between the letter and the spirit (2Cor.3:6), where he calls Old Testament events, in their materiality and historicity, shadows of New Testament spiritual reality (Col.2:15; Heb.10:1), and in the multiple contrasts he establishes between the carnal and spiritual children of Abraham (Rom.9:7-8), the old and the new Adam (Rom.5:14; 1Cor.15:45), the old and the new Law (Rom.7:6). These contrasts need not have a negative charge; but they often do because it is the spiritual sense, hidden under the letter, that contains the fullness of truth. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea. All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink; for

¹⁴ Mt. 1:22 the virgin birth is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that "A virgin shall conceive..."; 2:15 the sojourn in Egypt is a fulfillment of the prophecy "Out of Egypt..."; see also 8:17, 12:17, 13:35, 21:4; Mk.12:10-11,37; Lk.21:22; 42:27; Jo.15:25, 18:9, 19:24, 19:28; Acts.2:16ff.: this first sermon of Peter on Pentecost is woven with prophecies fulfilled. See also Acts 3:22, 8:32-5; 1Pet.2:5-9; Heb.1:5-14.

they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ....
Now these things were accomplished as an example (*in figura*) for us (1Cor.10:1-4, 6).¹⁵

This text was an essential text for the early Christians as they developed their exegetical practices. Paul says that the Israelites walked through the Red Sea, they ate manna, they drank water flowing from a rock. This is the literal level; but Paul refers to the material items and events only as spiritual realities. The physical food and drink are types of spiritual food and drink.¹⁶ The rock, however, is not strictly speaking a type of a spiritual rock; it is a metaphor for Christ.¹⁷ Rather, it is a typological metaphor, and a particularly good example. Again, it is a small step from Paul's representation of manna and water as spiritual food to Ambrose's representation of food in general, as we saw in part two, not just a type of the spiritual food of the Eucharist, but also as a metaphor for the text of Scripture, since the *process* of progressing from the letter to the spirit is like eating, drinking, and digesting.¹⁸ Remember, reading the Scriptures is like a feast of inter-related texts; assimilating them is like a health-giving exercise, something to which one devotes time and energy. In the Greek text of 1Cor.10, the term for "spiritual" is *pneumatiké*. The Latin is *spiritalis*. So here, *pneumatiké* is implicitly contrasted to any term signifying "literal" or "historical."

¹⁵ *Figura* is the word Ambrose uses to translate Paul's *typos*. See for example his *De Apol. David* (3.11) where he refers to the same passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Ambrose cites verse 11 in which Paul's adverb *tupikos* is translated by *in figura* (1Cor.10:11). In his *Mystagogy*, Mazza says, "For practical purposes, *typos* is identical with *figura* and *forma* (two Latin words used to translate the Pauline *typos*)." (Mazza, 21).

¹⁶ The context of 1Cor.10 indicates clearly the sacramental food and drink of the Eucharist; these are mentioned in verse 16.

¹⁷ See the discussions of Nauroy, "L'écriture," 287-9 and Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant Philon*, 56-7.

¹⁸ Part 2, sect.17: in the food imagery from the garden in the *Song of Songs* to describe the process of growing in purity and perfection through the reading of Scripture. See also Ambrose, *Cain et Abel* 2.6.22 (the manna is ground, boiled, baked, Num.11:7-8, before becoming food for the soul) and the discussion of Nauroy, "L'écriture," 276-7; Ambrose, *Exp.Ps.118* 16.28 (the teeth of the just chew the words of Scripture) and the discussion of Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant Philon*, 58.

2. ORIGEN'S DIVISION: *BODY*, *SOUL*, AND *SPIRIT* IN SCRIPTURE

In the *Peri Archon* 4.2.4, Origen makes this distinction. He introduces it with a quote from Proverbs: “Portray them threefold in counsel and knowledge, that you may answer words of truth to those who question you” (Prov.22:20-21).¹⁹ This introductory text is a significant marker – a code text – for the division that follows; both Jerome and Ambrose refer to it as well.²⁰ Origen interprets this text from Proverbs as referring to his well known anthropological distinction between the *somatic*, *psychic*, and *pneumatic* senses of Scripture.²¹ Again, this division refers to different levels of interpretation for one Biblical text. As Crouzel, Torjesen, and Dively-Lauro point out, Origen addresses himself here to the problem of a diverse audience.²² For the simple, who do not have faith or whose faith is weak and unformed, the homilist should stick to the plain text, as it is read from the codex or read out loud in Church. He should draw edifying lessons from the plain text, the *soma*. For the more advanced, who are making progress in the spiritual life, the homilist or commentator should draw lessons in morality out of a spiritual (allegorical) reading of the same text; this moral lesson is the *psyche*. For the advanced, the perfect, the homilist or commentator should point out the eternal truths of salvation, concerning Christ, the Church, the *eschaton*, all of which are hidden under the plain text; this level of hidden truth is the spiritual kernel – the hidden mystery – of the Biblical text, the *pneuma*. The *somatic* level may yield moral lessons derived from the plain sense of the text. It often does,

¹⁹ This reading of Prov. 22:20-21 is from Origen's text. In the LXX the verses are as follows: καὶ σὺ δὲ ἀπόγραψαι αὐτὰ σεαυτῷ τρισὼς εἰς βουλήν καὶ γνώσιν ἐπὶ τὸ πλάτος τῆς καρδίας σου. διδάσκω οὖν σε ἀληθῆ λόγον καὶ γνώσιν ἀγαθὴν ὑπακούειν τοῦ ἀποκρίνεσθαι λόγους ἀληθείας τοῖς προβαλλομένοις σοι.

²⁰ Jerome, *In Ezech.* 5.16, note 41 below. See also Ambrose, *De Is.* 4.27; part 3, sect.2, ch.3, note 36.

²¹ Origène, *Traité des Principes*, t. 3 ed. Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti, Sources Chrétiennes, 268 (Paris: Cerf, 1980), 311.

²² Torjesen, *Hermeneutical*, 40-1; Crouzel, t.4, 168; Dively-Lauro, 48-76: the three senses; 77-85: the intended audiences.

which is why so many Christians may live their lives well by staying with that level.²³ The *psychic* level presupposes the moral lessons derived from the *somatic* level, but it interprets the same text as an allegory for the soul and the moral condition of it. So the *psychic* level raises the moral lesson up to a higher, more general level.

Let us take two examples from Ambrose that fit well Origen's divisions. In both Ambrose follows Origen's order and procedure. In the first example, Ambrose interprets verse 90 from Psalm 118: "You have established the earth and it stands firm."²⁴ Ambrose explains that God has established the earth in wisdom (Prov.3:19); it is the foundation upon which we stand. This is the *somatic* level. Then, after a few comments on the suspension of the earth in the heavens (Job 36:7), he remarks that the saints are not preoccupied with the physical arrangement of the earth and the heavens, since these are of no use for salvation; and he quotes Ecclesiastes: "What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Eccl.1:3).²⁵ He who has true spiritual gain is like the earth that stands firm, established on the foundation of virtue (this is the *psychic* level); his soul brings forth good fruit, his flesh no concupiscence. Around this earth the Sun of Justice orbits (*pneumatic* level), and through an association of Biblical texts Ambrose explains that grace and eternal life come to this earth from the spiritual sun.²⁶ In this example we have the plain text that speaks of the physical earth, the *psychic* level that speaks of the earth that

²³ The plain text may in fact contain a moral maxim, a prayer, or a wise teaching. Many verses of Ps.118 are such. For example, (1) a moral maxim Ps.118.9: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to thy word." (2): a prayer (Ps.118:37): "Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; and give me life in thy ways." (3) a wise teaching (Ps.118.1): "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!"

²⁴ Ambrose, *In Ps118*, 12.20-23.

²⁵ By bringing in Ecclesiastes, as a commentary on the futility of natural science, Ambrose is introducing an element from the third division we will discuss below. So although this example shows clearly Origen's division of one and the same text into three levels, it also shows the 'contamination' of methods that, as we will argue below, resulted in Ambrose's new and personal method of exegesis.

²⁶ Ambrose, *Exp.Ps.118*, 12.20-23.

is the soul founded on virtue, and the *pneumatic* level on which the soul is the recipient of the grace of the Sun of Justice in orbit around it.

The second example comes from the *De Jacob*.²⁷ When Laban follows after Jacob, expecting to find stolen goods, he finds nothing. On the *somatic* level, there is a straightforward moral lesson: the honest man neither takes from others nor suffers loss of what is his. On the *psychic level*, the wise man can never be robbed because he has his goods within him always. Ambrose refers to the garments of his soul but he seems also to be equating them with the coverings of Jacob's tent. Finally, on the mystical or *pneumatic* level, Laban signifies "he who has become white." He came as Satan transformed into an angel of light (2Cor.11:14) and found nothing in Jacob's tent. This is impossible for men; but Jacob was a figure of Christ, in whom the prince of this world found nothing (Jn.14:30). Here we have a perfect Origenian interpretation of the anthropological interpretations of a single passage from the Scriptures. For another example of a *psychic* level interpretation, see also chapter 3, example 2a below where the resting place of the bride and bridegroom is the good works of members of the Church.

From most of the texts of Scripture, one may, in principle at least, derive lessons on all three levels.²⁸ These "senses" belong to the texts, but they are defined by the audience to which the texts are delivered. So they are different pedagogical readings of the same text. As pedagogical levels of reading, they reflect the degrees of spiritual perfection in the soul of the reader: beginner, intermediate, advanced.²⁹ Some texts lend themselves more easily to one or other of

²⁷ Ambrose, *De Jacob* 2.5.21-5. The story is from Genesis, ch.33.

²⁸ A good homily or commentary would contain elements of all three, in order to satisfy the needs of all.

²⁹ Crouzel points out the close bond between understanding of Scripture and spiritual progress in his commentary on the *Peri Archon*. When speaking of the core section 4.2-3, he says, "Cette section est le cœur du traité sur l'exégèse scripturaire : elle montre que l'on doit aller au-delà de la lettre, elle fixe les critères et donne des exemples de ce dépassement. Son importance atteint le domaine de la vie spirituelle, fondée elle aussi sur l'Écriture." (Origène,

these levels of interpretation. Some texts, Origen argues, are *asomatic* (bodiless).³⁰ That is, they are of no use for the edification of the reader or listener on the *somatic* level either because the plain text is metaphorical or because it describes something that could not happen or, on a much more subtle level, though the text makes sense, no edification may be derived from the obvious meaning of it.³¹ We have seen this idea already in the comparison of Origen with Porphyry. We will return to it later, since it applies to the *Song of Songs*, according to Origen's reading of it. First, however, we need to look at Origen's third classification of the senses of Scripture.

Before moving on to the third classification, I would like to make an observation about terminology. Origen takes his terms most immediately from Paul. The key text is the conclusion to the first letter to the Thessalonians: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1Thess.5:23).³² This passage enjoyed an enormous afterlife among the early Christian exegetes. Paul inherited the ideas behind it from both a Semitic and a Hellenistic intellectual custom in which the human person was thought of as composed of body, soul, and mind or spirit.³³ Ambrose also uses the tripartite division: body, soul, and mind (*corpus, anima, mens*)

Traité des Principes, t.4, ed. Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti, Sources Chrétiennes, 269 (Paris: Cerf, 1980), 167-9).

³⁰ Crouzel, t.3, 316.

³¹ See Crouzel, t.4, 185, note 43. Note also that if a text does not have a *somatic* level, this means that there is a distinction between the *soma* of the text and the literal, obvious level of the text, i.e. the actual words of the text (Dively-Lauro, 52).

³² αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἀγιάσαι ὑμᾶς ὁλοτελεῖς, καὶ ὁλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέμπτως ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθεῖη. (1Thess.5:23).

³³ Note that this is not the same as Plato's tripartite division of the soul alone in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*. De Lubac points out that it is perhaps closer to Aristotle's division of the human person into body and soul, with *nous* as the highest, intellectual part of the soul. But *pneuma* is different from *nous*; in Paul and Origen *pneuma* is seen as a capacity to receive the Spirit, a separate entity in addition to body and soul. See Henri de Lubac, "Tripartite Anthropology," in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 116-49. See also Kevin Corrigan, "Body and Soul in Ancient Religious Experience," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 360-83.

or body, soul, and spirit (*spiritus*).³⁴ By applying this division to the exegesis of Scripture, Origen establishes a parallel between hierarchical strata of the Biblical texts and the parts of the human person. He can do this because for him the human person is essentially a rational soul, remedially clothed with a physical body;³⁵ and Scripture is the revelation of the mind of the Logos/Christ to the human mind.³⁶ The more one lives on the level of spirit, the more deeply one sees into Scripture; the more one is aligned to the revelation of the divine Logos, the more perfect one becomes.³⁷ In his pedagogical division of Scripture into *soma*, *psyche*, and *pneuma*, Origen is driven, therefore, by a desire for spiritual perfection and Scripture is the essential key.

This idea leads us to a profound insight into differences in attitude and approach to the Church between Origen and Ambrose. We have seen an example of it already, in the *De Isaac*, in their respective interpretations of the verse from the *Song of Songs*: “I am black but beautiful.” For Origen the over-riding, essential factor is the spiritual progress – actually the spiritualization – of the bride. His bride is already far advanced on the road to perfection when she makes this statement. Her blackness is residual. A corollary to this view of perfection is that the Church, as

³⁴ Ambrose appears to use *mens* to indicate a separate constitutive part of the human person as such (*tu adulteras puritatem animae, vigorem mentis, corportis castitatem* (Hex.3.7.31)). He uses *spiritus* similarly but it also has wider applications: spirit is opposed to matter, flesh, the natural (vs. the spiritual) man. In certain contexts he posits only a binary division into body and soul. In letter 69, to the Bishop Constantius, in a discussion of circumcision, he makes the binary division but implies that there is a third part (*spiritus*) that he need not discuss here: *Cum sit autem homo compositus ex corpore et anima - satis est enim interim hoc dicere et silere de spiritu -, non est in utroque idem secundum naturam* (Epst. 69.16). Again, in commenting on the passage from the Gospel of Matthew where Christ says, “If two of you on earth agree about anything” and “Where two or three of you are gathered in my name” (Mt.18:19-20), Ambrose says that some take the “two” to mean body and soul; others take “two” to mean soul and spirit while “on earth” signifies “in the body” (*In Luc.7.193*).

³⁵ Human beings are “souls that make use of bodies” (*Peri Arch. 4.2.7*). See also his discussion of the clothing of rational nature in physical bodies (*Peri Arch.1.4.1*) and the spiritual bodies of the perfect at the end of time (*Peri Arch. 3.6*).

³⁶ See all of *Peri Arch. 4.2.7*.

³⁷ Though this question goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to realize that for Origen, there is an analogy between the division of Scripture and the divisions of the human person, both in structure and in right order. So the ordered study of the Scriptures reinforces the right ordering of the soul and thus guides the soul to greater perfection. See Dively-Lauro, 86-93.

a community of believers and as a dispenser of the sacraments, is a provisional help. The soul will eventually, in principle at least, reach heights of perfection that surpass much of the help the Church can give. Origen signifies this by making the maidens who accompany the bride less perfect souls, who aspire after the bride's perfection. Ambrose, on the other hand, sees the bride of the *Song* as black through actual sin. She has turned away from the Sun of Justice, who, therefore, no longer shines on her. All she needs to do is to turn back to him. Conversion is a simpler, much more immediate process for Ambrose than it is for Origen. We will see a more extreme case of this in the first stanza of Psalm 118, where Ambrose calls an adulterer he is hoping to convert the sleeping bride of the *Song*! If she [the adulterer] would awake and open to the bridegroom, all would be well. Similarly, in Ambrose, the accompanying maidens are as perfect or more perfect than the bride herself. They are members of the Church, angels, and the like. For Ambrose, participation in the sacramental life of the Church, listening to the Scriptures in the basilica with the congregation, receiving the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist: all of this is the perfection of Christian life for the community and for the individual. This is the image of the bride and the Church Ambrose proposes in the *De Bono Mortis*: the soul/bride has attained real perfection when she enters the garden of the *Song*; yet she lives there partaking of the foods and spices that represent the sacraments and the life-long reading of the Scriptures.

3. ORIGEN'S CLASSIFICATION: *MORAL*, *NATURAL*, AND *MYSTICAL*

The third division of the senses of Scripture comes from the Prologue to Origen's commentary on the *Song of Songs*. He orders the three Biblical books attributed to Solomon accord-

ing to the general disciplines of Greek philosophy: ethics, physics, and metaphysics.³⁸ The first book, *Proverbs*, is devoted to a study of morality.³⁹ The second, *Ecclesiastes*, is devoted to a study of the physical world and to the distinction between true and necessary knowledge and that which is “vanity of vanities” and to be spurned. The third, the *Song of Songs*, is devoted to a contemplative intellectual study of the divine truths that are beyond the reach of the senses, but hidden under metaphors of love.⁴⁰ After ordering the books, Origen comments that the Greeks took their disciplines from that wisest of men, who pre-dated them by centuries, namely Solomon.⁴¹ Strictly speaking, the ordering of Solomon’s books is not an ordering of the senses of Scripture. Origen brings it into the Prologue to his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, in order to specify the purpose of the book he has in hand (*in hoc libello..., qui habetur in manibus*) and to establish a clear hierarchy: the other disciplines must precede a study of the *Song of Songs*, since they both prepare and protect.

³⁸ Et temptemus primum de eo requirere, quid illud sit, quod, cum tria volumina ecclesiae Dei a Solomone scripta susceperint, primus ex ipsis Proverbiorum liber positus sit, secundus is, qui Ecclesiastes appellatur, tertio vero in loco Cantici Canticorum volumen habeatur. Quae ergo nobis occurrere possunt in hoc loco, ista sunt. Generales disciplinae, quibus ad rerum scientiam pervenitur, tres sunt, quas Graeci ethicam, physicam, enopticen appellarunt; has nos dicere possumus moralem, naturalem, inspectivam. Nonnulli sane apud Graecos etiam logicen, quam nos rationalem possumus dicere, quarto in numero posuere. Alii non extrinsecus eam, sed per has tres, quas supra memoravimus, disciplinas innexam consertamque per omne corpus esse dixerunt (Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum Cant.*, Origenes Werke, Bd.8, ed. W.A. Baehrens), 75.2-13.

³⁹ It is devoted secondarily to the preliminary study of logic, or the rational science. See Origen, *Ct.Cnt.* ed. Baehrens, 76.16 ff. But note that Origen includes it within the moral science, so that the order from the moral to the natural to the *inspectivum* is maintained.

⁴⁰ “The *moral* discipline is the one that creates an aptitude [in the soul] for an honorable way of life and that prepares habits that tend towards virtue. The *natural* is the one in which the nature of each and every thing is examined, so that nothing in life is done against nature, but each thing is directed to those uses for which it was made by the Creator. The *inspective* is that by which, going beyond visible things, we contemplate something of the divine and heavenly; we gaze on them with the mind alone, since they exceed the capabilities of bodily insight. “Moralis autem dicitur, per quam mos vivendi honestus aptatur et instituta ad virtutem tendentia praeparantur. Naturalis dicitur, ubi uniuscuiusque rei natura discutitur, quo nihil contra naturam geratur in vita, sed unumquodque his usibus deputetur, in quos a creatore productum est. Inspectiva dicitur, qua supergressi visibilia de divinis aliquid et caelestibus contemplamur eaque mente sola intuemur, quoniam corporeum supergrediuntur adspectum (Origen, *Ct. Cnt.* ed. Baehrens, 75.17-23).

⁴¹ We saw Ambrose use this apologetic argument based on antiquity in part two. It had a long history and was widely used; Origen develops it at some length here (*In Ct Cant.* X.x). See also Droge, *Homer or Moses* also mentioned in part two.

This book, moreover, is placed last, so that one may approach it when one has already been purified in one's morals and has learned the science of the corruptible and incorruptible and [understood] the difference between them. By this method one will be able to take no offense, from the images by which the love of the bride for her heavenly bridegroom – that is the love of the perfect soul for the Word of God – is described and formed. For if these [disciplines] are placed before, by which the soul is purified through her acts and her conduct and led to the discernment of the laws of nature, she arrives at a level of competence with regard to dogma and mystical teachings, and so with a sincere, spiritual love she ascends to a contemplation of the divinity.⁴²

Like the anthropological division above, the ordering of the books is essentially pedagogical.

The soul must pass through the stage of moral teaching and then contemplate the realities of nature, both corruptible and incorruptible, in order to arrive safely at a contemplation of God with a pure and spiritual love.⁴³ So when Ambrose uses these distinctions to explain a text without regard to the capacity of the audience, he effects a subtle shift in emphasis away from Origen's pedagogical aims.

After his exposition, Origen widens the application of the division of knowledge found in the books of Solomon to the whole of Scripture. He says that the threefold structure of divine philosophy is exemplified by the lives of the patriarchs. Abraham, by leaving his homeland and sacrificing Isaac, manifests the perfection of obedience derived from the moral science. Isaac, by his wise husbandry and the digging of wells, exemplifies the perfection of the natural science. Jacob, by his contemplation of the camps of God and the ladder leading from earth to Heaven,

⁴² Ideo enim novissimum locum tenet hic liber, ut tunc ad eum veniatur, cum et moribus quis fuerit defaecatus et rerum corruptibilium atque incorruptibilium scientiam distinctionemque didicerit, quo in nullo possit ex his figuris, quibus sponsae ad sponsum caelestem, id est animae perfectae amor ad Verbum Dei, describitur ac formatur, offendi. Praemissis namque his, quibus purificatur anima per actus et mores et in rerum discretionem naturalium perducitur, competenter ad dogmatica venit et ad mystica atque ad divinitatis contemplationem sincero et spiritali amore conscenditur. Baehrens, 78, lines 10-19. Note: the verb "formatur" could be translated as 'depict' or 'represent', but I think there is something more to it here than that. For Origen, reading the *Song of Songs* does truly form the soul for spiritual contemplation.

⁴³ Though the second science, *naturalis*, is given rather little space in Origen's commentary on the *Song of Songs*, it is of capital importance for him in the general scheme of things. The knowledge of corruptible things is necessary as a kind of athletic training for the knowledge of the more spiritual, incorruptible, things; all knowledge leads to the divine Logos. For a discussion and examples, see Torjesen, *Hermeneutical*, 82-84.

exemplifies the mystical, *enoptic* science. He concludes that, as all three patriarchs lived in tents, this signifies that they moved about not from place to place but from lower to higher knowledge.⁴⁴ “And you find many other [things, events, passages] in the divine Scriptures, which indicate according to this same format the order that we have said is found in the books of Solomon.”⁴⁵ For Origen, therefore, this progress in knowledge from the moral through the natural to the mystical is a pattern one sees throughout the sacred texts. It is the pattern after which one should form one’s own soul, through assiduous study of the Scriptures and the search for the most perfect understanding.

LATIN TRANSLATIONS OF ORIGEN’S TERMINOLOGY

Ambiguities seem to have arisen during the process of translating Origen’s terms into Latin. Ambrose and Rufinus both use the term *moralis* for the moral science of Proverbs (section 3) as well as for the *psychic* level of a text (section 2 above). The *pneumatic* level (section 2) and the *mystical* science (section 3) become either *spiritualis* or *mysticus*. So right away, we see a collapsing of the terminology into a simpler format that obscures Origen’s original classifications. The three levels upon which one may read one and the same text – Origen’s *somatic*, *psychic*, *pneumatic* – become in Latin something like *literalis*, *moralis*, *spiritualis* / *mysticus*. These terms are nearly the same as the terms for the classifications of the books of Scripture, as they are found in Rufinus’s Latin translation of Origen’s commentary on the *Song of Songs*: Origen’s *moralis*, *naturalis*, *mysticus*. The practical conclusion of this confusion is that, in the Latin texts of Ambrose, *moralis* and *mysticus* may do double duty for Origen’s division of the

⁴⁴ Baehrens, 79, 5-9.

⁴⁵ Sed et alia multa in scripturis divinis invenies, quae ordinem hunc, quem in libellis Solomonis contineri diximus, secundum hanc eandem formam designant (Baehrens, 79, 9-11).

senses (section 2) and his classification of texts (section 3). We should remember, however, that Ambrose read Origen in Greek, and his use of Origen in his own writings predates Rufinus' translations. Was Rufinus following Ambrose in his choice of *moralis* for the *psychic* sense (section 2)? Jerome, on the other hand, had his own set of terms. His *tropologia* may be a transliteration of a Greek term used by Origen; but though he follows Origen's anthropological division (section 2), he substitutes *mysticus* for *pneumaticus*. In his commentary on Ezekiel he refers to the same passage from Proverbs (22:20-21) with which Origen opens his division and he seems to follow the same ascending order of perfection:

We read in Proverbs: "But you, describe these things in a threefold manner, so that you may make a response with the words of truth that are placed before you." and this is a mandate for us, to understand the words of truth, that is the holy Scriptures, in a threefold manner: first, according to the letter (*iuxta litteram*); second, by a middle way, according to tropology (*tropologia*); third, in a more sublime manner, according to the things we recognize as mystical (*mysticus*).⁴⁶

So the translations of Ambrose, Rufinus, and Jerome are various and imprecise. This adds confusion to the process of the transmission of Origen's exegetical methods. The interesting aspect for us, however, is that we can see that Ambrose is aware of Origen's division of the senses of Scripture in the *Peri Archon* into *somatic*, *psychic*, and *pneumatic* and also aware of Origen's classification of the books of Scripture into *moralis*, *naturalis*, and *mysticus*. From these he creates his own synthesis appropriate to his exegetical and pastoral needs in Milan, a century and a half after Origen. The time, the place, the exegete, and the audience all differ. It is Origen, nevertheless, whom Ambrose puts to a radically new use.

⁴⁶ legimus in prouerbiis: tu autem describe ea tripliciter, ut respondeas sermones ueritatis qui proponuntur tibi, et iubetur nobis ut eloquia ueritatis, id est scripturas sanctas, intellegamus tripliciter: primum, iuxta litteram; secundo, medie, per tropologiam; tertio, sublimius, ut mystica quaeque cognoscamus (Jerome, *In Ezech.* 5.16).

CHAPTER THREE

AMBROSE'S EXEGETICAL METHOD II: HIS REWORKING OF ORIGEN

It is clear from Ambrose's texts that he read and understood Origen's classifications of the senses of Scripture (sections 2 and 3 above). He alludes to them in both theoretical discussions and when analyzing particular texts. Again, as a reminder, the general principle is that Origen's body-soul-spirit division (section 2) applies to the same passage or text. The moral-natural-mystical (section 3) applies to different texts. Both are marked in Origen by a progression from imperfect to perfect. We also saw that there was a tendency among Latin authors to simplify the terminology: the Latin *moralis* may be used for *psychic*, and *mysticus* may also be used for *pneumatic*. When Ambrose speaks of the different senses of a text, he generally uses *moralis* and *mysticus*, though we see that he thinks of one or the other of Origen's schemata. Even when he indicates a transition from one level to the next or from one type of text to another with non-technical terms, and sometimes with no transitional words at all, we still see Origen's schemata at work as an interpretive "habit" in Ambrose's writing. Origen was at the back of his mind, so to speak, though the original tripartite divisions are overlaid by a new binary alternation between the *moral* and the *mystical* sense, and these are applied either to one and the same text or to related texts.

Ambrose pays little attention to the hierarchy of perfection between the senses that was essential to Origen. So while we still see in Jerome's text cited above a progression in perfection

between the moral (*medie*) interpretation and the mystical (*sublimius*), in Ambrose we find little or none. Of course, an interpretation that brings out of a text truths concerning Christ and the Church may, in itself, be a deeper insight into spiritual realities than a moral interpretation of the same text. It may reflect a higher level of intelligence and holiness on the part of the exegete. Yet the idea that the different levels of Scripture are analogous to different parts of the human person and that the ordering of these parts reflects levels of spiritual perfection in the soul, so earnest in Origen, is absent from Ambrose. When we analyze the stanzas of Ambrose's *Expositio*, we will see numerous examples of this complimentary, bipartite exegesis of a text. One might say that for Ambrose the moral and mystical senses are two facets of one diamond. In the *Expositio*, he calls them the two eyes of the Church.¹ One eye is not higher than the other, though the moral eye is sweeter (*dulcior*) and the mystical eye keener (*acutior*). Both are necessary and complementary, not just for the soul that has already attained a high level of perfection, but for all Christians, for the Church at large. I do not wish to push this image too far; but it is Ambrose's metaphor for his conviction that the binary alternation between the moral and mystical sense, whether applied to the same or to different texts, is the appropriate method by which to discern and understand the riches of the divine revelation.² Ambrose also finds in Scripture other metaphors for his binary division: the Word of God is keener than the keenest of *two*-edged swords (Heb.4:12).³ Similarly, in a letter to Simplicianus he interprets the blood that Moses separated into two parts as representing the two senses of Scripture: Moses placed half in bowls (moral wisdom poured into our senses, through divine teaching, through the Passion, and through the

¹ Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. 118* 11:7; 16.20. See also Savon, "Le temps," 352 note 57.

² Nauroy, "L'écriture," 279-82, 287; Savon, "Le Temps." See also Savon, *Ambroise devant Philon*, 61.

³ See the references given by Nauroy "L'écriture," 280, note 88.

Eucharist) and he poured the other half over the altar (mystical wisdom derived from the offerings to God who gives life to the soul and light to the mind or from the sacrificial blood of Christ).⁴ Again, Origen is present in the background of Ambrose's exegesis, as his theoretical discussions and the examples of his exegesis will show, both of which follow. Ambrose has, however, freely and creatively adapted Origen to fit the needs and the audience of late fourth-century Milan.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS

In four treatises, Ambrose lays out a threefold division of the teachings of Scripture. In every case, he refers to Origen's division of the books of Solomon (section 3 above).

(1). In the *De Isaac*, in a passage some have considered to be an extraneous insert into the main themes of the treatise,⁵ he develops his theory of knowledge derived from Scripture by describing the wells Isaac either reopened or dug following his marriage to Rebecca. This is a mystical teaching, he tells us, and then he gives Origen's schema for the books of Solomon.

This teaching is mystical. You have it in Solomon that his *Proverbs* are moral [teaching], *Ecclesiastes* is natural, in which he, as it were, despises the vanities of this world, mystical things are in his *Song of Songs*.⁶

⁴ *Epist.*2 (65), *passim*. The distinction here between moral and mystical aligns most closely to Origen's division between *psychic* and *pneumatic*. In other texts the distinction between moral and mystical is closer to the division of Solomon's books. See also Savon, *Philon*, 61 note 36: the two tunics made by the good wife of Prov. 31:22 (LXX) also represent the moral and mystical senses.

⁵ Solange Sagot, "La triple sagesse dans le *De Isaac vel anima*: essai sur les procédés de composition de saint Ambroise," in *Ambroise de Milan: XVIe centenaire de son election épiscopale*, ed. Yves-Marie Duval (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1974), 112. Sagot is too severe in her critique. If she had noticed that Ambrose combines Origen's two classifications examined above, she might have arrived at a more unified picture of this section of the *De Isaac*.

⁶ haec doctrina iam mystica est. habes haec in Solomone, quia Prouerbia eius moralia, Ecclesiastes naturalis, in quo quasi uanitates istius despicit mundi, mystica sunt eius Cantica canticorum (*De Isaac* 4.23).

Note that Ambrose's first use of "mystical" above simply means that the teaching is spiritual; the second refers to Origen's use of the term. Ambrose repeats here what Origen had said in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. But, while Origen views the natural science(s) as a positive investigation of nature and the laws that God has woven into it, so that we may live according to nature and discover the will of God in it, Ambrose presents here only the negative side: the function of natural science is to turn us from the world, by showing us that it is "vanity of vanities."

(2). In the introduction to his commentary on Psalm 36, Ambrose mentions again the books of Solomon, but without reference to Origen's ordering of them. As we saw earlier, Origen teaches that moral science is the necessary foundation for intellectual growth; natural science prepares the mind for an understanding of the invisible realities behind nature; mystical science is the knowledge of these invisible realities, ultimately of God. When Origen extends his initial classification, he keeps the same order because this is the natural order for him, corresponding to the development of the human person in holiness. Here, in his introduction to Psalm 36, Ambrose's order is totally different from Origen's. It reflects the order of three books of the Pentateuch, Genesis, Leviticus and Deuteronomy:

All of divine Scripture is either natural, mystical, or moral. It is natural in Genesis, where there is an explanation of the making of the sky, the seas, the lands, and of how this world was constituted. It is mystical in Leviticus, where the mystery of the priesthood is expounded. It is moral in Deuteronomy, where human life is formed according to the precepts of the Law. Whence Solomon's three books seem to be chosen: *Ecclesiastes* from the natural [sciences], the *Song of Songs* from the mystical, *Proverbs* from the moral.⁷

⁷ Omnis scriptura diuina uel naturalis uel mystica uel moralis est: naturalis in Genesi, in qua exprimitur, quomodo facta sunt aelum maria terrae et quemadmodum mundus iste sit constitutus; mystica in Leuitico, in quo comprehenditur sacerdotale mysterium; moralis in Deuteronomio, in quo secundum legis praeceptum uita humana formatur. unde et Salomonis tres libri ex plurimis uidentur electi: Ecclesiastes de naturalibus, Cantica canticorum de mysticis, Prouerbia de moralibus (*In Ps.36*, 1).

Though natural science retains positive content here and Solomon's books reflect the universality of knowledge, there is no significant hierarchy among them. Ambrose's purpose here in his introduction to Psalm 36 is to show rather that the Psalter is a Biblical book with a special status, since it contains all knowledge, as a microcosm of the macrocosm of Scripture. After laying out this division, his introduction continues like something out of Servius:⁸

Since the corpus of the psalms is one, nothing in them, therefore, is divided [into categories] or separated [from the whole]. But as the verses of the psalm come forth, so we see that no aspect of the teaching of this kind of knowledge [that is, of the division of the sciences] is omitted. For clearly [the psalmist] expounded natural science as he spoke of angels, and powers, sun and moon, stars and the lights of highest heaven... and he spoke of mystical matters as he wrote about hidden [mysteries], the anointing of holy oil, and the construction of the tabernacle, in which [accounts] grace is manifold, since "In many and various ways the Lord spoke through the prophets" (Heb.1:1)... and with regard to moral matters, he has woven in many aspects, explained the diverse kinds of virtue, and given precepts for life.⁹

Thus, although in the *De Isaac* Ambrose reproduces intact Origen's teaching about Solomon's books, in Psalm 36, he brings them in as a convenient schema, almost like a school device, for classifying the Scriptures. He only mentions three out of the five books of the Torah and lists Solomon's books in the wrong order (according to Origen). Ambrose seems to indicate no sense

⁸ In the sense that the Psalter is platform for an exposition of universal knowledge. Peter Marshall asks whether Servius was intended for the use of schoolteachers rather than school children (Peter K. Marshall, *Servius and Commentary on Virgil* (Ashville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1997), 20). With regard to Ambrose one wonders also who might have been the intended audience for some of his remarks. Ambrose implies here that the Psalter is a repository of all knowledge. Similarly, in his Preface to Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Servius writes: "All of Vergil is full of knowledge, but in knowledge this book holds first place. The greater part of it is from Homer. Some things are said plainly, but many things are drawn from history and many things are said with reference to the deep science of the philosophers, theologians, and Egyptians, so that many have written whole treatises on the individual facets of this book." (J. W. Jones, Jr., "The Allegorical Traditions of the Aeneid," in *Virgil at 2000: Commemorative Essays on the Poet and his Influence*, ed. John D. Bernard (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 111).

⁹ Sed quia omnium psalorum corpus unum est, idcirco nihil in his diuisum est atque distinctum, sed prout se obtulit ratio, nulla intermissa doctrinae istiusmodi disciplina est. namque et naturalem euidentissime comprehendit dicendo de angelis atque uirtutibus, sole et luna, stellis et lumine caeli caelorum ... et de mysticis locutus est, cum de occultis et sacrae unctionis unguento et de consummatione scripserit tabernaculi. quorum multiplex gratia, quoniam multifariam et multis modis locutus est dominus in prophetis.... et de moralibus plura contexuit diuersaque uirtutum genera demonstravit et dedit praecepta uiuendi (*In Ps. 36.2*).

of, or interest in, a classification that is tied in any way to the growth of the soul in wisdom and holiness. He has pared off any vestige of Origen's metaphysics.

(3). In the Prologue to his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Ambrose's purpose is to show that the wisdom of Greek philosophy is fully contained in Scripture.

For though the divine Scripture is empty of the teaching of worldly wisdom, inasmuch as this is more of an artificial design of rhetorical figures than a wisdom based on the [true] causes of things, nevertheless if one searches the Scriptures for the things that they [the philosophers] consider wonderful, one will find them. For there are three disciplines the philosophers of this world consider to be most excellent, that is wisdom is threefold: either it is *natural*, *moral*, or *rational*.¹⁰

Here we have yet another order for Solomon's books. Ambrose refers here to the division of the sciences in the *De Academica*, where Cicero attributes to Plato this threefold division of philosophy into *moral*, *natural*, and *rational*.¹¹ In the context of Ambrose's commentary on Luke where he is comparing the Scriptures to pagan philosophy, he replaces *mystical* with *rational* because it includes both the more elementary knowledge covered by logic and the more speculative investigation of non-material reality, normally included in metaphysics. Ambrose's point here is not that Scripture in and of itself is divided thus but that it contains the threefold wisdom of the pagan philosophers. He goes on to say that this division is found in the Old Testament (represented by the wells Isaac dug) and in the New (each evangelist contains all three but each excels in one). Then, finally, he brings in Solomon's books and associates the pagan division of the sciences with that made by Solomon, since Solomon himself was well versed in the wisdom of the philosophers:

¹⁰ Nam licet scriptura diuina mundanae euacuet sapientiae disciplinam, quod maiore fucata uerborum ambitu quam rerum ratione subnixa sit, tamen si quis in scripturis diuinis etiam illa quae miranda illi putant quaerit, inueniet. Tria sunt enim quae philosophi mundi istius praecellentissima putauerunt, triplicem scilicet esse sapientiam, quod aut naturalis sit aut moralis aut rationalis (*In Luc.* 1:1-2).

¹¹ See *De Academica*, 1.19. and Aristotle *Topics* 1.14, 105b 19ff.

What indeed do the three books of Solomon show us – one of them *Proverbs*, another *Ecclesiastes*, the third the *Song of Songs* – if not that holy Solomon was an expert in this threefold wisdom? He wrote of the rational and ethical [disciplines] in *Proverbs*, of the natural sciences in *Ecclesiastes*, since all things in this world are “vanity of vanities” (Eccl.1:2) and “every creature is subject to vanity” (Rom.8:20). He wrote of the moral and rational [disciplines] in the *Song of Songs*, in this respect: that when a love for the heavenly Word is poured into our soul and the mind is joined to this holy company, admirable mysteries are revealed.¹²

Now, Ambrose divides the rational disciplines into the lower, logic and the like, and – like Origen – he includes the study of them under the book of *Proverbs*;¹³ the higher, metaphysics, he includes under the *Song of Songs*. Though Ambrose depends on Origen here, the ambience is different. Origen encouraged his students to study nature because it was a book in which the laws of the universe were to be found and a knowledge of these laws was a necessary step in their progress beyond nature towards a knowledge of immaterial reality.¹⁴ Ambrose seems to imply that a study of Scripture alone would suffice.

(4). Finally, in stanza one (*Aleph*) of his *Expositio Psalmi 118* Ambrose refers again to the ordering of Solomon’s books. His purpose here, however, is to show the complementary relationship between moral discipline and mystical wisdom. He says that the opening verse of the psalm shows both that moral discipline is a prerequisite for mystical wisdom and that

¹² Quid etiam tres libri Salomonis, unus de Prouerbiis, alius Ecclesiastes, tertius de Canticis canticorum, nisi trinae huius ostendunt nobis sapientiae sanctum Salomonem fuisse sollertem ? qui de rationabilibus et ethicis in Prouerbiis scripsit, de naturalibus in Ecclesiaste, quia *uanitas uanitatum et omnia uanitas* quae in hoc mundo sunt constituta: *uanitati enim creatura subiecta est*; de moralibus autem et rationabilibus in Canticis canticorum, eo quod cum animae nostrae amor uerbi caelestis infundit ur et rationali mens sancta quadam societate conectitur, admiranda mysteria reuelantur (*In Luc.* 1.2). See also Savon, *Philon*, 66 with note 61 for a discussion of Ambrose’s references to the sciences and to natural science in connection with Isaac’s well called “of Oath.”

¹³ Baehrens, 76.16-78.2. Logic is mixed in with the study of morals here.

¹⁴ Baehrens, 78.1-19. For Origen also, there is a negative aspect to the study of natural science, since it should lead one to realize that the fullness of knowledge is not in them; they are “vanity of vanities” in comparison to the higher mystical knowledge. Elsewhere, however, Origen shows the positive aspect to the study of natural science; it teaches the soul discernment. By understanding the *logoi* in created reality, one understands better the *Logos* from which they come. See Torjesen, *Hermeneutical*, 82-4.

mystical wisdom is the full complement of moral discipline; Solomon followed this order in his books, but if one looks carefully, one notices that each contains elements appropriate to the other. The thrust of Ambrose's argument here is that there is reciprocity between the moral and mystical wisdom and hence between the moral and mystical elements in the books of Scripture.

Following this order Solomon wrote *Proverbs*, where he explains more abundantly the moral level, in *Ecclesiastes* he explains the natural, in the *Song of Songs* the mystical. If, however, you look carefully, you will find many mystical matters in *Proverbs* and the sweetness of moral matters in the *Song*. For this [statement] indeed is mystical: "Wisdom has built herself a house and set it upon seven pillars; she has slaughtered her offerings [for a feast]" and so on (Prov.9:1-2). You will find the same thing in the *Song*, where the sweetness of caresses and the passion of the lover is expressed, though this is as mystical as it is moral: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth, since your breasts are better than wine and the perfume of your ointments is above all fragrant spices." (Sg.1:1-2)¹⁵

Note that for Ambrose the "sweetness of caresses and the passion of the lover" fit into the moral teaching of the *Song of Songs*. We shall return to this later. For the present, the important point is that Ambrose is in the process of breaking down Origen's classifications. Origen attached different disciplines to different books. Ambrose attaches different disciplines to the same books: *Proverbs* and the *Song of Songs* both contain both moral and mystical teaching.

In conclusion, these four examples of Ambrose's theoretical approach to the division of the teachings of Scripture show that his thought is squarely based on Origen's classification of Solomon's books. This classification has the status of a general principle for Ambrose; it is his

¹⁵ Quam institutionem secutus Salomon librum de Prouerbiis scripsit, quo moralem locum uberius expressit, naturalem in Ecclesiaste, mysticum in Canticis canticorum. quamquam si diligenter discutias, et in Prouerbiis mystica pleraque repperies et in Canticis moralium suauitatem. nam utique mysticum est: *Sapientia aedificauit sibi domum et subdidit columnas septem; interfecit suas hostias* et cetera (Prov.9:1-2) hoc quoque in Canticis. licet tam mysticum quam morale, in quo blanditiarum suauitas et affectus amantis exprimitur: *Osculetur me ab Osculo oris sui, quoniam optima ubera tua super uinum et odor unguentorum tuorum super omnia aromata* (Sg.1:1-2), *Exp.Ps.118* 1:3.

bow to the tradition of exegesis established by Origen.¹⁶ Nevertheless, he changes the order, changes the emphasis, adds his own nuances according to the requirements of context and purpose, and even subverts the classification. This analysis gives us a fascinating insight into the use one early exegete might make of another.

Why would Ambrose appeal to Origen's classification of Solomon's books as he does? Some suggestions may be found in the excerpts and comments above. Three of the four texts come from the prefaces or early sections of Ambrose's treatises. In the *De Isaac* Ambrose mentions the classification of the books at the beginning of a section of the text after a clear break; he then follows it with a number of examples we will examine in the next section. One might say that the addition of a well-known text from Origen added a certain cachet to Ambrose's own exegetical text. Also, Ambrose never tires of pointing out the supremacy of the wisdom of the Scriptures over the uncertain ideas of the philosophers. Bringing in Solomon and his books, therefore, would have been a convenient tool in the polemical debate, especially in a context where one wished to show that all knowledge is contained in Scripture (Luke, no.3 above) or that the Psalter is a microcosm of knowledge, much as Virgil and Homer were thought to be (Ps.36, no.2 above). I think, however, that there is a much deeper reason which not only accounts for Ambrose's admiration for and abundant use of Origen but also explains his distancing of himself from Origen. To put the answer in perspective, the Origenist controversy broke shortly after Ambrose's death; yet Ambrose, who drew so heavily on Origen was never implicated in the strife and condemnations. Of course, there may have been a number of reasons

¹⁶ This idea of looking back to the received tradition and then doing something quite different is characteristic of Ambrose. In a different context, Yves-Marie Duval brings out this point in his analysis of Ambrose's *De Virginibus* (1973).

for this that had little to do with exegesis. It is striking though that Ambrose derived much inspiration and material from Origen's exegetical works, yet his own texts show no trace of Origen's metaphysics. He admired Origen as an exegete, but he had an instinctive sense of the danger of his metaphysics and so stayed clear of them. There is no trace of subordinationism in Ambrose's division of the senses of Scripture or in the classification of Solomon's books.¹⁷ Instead, degrees of perfection give way to complementarity. Chapter four below will give us greater insight into this question in the specific context of the *Song of Songs*.

EXAMPLES

The same experimental use of and transformation of Origen may be seen in Ambrose's exegeses of particular Biblical texts. I will give an account of several examples from the *De Isaac* as a complement to part one of this dissertation (section 1. below) and then list other examples that show the variety and richness of Ambrose's exegetical procedure (section 2. below). Then, in light of these examples, I will consider one aspect of Ambrose's exegesis of the *Song of Songs* as a whole (chapter 4): is the level of the plain text, the drama of the bride and groom, significant for Ambrose? Putting the question in Origen's terms, is the *Song of Songs* a *somatic* text?

¹⁷ I realize that the term *subordinationism* is usually used in discussions of the nature of Christ. It seems to fit here as well, however, since human souls are also on the same continuum of perfection. The difference between souls and Christ is that he is at the top. Origen's division of the senses of Scripture and his classification of Solomon's books fed into this idea of a continuum of increasing perfection.

1. FROM THE *DE ISAAC*Example 1: Isaac's Wells (*De Isaac* 4.20-26)

In the *De Isaac* Ambrose gives an allegorical interpretation of the passage from Genesis which relates that Isaac both reopened wells dug by Abraham and dug new ones of his own (Gen.26:18-25).¹⁸ Ambrose describes the wells Isaac dug and the name he gave each (4.20). He prefaces his interpretation of the wells and the names with the remark, "Who, when he reads these things, would consider these to be temporal works rather than spiritual... what is a well of living water if not a depth of profound teaching?" (4.21).¹⁹ The first well, named "Of Vision" gives water, that is knowledge, which cleanses and strengthens the rational part of the soul and its eye, so that it may have clearer vision.²⁰ This reflects Origen's discussion of the rational arts (logic) in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*.²¹ The second and third wells, named "Injustice" and "Enmity" (because they caused quarreling with neighboring shepherds), signify moral teaching, since Isaac by his virtue broke down the walls of division and resolved difficulties between persons as well as the enmities within each individual caused by the flesh (*in carne hominis inimicitiae*). Consequently, after the reconciliations, pure clean water was found in the wells, that is *moral* doctrine useful for living. The fourth well is named "Latitude"; it signifies the tranquility and security of the soul, when – by means of the true knowledge of *natural* things – it has passed beyond worldly and sensible reality and conflicting and alien thoughts. Finally, the last

¹⁸ See the first example of the theoretical discussions above (p.19). For a detailed discussion of the threefold wisdom as Ambrose develops it in the *De Isaac* see Sagot, "La triple sagesse," 67-114.

¹⁹ quis haec legens terrena magis quam spiritalia opera esse arbitretur, quod uel Abraham fodit puteos uel Isaac, tanti uidelicet patriarchae, uel etiam Iacob, sicut in euangelio repperimus, uelut fontes quidam generis humani et specialiter deuotionis ac fidei. quid est enim puteus aquae uiuae nisi profundae altitudinis doctrinae? (4.21).

²⁰ A puteo igitur Visionis aperire Isaac adorsus est puteos et bono ordine, ut eius putei aqua primum rationabile animae oculumque eius dilueret et foueret, quo uisum eius faceret clariorem (*De Is.*4.22). I am both translating and paraphrasing here in order to shorten the discussion.

²¹ See note 13 above (Baehrens, 76.16-78.1).

well, named “Of Oath,” is the place where God appeared to Isaac; he said to him there, “Be not afraid, I am with you,” and where he blessed him. This is *mystical* teaching (4.22). Then, Ambrose gives the theoretical explanation from Solomon’s books we saw in the theoretical discussions (no.1 above). Isaac’s wells are paradigmatic for Ambrose.²² They are an allegorical shorthand – based on the idea of the depth of wisdom – for the threefold wisdom reflected in the division of Solomon’s books. Each of Solomon’s books refers to one, or two together, of the wells, as sources of spiritual teaching. In a sense, this is classic Origen. As we saw earlier, Origen had associated each of the Patriarchs with a branch of wisdom, and this is no different from Ambrose’s treatment of Isaac’s wells. So clearly, if Ambrose reconstrues Origen’s teaching about the threefold wisdom, it is not because he misunderstood it. Yet reconstrue is just what he does. In two texts from the *De Isaac* that follow immediately after the section on Isaac’s wells (see the examples below), Ambrose conflates Origen’s division of the senses of Scripture (section 2 above) with his classification of Solomon’s books (section 3 above). Again, Ambrose is interested in the whole enterprise both of multiple senses in Scripture and diverse insights into the wisdom contained within it, but he does not subscribe to the linking of these senses or branches of wisdom to the state of soul or to the degree of perfection of his audience.

Example 2: the Threefold Wisdom in the *Song of Songs* (*De Isaac* 4.27-30)

Just after his interpretation of Isaac’s wells in the *De Isaac*, Ambrose applies the threefold wisdom to the *Song of Songs* alone. Origen had linked it to different Biblical books and personages, Ambrose applies it to one book, thus echoing Origen’s second division into *somatic*,

²² See also Ambrose, *In Luc.* Prol.2, where he brings them into the discussion (see section 3 above) as examples of the threefold wisdom in the Old Testament: “Quid enim aliud significant tres illi putei?”

psychic and *pneumatic*. Ambrose reinforces this echo of the second division by referring to the same passage from *Proverbs* to which Origen had appealed in the *Peri Archon*:

In the book of the *Song of Songs* itself Solomon also clearly expressed this threefold wisdom, even though in *Proverbs* he said that he who wished to hear his [Solomon's] wisdom should write it for himself in three ways.²³

This is a highly suggestive statement because, as we said, this verse from *Proverbs* (Prov.22:20-21) is the Scriptural base and justification – the code – for Origen's division of the senses of Scripture into *somatic*, *psychic* and *pneumatic* (division 2). After referring to this verse, Ambrose gives two sets of texts that show the presence of the threefold wisdom derived from Solomon's books (moral, natural, and mystical; division 3) in the single book of the *Song of Songs*.

a) First Set (*De Isaac* 4.27-9):

In the *Song* the bride says of the bridegroom: "Behold you are fair, my Love, and truly beautiful. Our couch is covered in shade; the beams of our house are of cedar, the panels of cypress." (Sg.1:15-17). We may take this as referring to *moral* teachings: for where do Christ and the Church find repose if not in the works of his people? Indeed where there is impurity, where there is pride, where there is wickedness, there, the Lord Jesus says, "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt.8:20).²⁴

Note that Ambrose identifies the people, that is the members of his congregation, with the dwelling of Christ and the Church. That is, the integrity of their lives is essential to the actualization of the nuptials of the Church and Christ. The spiritual house of the bride and bridegroom is built upon the moral teachings that give integrity to the works of the people.

²³ In ipso quoque Canticorum libro Solomon hanc triplicem sapientiam euidenter expressit, licet in Prouerbiis dixerit, ut tripliciter sibi scriberet qui sapientiam eius uellet audire (*De Is.*4.27).

²⁴ ait ergo in Canticis sponsa de sponso: *ecce es formosus consobrinus meus equidem pulcher: adclinatio nostra opaca, trabes domorum nostrarum caedri, lacunaria nostra cupressi* (Sg.1:15-17). possumus hoc de moralibus accipere. ubi enim requiescit Christus et ecclesia nisi in operibus suae plebis? denique ubi impudicitia, ubi superbia, ubi iniquitas erat, ibi ait dominus Jesus: *filius autem hominis non habet ubi caput suum reclinet* (Mt.8:20) (*De Is.*4.27). Note that this is Origen's *psychic* sense (a level of moral teaching that refers to the whole soul as the base of the moral life, rather than to a particular moral injunction).

What do we take to refer to *natural* teachings? “In his shadow,” she [the bride] says, “I sat and his fruit was sweet in my mouth.” (Sg.2:9). For whoever has passed beyond earthly [cares] and to whom worldly matters are dead, since the world has been crucified to him and he to the world (cf. Gal. 6:4), [such a one] contemns and flees from all things under the sun (cf. Eccles.1:3; 4:7).²⁵

This may look like a facile connection between the shade of the apple tree and an association of the sun with worldly affairs; but for those familiar with the Book of Ecclesiastes, Ambrose’s “under the sun” (*sub sole*) evokes the whole of the book of Ecclesiastes. The phrase is a leitmotif with 28 occurrences in a Biblical book containing 12 short chapters. Vanity and fruitless toil is what is under the sun.

He [Solomon] also speaks of *mystical* teachings: “Take me into the wine cellar, order love within me” (Sg.2:4). Indeed as a vine entwines its vineyard, so Our Lord Jesus like an eternal vine embraces the people with arms, as it were, of charity.²⁶

The wine cellar – where spiritual intoxication takes place – and the ordering of love are the fruit of mystical teachings. It is significant that here also, Ambrose has Christ embrace the people, not the Church in the abstract.

b) Second Set (4.30)

Consider each of these: in *morals* he [the bridegroom] is a flower, a lily among thorns as he himself says, “I am a flower of the field and a lily of the valley.” (Sg.2:1-2). In *morals*, therefore, he is a flower; in *natural* teachings he is the Sun of Justice (Mal.4:2), who in his rising and resurrection enlightens and in his setting casts shadow – take care lest he set for you, since it is written, “Do not let the sun set on your anger.” (Eph.4:26 and cf.

²⁵ de naturalibus autem quid accipimus? *in umbra inquit eius concupiui et sedi, et fructus eius dulcis in faucibus meis* (Sg.2:9). qui enim terrena supergreditur et cui mundana moriuntur, quoniam crucifigitur ei mundus et ipse mundo (cf. Gal.6:4), omnia quae sunt sub sole contemnit et refugit (cf. Eccles.1:3, 4 :7).

²⁶ de mysticis quoque ait: *introducite me in domum uini, constituite in me caritatem* (Sg.2:4). etenim sicut uitis uineam suam ita dominus Jesus populum quasi uitis aeterna quibusdam brachiis caritatis amplectitur. Ambrose takes this verse of the *Song* from the LXX. *Domun vini* may not indicate the place where wine is stored but rather where it is made? The Romans supported the vines with trellises consisting of vertical poles connected by cords or reeds or vine shoots or branches. Varro notes that the use of vine shoots was common in the territory of Milan. This explains Ambrose’s likening of Christ’s arms of love to the supporting vine shoots. See Sagot, “Triple Sagesse,” 101.

Sg.1:5-7) in *mystical* matters he is charity, since the fulfillment of the Law is Christ (Rom.10:4) and so the Church, who loves Christ, is wounded by love (Sg.2:5).²⁷

Ambrose says here concisely that Christ in himself and in his Church is the subject of all three sciences.²⁸ Natural teachings are symbolized, again, by the sun; here it is the spiritual Sun of Justice (Mal.4:2). Those reading the *De Isaac* as a whole would recognize that he refers back to the scene he described a few paragraphs earlier, 4.13-17, where the Sun “set” on the bride because of her infidelity (cf. the analysis in part 1, ch. 2, sect. 5). Finally, Christ is the subject of mystical teaching because he is charity and the Church is wounded by his love (Sg.2:5).

Example 3: the Shepherd Resting at Noon (*De Isaac* 4.13-17)

In the passage at (4.13-17) mentioned above, after the bride explains why she is dark, she then turns to the bridegroom and asks, “Where do you pasture your flocks, where do you rest at noon?” (Sg.1:6/7) Ambrose comments:

Rightly she says, “Where do you feed [your flocks]?” since the Word of God is regal; “Where do you rest?” because this is moral [teaching]; “at noon” because this is mystical.²⁹

Only the moral and mystical teachings are mentioned but the structure of the sentence implies a tripartite division. Here *regale* refers to the level of the plain text, literal though metaphorical, of

²⁷ considera singula, in moralibus flos est, inter spinas lilium, sicut ipse ait: *ego flos campi et lilium conuallium* (Sg.2:1-2). in moralibus ergo flos est, in naturalibus sol iustitiae (Mal.4:2; Sg.1:6), qui oriens et resurgens inluminat, occidens obumbrat - caue ne tibi occidat, quia scriptum est: *sol non occidat super iracundiam uestram* (Eph.4:26) -, in mysticis caritas est, quia plenitudo legis est Christus (Rom.10:4). et ideo ecclesia, quae diligit Christum, uulnerata est caritatis (Sg.2:5).

²⁸ In the *Exp.Ps.118*, he comments at greater length on Sg.2:1-2: *moralibus* fits these verses since the flower of the field gives off the perfume of good works and Christ as the flower has grown in the wide field of faith spread over the whole world. The odor has spread to Paul who says, “I am the good odor of Christ” (2Cor.2:15). The lily is resplendent through the good works of the saints. It is the fairest of lilies since its grace shines in humble places. It also has some red color within; thus it is Christ in the incarnation, mortal but shining with divinity and surrounded by grace (Ambrose, *Exp.Ps.118*. 5.7-9).

²⁹ recte dicit ubi pascis? quia regale est dei uerbum: ubi manes? quia morale: in meridiano, quia mysticum (*De Is.* 4.14). In his English translation McHugh substitutes *natural* for *regal*. This cannot be right. It masks the ambiguity and misses the interest of this passage. See Michael P. McHugh, *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 20.

the dramatic “plot” of the *Song of Songs*, since the Word, the Sun of Justice, is a Shepherd presiding over other shepherds. This is evident from his answer to her: “Pasture your kids beside the shepherds’ tents” (Sg.1:8). In the logic of the metaphor of the *Song of Songs*, therefore, the application of *regale* to the Shepherd belongs to the textual base for the moral and mystical interpretation of the passage. So here we have – if our reading is correct – a literal (or perhaps, natural), a moral, and a mystical level present in one single verse of the *Song*. Again, this example uses the terms of the classification of wisdom according to Solomon’s books, but it looks like Origen’s division into *somatic*, *psychic*, and *pneumatic*.

2. FROM OTHER TEXTS

We saw earlier that Ambrose prefers a binary division between the moral and mystical senses and that he likens this to the two eyes of the Church. They are both necessary for the full interpretation of a text and they are complementary. The examples that follow show this binary division; but the relation between the two senses varies, and we see traces in this variety of Origen’s tripartite division. It seems to be a backdrop to Ambrose’s alternation between moral and mystical. In this way, Ambrose may present the moral sense as a preparation within the soul for the deeper insight of the mystical sense. Or he may present each sense merely as a complementary aspect of the text at hand: the moral sense applies to the interior life of the soul, the mystical applies to the mystery of Christ and the events leading to and fulfilled by the incarnation. Again, Ambrose has assimilated Origen but developed his own synthesis. The examples below are taken from Ambrose’s exegesis of metaphors, though no.7 shows that he makes no

clear distinction between an historical event or person and a prophetic metaphor. Again, since all are vehicles of divine revelation in Scripture, all are interpreted by the same exegetical method.

Example 4: The eyes (Ps.118.5:28-36)³⁰

In these paragraphs of stanza five (*He*) of Psalm 118, Ambrose comments on the verse “Turn away my eyes, lest they look upon vanities” (Ps.118.37a). He begins by saying, “Let us defer for the moment the mystical sense.” Without mentioning by name the moral sense, he launches into a diatribe against all the vanities upon which a Christian should not look: the circus, the theatre, the victor’s crowns, horse racing, women, secular pomp. These are sensual pleasures and worldly vanities; by gazing on them one opens the window of the eye and death enters in. At the juncture of paragraphs 30 and 31 he makes his classic transition: “These suffice for moral teachings [about the eyes]. There are also mystical eyes.”³¹ These are the eyes of the soul, the eyes of faith. Those who have darkened their hearts by looking on sensual vanities are alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and blindness of heart (Eph.4:17). Origen’s threefold progression from moral rectitude to right discernment to spiritual enlightenment lies beneath this binary division between the moral and mystical eye.

Example 5: the Serpent (Ps.118.20:2)

In stanza twenty (*Res*) of Psalm 118 Ambrose begins by saying that *Res* means “head.” He says that the only part of a man that distinguishes him from other men or from beasts is his head. Remove that and he is unrecognizable. This leads to a delightful description of the serpent for whom also the head is everything: when it faces danger, it coils up and suffers the loss of all its

³⁰ The numbering of the examples is continuous for ease of reference.

³¹ *haec sunt moralia* [referring to what has been said] *Sunt etiam mystici oculi* [referring to what will be said in the following paragraph] (*Exp.Ps.118.5.30-31*).

body so long as the head is safe. Augustine develops this image (remembering Ambrose?) in the *De doctrina christiana*.³² With admirable concision Ambrose comments: *Hoc et tu moraliter caput serva, hoc servato et mystice* (Ps.118.20:2: “You also preserve your head through your morals, though once it is safe, guard it mystically.”) This statement serves as his transition to a mystical interpretation of Christ as the head of Christians; all their good depends on an attachment to him (Ps.118.20:2-6). Ambrose does not spell out here all the levels of interpretation. Instead he lets the lively images of the head and the snake carry the burden of interpretation. As we reflect upon this cryptic statement – and decode the metaphor – we see that Ambrose seems to be saying that a good moral life is the base without which one cannot attain mystical wisdom. Once moral integrity is acquired, however, mystical wisdom preserves it. One level is more perfect than the other (Origen), but each is maintained by the other.

Example 6: Leaves and Fruit (Ps.1:3)

In his commentary on verse 3 of Psalm 1 (“He [the just man] is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in due season; its leaves never wither”) Ambrose considers the relationship between leaves and fruit (Ps.1:41-2).

The fruit is within; the leaves are that by which the fruit is protected from the burning sun and cold. The fruit seems to be faith, peace, the excellence of teaching, the search for true knowledge, the explanation of the mysteries. These fruits a good life preserves, a bad life loses, even though it perceives them [intellectually].... In the contemplation of heavenly mysteries the fruit is like mystical teaching, the leaves like moral. For virtues without faith are leaves: they look verdant but they cannot be productive, they flutter in the wind.... The mystical teachings save and free from death, moral teachings are an ornament of beauty not an aid to redemption. That the mystical teachings are more excellent than the moral even the Lord himself teaches in the Gospel when he says of Mary, that she has chosen the best part (Lk.10:41-2).... Who in his works shall we compare to the one who is zealous for the knowledge of eternal truth? Neither should faith be lacking to

³² Augustine, *De doct. christ.* 2.16.

the activity of the one who works, nor should activity be lacking to the one who, like Mary, seeks knowledge, lest the leaves be without fruit or the fruit without its natural protection be uncovered and exposed to injury.³³

In this realistic and nuanced account of the classic dilemma presented by Martha and Mary, Ambrose implies that most are required to live the life of both and that one must strike the right balance between the two. In and of itself the mystical life is higher, though both are necessary. There is both a hierarchy and a complementarity: the leaves without fruit are nothing, but fruits without leaves are in danger. One interesting aspect of this passage is that Ambrose comes close to saying that moral virtue offers no help in the attainment of salvation: it is “an ornament of beauty not an aid to redemption.” Then he seems to back off and focus on the complementary roles of the leaves and fruit. For a brief moment, the winds of grace and faith, so strong in the anti-Pelagian works of Augustine, blow through Ambrose’s leaves. Origen had also made the point that a good moral life is necessary for the attainment of mystical knowledge, though he looked at the process as one of increasing perfection, due to his alignment of growth in spiritual perfection and knowledge to the parts of the human person. So for Origen, the Christian that has arrived at the level of mystical (*pneumatic*) knowledge has already arrived at a high degree of

³³ The entire passage follows: *Fructus interior est, folium, quo fructus uel a sole torrenti uel a frigore defendatur. fructus uidetur esse fides, pax, doctrinae exeellentia, uerae cognitionis intentio, mysteriorum ratio. hos fructus bona uita eustodit, mala, etiamsi pereepit, amittit. peccatori autem dixit deus: quare tu enarras iustitias meas? (Ps.49:16) in mysticis fructus est, in moralibus folium econtemplatione mysteriorum eaelestium. nam uirtutes sine fide folia sunt; uidentur uirere, sed prodesse non possunt, agitantur uento, quia non habent fundamentum. quanti gentiles habent misericordiam, habent sobrietatem, sed fructum non habent, quia fidem non habent! labuntur cito folia, ubi uentus flauerit. et aliqui Iudaei habent eestimoniam, sedulitatem lectionis multam et diligentiam, sed sine fructu sunt, sed uersantur ut folia. haec forte sunt folia, quae Saluator in illa ficu repperit, sed fructum non repperit (cf. Mt.21:19). Mystica saluant et a morte liberant, moralia autem ornamenta deoris sunt, non subsidia redemptionis. praestare autem mystica moralibus etiam ipse Dominus docet in euangelio suo dicens de Maria, quae sedens secus pedes Domini audiebat uerbum illius, cum Martha circa ministerium festinaret et quereretur, quod soror eam propria circa mensae ministerium non iuuaret: *Martha Martha, Maria optimam partem elegit sibi, quae non auferet illi* (Lk.10:41-2). si quae Christo ministrabat ad mensam non conferebatur ei quae uerbum cupiebat audire, quem operantem studioso cognitionis aeternae conferre poterimus, ita tamen, ut nec illius operationi fides nec huius cognitioni, sicut Mariae, desit operatio, ne uel folia sine fructu sint uel fructus sine munimentis naturalibus sit intectus et pateat iniuriae? (In Ps.1.41-2).*

moral perfection, though, of course, he must maintain it. Still, this linear vision of the process is radically different from that of Ambrose's leaves and fruit.

Example 7: the Cock (*Aeterne rerum conditor*)

Ambrose's hymn moves from the level of the natural activity of the cock, namely crowing, through the moral level to the mystical. With intense economy of language the multiple layers of meaning unfurl, so to speak, into one unified but multi-level picture: the daily activity of the barnyard animal signals the coming of dawn, evokes the repentant tears of Peter, and finally greets the rising sun, the *Lux* that is Christ.³⁴ One does not move from one sense level to the next; but the crowing of the cock, echoing through the poetry of the hymn (note the repetitions of *hoc*), builds up a rich interplay of levels of meaning all deployed at once.

Example 8: David the Adulterer

In one final example, we see how far Ambrose can take the multiple senses of Scripture, coalesced with the different kinds of wisdom. The *Apologia Prophetarum David* is a *tour de force* worthy of the ex-lawyer. Without denying David's grievous sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah, Ambrose argues for acquittal.³⁵ In David's defense he shows

³⁴ See Fontaine, *Hymnes*, 143-175.

³⁵ Ambrose says in the Prologue that he undertakes the defense because many are offended that a great prophet whom Scripture treats as a type of Christ should have acted in such an evil manner. Hadot argues that the dedication to Theodosius makes the treatise a response to the massacre at Thessalonica. Dans sa forme extérieure, l'ouvrage se présente comme~ une plaidoirie, dans laquelle Ambroise cherche à excuser le double crime d'adultère et de meurtre commis par David, lorsqu'il fut séduit par la beauté de Bersabée. Ce plaidoyer comporte deux parties... [le plaidoyer] se conforme aux règles traditionnelles de la rhétorique. Dans le cas présent, il n'est pas possible de nier la réalité des faits ou leur caractère délictueux. David a bien fait tuer Urie et il a bien commis l'adultère avec Bersabée. L'avocat se trouve donc dans le pire des « états de cause », celui de la *qualitas assumptiua* (Lausberg, 177), dans lequel il lui faut chercher en dehors du fait litigieux lui-même des arguments capables de défendre son client, puisque de toute manière on ne peut nier qu'il soit coupable. Il lui faut alors implorer le pardon des juges, c'est la *deprecatio*; il lui faut essayer de minimiser la responsabilité du coupable en invoquant l'ignorance ou le hasard ou la nécessité, c'est la *purgatio*. *Deprecatio* et *purgatio* sont les deux formes de la *concessio*, c'est-à-dire de l'aveu, de la

that his repentance was swift, his sorrow deep, that this was one fall in an otherwise exemplary life of moral virtue, and that God forgave him. Then he boldly rewrites the story and Nathan's parable. In the rewritten story, Bathsheba is the Church of the gentiles united to the true David, Christ, in an illegitimate marriage (according to the Law of Moses). She is naked with a pure heart having just emerged from the bath of baptism. David has rescued her from Uriah, who symbolizes the devil (*De Apol.*14). In Nathan's rewritten parable, Jesus Christ is the only one who is truly rich. He left the ninety-nine to search for the one and found her. She is not evil but in long exile, at the home of Uriah, the prince of this world. David (Christ) took her (she is in fact his own human nature), immolated her, and gave her to us as food for eternal life (nn.20-22). Ambrose appears to take incredible license with the Biblical text. At no point, however, does he deny the historical fact of the heinous crimes. The significant point here is that according to Ambrose's exegesis, all aspects of the situation – the historical event, David's sin, the moral probity of David sanctioned by the forgiveness of God, and the mystical figurative and prophetic role of David, contribute simultaneously to a complete understanding of this Old Testament scene.³⁶ There is no progression from a lower, surface meaning of the text to a deeper, more perfect interior hidden meaning, in which the plain text is, so to speak, the protective shell for the hidden kernel. Though Ambrose follows Origen and Didymus in his exegesis of Psalm 50, David's *Miserere*, in the other sections where he details his mystical interpretation of David and Bathsheba as typological metaphors for Christ and the Church, no references are found to Origen or Didymus. So Ambrose was on his own in his spiritual rewrite of this story.

confession, seule attitude possible dans une telle situation. Here Hadot refers to Cicero's *De Inventione*. See Ambroise de Milan, *Apologie de David* ed. Pierre Hadot (Paris : Cerf, 1977), 7-8.

³⁶ See Nauroy, "L'écriture," 284-6.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at examples of Ambrose's use of the terms *moralis*, *naturalis*, and *mysticus* in the interpretation of different Scriptural texts. The examples range from a clean and faithful reproduction of Origen's classification of the books of Solomon to a maverick rewrite of the story of David and Bathsheba, with various stages of adaptation of Origen's principles in between. What these changes show us is Ambrose taking master ideas from Origen,⁽¹⁾ of three senses belonging to one and the same text and (2) of different areas of divine wisdom present in Scripture. Inspired by and reworking these ideas, Ambrose has arrived at an exegetical method of his own in which the moral and mystical aspects of a text complement each other, in much the same way as the moral and mystical wisdom of Solomon; but these aspects are regularly applied to one and the same text or to different phrases in one single Scriptural passage.

We saw in the *De Isaac* that he began to think of the *Song of Songs* as containing not only the mystical teaching but in some sense all three kinds of teaching. Some of the examples contained all three types of wisdom: moral, natural and mystical; others had only the moral and mystical. All of the examples show, however, that Ambrose has backed away from Origen's idea of the correspondence between increasing interiority of the text and increasing perfection of the soul. Origen's *psychic* interpretation of a text – that is, an essentially allegorical interpretation of Biblical events, persons, and figures – has disappeared to be replaced by moral teaching as exemplified by the book of *Proverbs*. Similarly, Origen's *pneumatic* sense – the inward kernel of hidden truth present at the heart of any Biblical text – has been replaced by the mystical teaching as exemplified in Solomon's *Song of Songs*. Finally, although Ambrose is of course deeply interested in the perfection of the souls of his audience, the unrelenting drive towards ever increas-

ing perfection, based on an increasing penetration of Biblical texts, does not figure in his exegesis, as it had in Origen's. The alternation between a moral and mystical sense, therefore, seems to be Ambrose's regular and preferred mode of interpretation. We will see this alternation reproduced throughout our analyses of the individual stanzas of the *Expositio*.

Ambrose's hymns, however, are a magnificent exception to this rule. We mentioned at the beginning of this section that example 7 would be a special case of the exegesis of a metaphor, the cock, with richly condensed senses layered one on top of another: the natural or literal level in the crowing of the cock, mimicked by a recurring "hoc," the moral level in the repentance of Peter at the crowing, and finally the mystical in the light of the rising Sun, a symbol of Christ. All levels stand together in a mosaic of verbal and allegorical color. It is a literary and exegetical feast, Ambrose at his best. It is no wonder that Augustine was charmed by his sermons and wept tears of joy at his hymns.³⁷ This brings us to our final reflection.

Ambrose developed his method of exegesis out of his own temperament and intellectual custom. His pastoral need, however, must have weighed as heavily as personal preference. Men in his audience like Augustine or the adulterer of Stanza 1 would have had little use for an unadulterated delivery of Origen's senses of Scripture. The Church at Milan in the 380s was a radically different milieu from the Church at Alexandria or Caesarea in the third century. So as we look at the transformation of Origen in the hands of Ambrose, and this is especially true with the *Song of Songs*, we get a glimpse of how greatly the Church had changed since the days of Origen. The bishop can no longer be certain that the men and women who stand before him as he preaches are ardent practitioners of the way of perfection. On the other hand, they require from

³⁷ Augustine, *Conf.* 9.6.

their bishop both guidance in the understanding of the Scriptures and principles for the Christianization of their lives in a sophisticated imperial city.³⁸

³⁸ This seems evident in a number of places in the stanzas of Ps.118.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SONG OF SONGS: A SOMATIC TEXT?

I would like to return for a moment to Origen's classification of the senses of Scripture into *somatic*, *psychic*, and *pneumatic*. He says that every Biblical text has a *psychic* and *pneumatic* dimension. Most have a *somatic* dimension as well. This means that when the text is viewed from each of these viewpoints, it makes sense and may be used to teach and edify those who listen to or read it on that level. To put it another way, a *somatic* text is edifying on the surface level of the plain text as well as on an interior moral *psychic* level; finally this same text may be viewed as a revelation of divine truth and this is the *pneumatic* level. The story of Noah's ark, for example, on the *somatic* level is an historical account of Noah, his obedience to God, his prudence in saving his family and the animals from destruction; God begins again with Noah and his family. For Origen and many of the early exegetes Noah was an historical figure and the flood a fact.¹ On the *psychic* level the Ark may be considered as an image of the soul within which the Christian must house the truths of Scripture in order to build up within himself a saving protection from the floods of vice and sin. Origen notes that the Ark has three lower decks and two upper; these symbolize Biblical texts with two or three senses. The flood waters cleanse the soul, since they destroy all corruptible vices and worldly pleasures (Origen and Ambrose). On the *pneumatic* level the Ark is an image of the Church, within which – according to Origen –

¹ Origen defends the historicity of the flood and the Ark against the heretic Apelles, a follower of Marcion. For this and for an analysis of Origen's 2nd Homily on Genesis, see Dively-Lauro, 132-147.

the Christian ascends from the lowest to the highest deck, while Noah represents Christ. Or the Ark may be a figure (in dimensions and structure) of the human body (Ambrose) and an image of Christ himself (Augustine).² In the mystagogical catechesis, as we shall see below, the flood is also an image of baptism. The *pneumatic* or mystical interpretations, therefore, are multiple.

In contrast to Noah's Ark, the *Song of Songs* presents immediate and baffling difficulties of interpretation with regard to the plain meaning of the text. Origen cautions those who still feel the sting of carnal passion to refrain from reading it.³ Gregory of Nyssa makes a similar remark at the beginning of his homilies on the *Song*.⁴ Origen also says that the Jewish rabbis of his day keep this text with several others until the student had reached sufficient maturity to read it.⁵ While Ambrose is no lover of carnal passion, he does not warn against the erotic imagery of the *Song*. On the contrary there is something refreshing, down to earth, about him. He has no qualms when it comes to describing the lover's kiss (part 1, ch. 2, no. 4). The garden wedding that enters rather unexpectedly into the middle of the *De Bono Mortis* has the marks of a real and lively party. He includes the caresses and the passion of love in his exposition of the moral teachings of the *Song* (see the Theoretical Discussions, no.4 above) Other touches like these will surface in the stanzas of Psalm 118 that follow. Though the insistence on the sensual imagery as the main message of the *Song*, typical of modern historical exegesis, would have left him cold, still

² See for example the long development of Ambrose, following Philo, in the *De Noe*, 6.13-9.30. See also Augustine *civ.dei* 15.26-7 and *Contra Faustum* 12.14-24. For Augustine, the door in the side is Christ's heart opened by a lance through which Christians enter into the ark, through the water and blood of the sacraments that flowed from the wound..

³ Ob hoc ergo moneo et consilium do omni, qui nondum carnis et sanguinis molestiis caret neque ab affectu naturae materialis abscedit, ut a lectione libelli huius eorumque quae in eum dicuntur penitus temperet (Origen, *In Ct.Cant.* Prol.Baehrens, 62.19-22).

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, ed. Hermann Langerbeck (Leiden: Brill, 1986) Oratio 1, lines 4-18.

⁵ Origen, *In Ct.Cant.* Baehrens, 62.22-30.

Ambrose stands far from any insistence on a radically spiritualized love, such as the warnings of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa might suggest.

J. Christopher King has argued persuasively that the *Song of Songs* is for Origen an *asomatic* (bodiless) text.⁶ This means that the dialogue and drama of human and sensual love between a bride and a groom has no significance for the meaning of the *Song*. King cites numerous indicators found in the text of the *Song of Songs* itself as interpreted by Origen.

1). The title: on the principle that the divinely assigned title reveals the purpose of a Biblical book, Origen points out that the title of this book is “The Song of Songs which is Solomon’s Own” (*Canticum canticorum quod est ipsi Solomoni*).⁷ As such it is an exemplar for all other songs and it is written by Solomon himself. Neither the name of the people over whom he rules (Israel), nor the city where he rules (Jerusalem) are mentioned, as they are in *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*.⁸ Here it is just Solomon himself. Origen concludes that as author of the *Song of Songs* Solomon, whose name means peace, is a patent symbol for Christ, the Word.

2). The order: the *Song of Songs* is the seventh in a series of Biblical songs. It represents the highest state of perfection which a soul may attain. Significantly, each of the songs must be sung in order to fulfill their divine purpose; and the soul must sing them all and in the right order as she ascends and only then may she enter finally the chamber of the heavenly bridegroom to hear the *Song of Songs*, which is a marriage song (*epithalamium... a Solomoni conscriptus*).⁹

⁶ See King, 134-178. It is significant perhaps that Gregory of Nyssa also uses the term *asomatos* to describe the love to which the *Song of Songs* brings the bride (Gregory of Nyssa, In *Ct. Cant.* Oratio 1.13-5).

⁷ *Sg.* 1:1 and Baehrens, 83.30.

⁸ King, 138-43.

⁹ Epithalamium libellus hic, id est nuptiale carmen, dramatis in modum mihi videtur a Solomone conscriptus, quem cecinit instar nubentis sponsae et erga sponsum suum, qui est sermo Dei, caelesti amore fragrantis (Origen, In *Ct. Cant.* 1.1; Baehrens, 61); King, 143-8.

3). Narrative and figurative inconsistencies: there are sudden changes of character and address, so that it becomes difficult to identify the speaker or the addressee and to follow the sequence of events on the level of the plain text. Similarly, the bride is identified from the outset, according to Origen, with the soul longing for the embrace of the Word. She prays to God, whom she knows to be the bridegroom's father. The literal bridegroom is therefore none other than the Son of God, who becomes suddenly present even while the bride is begging for his kiss.¹⁰

This stance has left many critics of Origen dissatisfied. They accuse him of over-spiritualizing the *Song* in order to avoid the obvious literal sexual meaning. But King is correct in seeing Origen's parallel between the love, haste, and goal (union) of the bride in the *Song* on the one hand and the process of reading Scripture, on the other.

Yet what Origen wants the reader to see above all is that the hermeneutic movement from letter to spirit in the Scripture is an enactment of the nuptial mysteries. The rhetorical form of Origen's exhortation here draws down the spiritual action of the verse from an entirely speculative order – where the love-life of the bridegroom and bride is considered *in abstracto* – into the experience of the reader. He shows the form of the bride's narrative movement into the deeper embraces of her lover to be the same as the form of the Christian's hermeneutical movement into the spiritual meaning of the *Song*. . . . Thus, Origen urges the Christian to lay hold of his identification with the bride in and through the very act of reading the *Song*.¹¹

By properly reading and assimilating the *Song*, one becomes the bride. For Origen, therefore, true union of the soul with the Word of God is a “noetic embrace” (King, 172). One attains this union *through* the text of the *Song*, and generally through Scripture, by learning to read it in such a way that one is transformed into the bride. King continues:

¹⁰ King, 56-9; 151-6. Origen concludes his analysis of one difficult passage: Sed haec nullam mihi videntur, quantum ad historicam narrationem pertinet, utilitatem conferre legentibus aut aliquam saltem narrationis ipsius servare consequentiam, sicut in ceteris Scripturae historiis invenimus. Unde necesse est cuncta ad spiritalem transferre intelligentiam (Baehrens, 229.19-23).

¹¹ King, 171-2. The context of this statement is Origen's analysis of Sg.2:6: “O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!”

By *turning* (my emphasis) from a sensible, corporeal understanding of the text, the reader prepares to set out on the bride's path to consummation. This turning constitutes an intellectual and moral conversion from the will to confect the kind of alluring fantasies that attach themselves, as mental pictures, to the verse. Thus, it is clear why Origen can so frequently describe the process of allegorical reading in the language of *metanoia*. On Origen's account, the true hermeneutical gesture is not merely interpretative; it is ascetical, redemptive, and, at its point of origin in the soul, erotic. Refining the capacity to perceive the divine sense of Scripture – and particularly the *Song* – is not simply one mode of *metanoia* among many; it is, for Origen, the highest form and fruition of *metanoia* as such.¹²

The “noetic embrace” of the soul with the Word is, in my opinion, the key to an understanding of Origen's exegesis of the *Song of Songs*. In King's interpretation, Origen is prepared to admit that when one approaches the *Song*, one may have fantasies of sensual love; but if one has followed the course through *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*, one knows that true love is wholly spiritual. Reading the *Song* is the exercise that constitutes the definitive launch into spiritual and perfect love.

Though King does not develop this point, the “noetic embrace” derives from Origen's idea of the external and internal senses and how they relate to the creation of man. He lays it out in the Prologue to his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. He says that when Moses wrote of the creation of the world, we find that he recounts the creation of two men; the first was “made in the image and likeness of God” (Gen.1:26), the second was made “from the slime of the earth” (Gen.2:7).¹³ Paul the apostle, says Origen, also knew this and stated clearly in his epistles that every human being is made of two: “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.”¹⁴ After stating the principle of the double creation, Origen says that if it is unclear to anyone, he will explain it better in the proper place. This clearly implies that

¹² *ibid.* 172.

¹³ In principio uerborum Moysei, ubi de mundi conditione conscribitur, duos invenimus homines creatos referri, primum “ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei factum,” secundum “e limo terrae fictum” (Origen, *In Ct.Cant.* Prol. B.p.64 top).

¹⁴ 2Cor.4:16. Origen also refers to Rom.7:22. See Origen, *In Ct.Cant.* Prol. Baehrens 63ff.

Origen is not speaking metaphorically about internal and external experiences of life and love.¹⁵

He is stating what he regards as a metaphysical fact. He explains that he has mentioned the interior and the exterior man because Scripture uses homonyms for the members, attributes, states, and affections of both. For example, one may be a child either with regard to physical age (the exterior man) or with regard to one's soul (the interior man). Similarly, Scripture refers to the eyes, ears, hands, feet, tongue, teeth of both the exterior man (the body with the physical senses) and the interior man (the soul with her powers).

In all things, therefore, the same names are used for each man, but the properties of things are kept distinct for each: corruptible properties are attributed to the corruptible, incorruptible properties are attributed to the incorruptible.¹⁶

One must learn to distinguish between the distinct realities to which Scripture gives the same name. Thus there are two kinds of love, one carnal the other spiritual. Scripture sometimes distinguishes between the two by giving the name "love" to the carnal and "charity" to the spiritual. But, Origen insists, it is the *same* love; the difference between the two comes from the source (exterior sense vs. interior sense) not from the nature of love. The process of reading Scripture – of seeking the *psychic* and *pneumatic* senses and of going through the course outlined by the division of Solomon's books – teaches the soul to distinguish between the two sources of love and to embrace the love that belongs to the interior man, that is the soul in her true nature (and this is true human nature recovered from the fall). True love for Origen, therefore, is the "noetic

¹⁵ Unde puto neminem iam debere dubitare quod Moyses de duorum. hominum. factura vel figmento scripserit in principio Genesis, cum videat Paulum, qui melius utique quam nos intelligebat ea, quae a Moyse scripta sunt, duos homines esse per singulos quosque dicentem. Quorum unum, id est "interiorem," renovari per singulos dies memorat, alium vero, id est "exteriorem," in sanctis quibusque et talibus, qualis erat Paulus, "corrumpi" perhibet et infirmari. *Quod si alicui videbitur de hoc adhuc aliquid dubitandum, in locis propriis melius explanabitur* (Origen *In Ct.Cant.*Prol. B 64).

¹⁶ Sic ergo per omnia similitudo quidem vocabulorum secundum utrumque hominem ponitur, rerum vero proprietates unicuique discreta servantur et corruptibili corruptibilia praebentur, incorruptibili vero incorruptibilia proponuntur.(Prol .66).

embrace” of the Word of God by the soul that has recovered the full use of her spiritual senses.

The *Song of Songs* is the *asomatic* epithalamium that both effects and celebrates that embrace.

This is the doctrine of the third-century elite community of Origen’s students at Caesarea. Ambrose is a world apart in late fourth-century imperial Milan, where civil servants, families, consecrated virgins, clergy and laity from all walks of life swell the ranks of his congregation. Whether or not Ambrose ever asked himself how the erotic imagery of the *Song* could be fully reconciled with a spiritual love of the Word (in Origen’s sense) he turned instinctively from Origen’s metaphysics and from Origen’s need to make the *Song* a wholly consistent, spiritual, and divine text. There are some deeply human aspects of the heart that Ambrose understood, which Origen, perhaps, did not. On a level deeper than cognitive reasoning Ambrose understood the transformative power both of love and of the poetic metaphor. This instinctive, practical sense protected him from the heady enthusiasm of Origen and his followers. It also allowed him to treat the *Song of Songs* as a *somatic* text. For Ambrose the logical place to start an ascent of the soul towards God was the solid foundation of human love. Ironically, this puts him in the ranks of the most modern exegetes of the *Song of Songs*.¹⁷

In addition to these differences of time, place, temperament, poetic sense, and Church environment, there was the deeply formative and indelible foundation of a Roman education and culture. Virgil, Ovid, Terence, Cicero and others are treasures for Ambrose. He gives every

¹⁷ See, for example, Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Jean Emmanuel de Ena, *Sens et Interpretations du Cantique des Cantiques: sens textual, sens directionnels, cadre du texte* (Paris: Cerf, 2004); Paul J. Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011); Jean-Marie Auwers, *Regards croisés sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Bruxelles: Editions Lessius, 2005); Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2005). See also Russell J. DeSimone, *The bride and the bridegroom of the Fathers: an Anthology of Patristic Interpretations of the Song of Songs* (Rome: Instituto Patristico Augustinianum, 2000), esp. the Introduction, 9-21.

evidence of enjoying them and thinking that his audience will also. As we shall see, traces of them come to the fore in his commentary on Psalm 118. Where Augustine worried about his tears over Dido, Ambrose had no qualms whatever. After reading much of what Ambrose has to say about the *Song of Songs*, I think I can say that in his own imagination, he saw it as a Scriptural equivalent to the stories and myths he knew so well from his long acquaintance with the classical tradition. As such it was the divine answer to the sorrow and heartache that marks many of the great stories, an answer that in no way denies the deepest needs of the human heart. There is a mysterious quality about Ambrose that is refined and urbane, but profoundly sympathetic to the drama of human life.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this excursus on Ambrose's approach to exegesis has been to show both that he read and understood Origen and that he transformed Origen's exegetical method. He adapted it to his own temperament and philosophical principles as well as to the needs of his congregation in Milan and the cultural *milieu* of the late fourth century. Beneath the differences in approach to the *Song of Songs*, therefore, lie fundamental differences of method, metaphysics, purpose, and cultural environment. With regard to metaphysics, Origen thought that the essential human person was the intellectual soul; in this life it *uses* a physical body, which is conceived of as a redemptive second chance for the fallen soul.¹⁸ Ambrose, on the other hand, is more nuanced. He speaks the language of Plato and Origen; but as he develops his ideas we see that, however he may define the human person philosophically, on a practical level, when it comes to

¹⁸ See p.15, note 45.

motives and moral actions, he respects entirely the union of body and soul. His sense of *decorum* – which we will examine in greater detail in section two, stanza eleven – was far too deeply ingrained in him to allow him to ignore the role of the body in the moral physiognomy of the human person. In this regard, he famously rejected two candidates for the priesthood on the basis of gait: speaking of one of them, he says that he ended by leaving the Church and that the appearance of his gait showed the perfidy of his soul.¹⁹ For Ambrose, therefore, regardless of the metaphysical relation between body and soul, in the business of life, the body counted as a mirror of and companion to the soul.

This brings us to what may be the most profound difference between Ambrose and Origen. Both men would argue that the essence of human nature lies in the soul. We have already seen that Ambrose clearly argues for this position in the *De Isaac* and the *De Bono Mortis*: “One [the soul] is who we are, another is what belongs to us; one is he who is clothed, another is the clothing.”²⁰ The idea that sin comes from the allurements of the flesh is also everywhere in Ambrose. This is only the least complicated part of the picture, however. Origen is keenly aware of the ability of the soul to choose, to go towards the body or towards the spirit, and for him the spirit in a man is a pure reflection of the Spirit of God.²¹ Ambrose speaks of the

¹⁹ qualis incesso prodebat, talis perfidia animi demonstratetur (Ambrose, *De Off.* 1.72). In his introduction to his edition of the *De Officiis*, Ivor Davidson remarks that this meant that there was no shortage of young men wishing to be among Ambrose’s clergy, (78). They needed to know how to make a dignified appearance not only in the presence of the faithful but before pagans and the imperial court (81). So in late fourth-century Milan, there was a particular need for *decorum*. Another aspect to this question was the scrutiny to which Ambrose himself would have been subjected as he preached and presided over the episcopal tribunal (83). See, Ambrose, *De Officiis*, ed. Ivor Davidson, v.1: introduction, text, and translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁰ quid est itaque homo? utrum anima an caro an utriusque copula? aliud enim nos sumus. aliud nostrum, alius qui induitur et aliud uestimentum (*De Is.* 2.3).

²¹ See the discussion in Dively-Lauro, 86-91. Note that for Origen, the spirit in a man has no part in sin (90).

soul as a life-giving principle for the body, which it governs.²² He also sees an irrational element in the soul that is the real cause of evil.²³ So the practical question is how far must one remove oneself from the dangers of material life, in order to maintain moral integrity? Of course, the answers to this question are influenced by many external factors, and one's audience would perhaps be chief among them. As we have seen in the *De Isaac* and the *De Bono Mortis*, Ambrose does not consider actual flight from the world as an option for his audience:

Flight, however, does not mean to abandon the world, but to live among earthly things [and] to hold to justice and sobriety, to renounce vices not the uses of one's resources. Holy David "fled before the face of Saul" (1Sam.19:10), not indeed to abandon earthly affairs but to escape the contagion of one who was cruel, disobedient, and treacherous.²⁴

His goal in the treatises we are examining is that his Christians guard the right measure of things (cf. *De Is.*2.5) without necessarily abandoning a secular life.²⁵ In addition to the question of audience, however, there is a subtle but profound difference in attitude between Ambrose and Origen toward human nature as such. Though the spiritual perfection Ambrose proposes through his interpretation of the *Song of Songs* is as high and demanding for the individual soul as it is for Origen, Ambrose sees the soul as stable in her fundamental relationship with the body. For

²² sed anima est uiuens, quia factus est Adam in animam uiuentem, eo quod insensibile atque exanimus corpus anima uiuificet et gubernet (*De Is.*2.4).

²³ The soul, therefore, is by nature excellent, but for the most part it becomes liable to corruption because of the irrational element [within it]. As a result it is inclined to pleasures of the body and to insolence; as it does not adhere to the right measure of things, deceived in thought and inclined to material things, it is glued to the body (*anima igitur secundum sui naturam optima est, sed plerumque per irrationabile sui obnoxia fit corruptioni, ut inclinatur ad uoluptates corporis et ad petulantiam, dum mensuram rerum non teneat, ant fallitur opinione atque inclinata ad materiem adglutinatur corpori* (*De Is.*2.5)).

²⁴ fuga autem est non terras relinquere, sed esse in terris, iustitiam et sobrietatem tenere, renuntiare uitiiis, non usibus elementorum. fugiebat Dauid sanctus a facie Saul, non utique ut terras relinqueret, sed ut inimitis et inobseruantis et perfidi declinaret contagium (*De Is.*3.6).

²⁵ I am aware that this open attitude towards secular life is a function of the three treatises that are the subject of this dissertation. Ambrose founded a monastery outside of the city, he also encouraged virgins to stay home and away from secular gatherings. But more than the question of audience, there is an interior disposition in Ambrose, reflected in his ideas of the Church, that is radically different from Origen and also implies a different idea of asceticism. Colish (31-40) overstates her case. But her argument that the aim of Ambrose's patriarch treatises is a formation in Christian life that is integrated into society at large, as opposed to a formation that causes the Christian to withdraw from it, is certainly correct.

Origen, on the other hand, the soul finds true stability only when she has become wholly identified with her interior spiritual senses and her essentially intellectual nature.

Clearly, manifold differences in the status of the Church, in the audiences to whom they preached, and in the theological developments of the fourth-century enter into a picture of the differences between Ambrose and Origen. The real dilemma, however, is that what Ambrose and Origen seem to say is often quite similar, yet the effect is different. With regard to the *Song of Songs* in particular, their interpretations on a level of detail may at times coincide, but they are worlds apart in their fundamental attitude to the base level of the text and in their understanding of the soul implied by the difference between thinking of the text as *somatic* or *asomatic*. This difference in attitude towards the human soul as it is reflected in the exegesis of the *Song of Songs* seems to me to be critical. Because Ambrose thinks that the men and women of his congregation are essentially as they appear to be – for lack of a better expression – he enjoys a freedom that Origen does not. He can reach down into their day-to-day lives and bring them up into his vision of the perfection of Christian life with ease, where for Origen the process and need for unflinching moral ascent is permanent.

Ambrose's preference for a binary interpretation of Scriptural texts is a reflection of this freedom. Moral edification and mystical insight are the complementary facets of the spiritual meaning of the text. Both are equally available to those who sincerely and diligently scrutinize the Scriptures. It is still the spiritual truths hidden under the letter of the Biblical texts that count, but the tight parallel between the hidden truths and the progressive perfection of the soul has been enlarged, if not wholly broken. Ambrose has made a shift – subtle, profound, but

unmistakable – away from the metaphysics of Origen into the world of the flesh and blood members of his audience in fourth-century Milan.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHY ASSOCIATE THE *SONG OF SONGS* WITH PSALM 118?

In light of this discussion of image and *mysterium*, of metaphor, and of Ambrose's exegetical method, we are in a position to approach his exegesis of Psalm 118. Before beginning an analysis of passages from his commentary, however, one primary and fundamental question remains to be answered: why did Ambrose choose to comment on Psalm 118 by means of a parallel commentary on the *Song of Songs*? When I began to research the question, I thought the answer would require an intriguing but relatively circumscribed investigation. That estimate has now been blown to the winds. It seems to me that the answer takes us far into the heart of fourth-century thought. I can only present here a complex matrix of reasons why Ambrose might have used the *Song of Songs* to interpret a psalm dedicated to the Law of the Old Testament. I will outline some of them here. Others we will see later, after we have analyzed some of the stanzas of his commentary. One thing is clear though. Whatever the reasons or motives, they represent a personal choice on Ambrose's part because he is the only one, as far as we know, to associate these two Biblical texts. Before delving into Ambrose's reasons for associating them, we need to take a brief look at Psalm 118.

PSALM 118

Psalm 118 (119 in the Hebrew and modern Christian Psalters), is the longest psalm in the collection; it contains 176 verses. It is a *tour de force*, an acrostic consisting of 22 stanzas, one

for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza has eight verses and the first word of each verse begins with the letter of the alphabet belonging to that stanza. In order to see how this works, one may look at the seventh stanza, *waw*. This letter, as a particle, means “and.” Since few Hebrew words begin with it (3 only in the Biblical corpus), the Hebrew poet simply began each line of the seventh strophe with “and.”¹ Jerome preserved this schema in the Latin Vulgate by beginning each of the eight lines with “et.” In addition to this rigid format, each stanza had to contain a series of eight terms each signifying some aspect of the Old Testament Law. The LXX found eight Greek words to replace the Hebrew terms, with mixed success. Origen reduced these to five, but he does not insist on the precise meaning of each.² The Vulgate gives us a good idea of the piling up of synonyms in the Hebrew original; the same terms recur with nearly every stanza: *via, testimonium, mandatum, iustificatio, iudicium, praeceptum, iustitia, sermo, eloquium, lex, uerbum*. The result is a long, repetitive, meditation on the beauty and necessity of the Law, punctuated by petitions to remain faithful to the precepts, ordinances, laws, testimonies, and so forth. There is a buildup of intense desire which climaxes in the last verse (176): *erravi sicut ovis quae periit quaere servum tuum quia mandata tua non sum oblitus* “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commandments.” This last verse brings us to two further considerations.

First, when Christ appears to the apostles on Easter, he says to them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets *and the psalms* (my emphasis) must be fulfilled” (Lk. 24:44).

¹ See Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 419-24. Alter comments: “Perhaps this extravagant mnemonic was deemed appropriate because of the manifestly didactic nature of the poem. The edifying truth of unflagging loyalty to God’s word was intended to be inculcated in those who recited the text, inscribed in the memory” (419).

² Harl, 125-7.

Clearly some psalms are prophetic. In his first sermon on Pentecost (*Acts* 2:14-36), Peter cites Psalms 15(16).8-11 and 109(110).1 as prophetic of events that happened recently in Jerusalem. Psalms 8, 18(19), 21(22), 22 (23), 39(40), and many others have been interpreted similarly as referring to some aspect of Christ's incarnation and saving work. In these psalms the psalmist is said to speak "in the name of Christ." Other psalms refer more appropriately to the Christian life; they contain prayers of petition or praise; they are "prayers addressed to God, or after the incarnation, to Christ." Such is the final verse of Ps.118 cited above.³ Then, of course, there is a large area of overlap subject to the genius and persuasion of the individual interpreter. Though Psalm 118 contains verses that may be considered prophetic, it is generally considered by the Christian tradition to be a prayer of petition and praise addressed to Christ.

Second, returning to the last line of the psalm: how ironic that after such a lengthy praise of the Law of the Lord, one stands before it in the last verse as a lost sheep! To my mind this shows as few Biblical texts can the intense desire at work in the Old Testament texts and prophecies, and the accompanying helplessness. Who will provide a solution? As Paul says so eloquently in chapter seven of the letter to the Romans:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom.7:21-24).

In chapter eight he goes on to show the liberation Christians have received from Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit. I dwell on this emotive aspect of Psalm 118 because it seems to me that this shows us one reason why the early Christians commented on it as extensively as they did. The longing, the difficulty, the weakness, all have a solution beyond expectation

³ Harl, 96.

through the coming of Christ. Because they believed that Christ was the fulfillment of the Law, Christians saw themselves as able to fulfill the precepts of the Law, where the Jews never could: there is a clear message in Ambrose, as in other contemporary theologians, that the Church of the gentiles is succeeding where the Synagogue failed.⁴ For Christians, the Good Shepherd, who leaves the 99 to seek the one lost sheep, has the last word. Here is a foretaste of Ambrose's delightful commentary on verse 176:

Come, therefore, Lord Jesus, seek your servant, seek your weary sheep. Come, Shepherd, seek, as Joseph sought his flock (cf. Ps.79(80).1). Your sheep has wandered, while you tarry, while you pass your time in the mountains. Leave your ninety-nine sheep and come search for your one sheep that has strayed. Come without hounds, come without evil workmen. Come without the hired man, who does not know how to enter by the door (Jn.10:1). Come without an aid, without a herald. For a long time now I have been waiting for you to come. I know indeed you will come, *since I have not forgotten your commands*. Come without the rod, but with charity and the spirit of gentleness.⁵

We will return to this image when we analyze stanza 22, but Ambrose's commentary on the last verse captures the poignancy of the psalm and the imperfection of the Law. Both of these aspects that come through an incredibly rigid structure in the composition of this psalm enter into Ambrose's reasons for coupling it with the *Song of Songs*.⁶

One might expect that if Psalm 118 is one of praise and petition, addressed by the Church to Christ, the fulfillment of the Law, it would have occurred to exegetes to bring the bride of the *Song of Songs* into their commentaries. Neither the Greek fathers represented in the Palestinian

⁴ See, for example, *In Luc.* 6.23.

⁵ Harl, 471; Ambrose *Exp.Ps.118.22.28*: ueni ergo, Domine Iesu, quaere seruum tuum, quaere lassam ouem tuam, ueni, pastor, quaere sicut oues Ioseph (cf. Ps.79(80).1). errauit ouis tua, dum tu moraris, dum tu uersaris in montibus. dimitte nonaginta nouem oues tuas et ueni unam ouem quaerere quae errauit. ueni sine canibus, ueni sine malis operariis, ueni sine mercenario, qui per ianuam introire non nouerit. ueni sine adiutore, sine nuntio, iam dudum te expecto uenturum; scio enim uenturum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus (Ps.118:176). ueni non cum uirga, sed cum caritate spirituque mansuetudinis.

⁶ Also note that the sheep prays to Christ, the Good Shepherd, but the sense of a long period of waiting "hovers," as it were, between the Old and New Testaments. In fact, sheep imagery comes from both Testaments and the reference to Joseph from Psalm 79(80) signifies Israel under the old Law, as well as the new Israel of the Church. This is Ambrose's signature compilation of images: the more senses one can pack in, the better the interpretation.

Catena nor Hilary – the known predecessors to Ambrose – use the *Song of Songs* in order to interpret Psalm 118.⁷ Nor does Augustine after him. There may have been texts from Origen now lost, and Ambrose read more of him than we can; but as far as we know, these would have been incidental references.⁸ So Ambrose appears to be the only one to use the *Song of Songs* as an interpretive key to Psalm 118. He sets up a parallel from beginning to end between the *Song* and the psalm. Citations from the *Song* drop out of sections 8 and 9; they occur once in section 10 and twice in 11;⁹ and then they pick up again and proceed to the end, so that the last section of the psalm coincides with the final chapter of the *Song*. This seems to indicate that the parallel between the two texts is intentional and complete in the sense that the whole of one is meant to interpret the whole of the other.

WHY INTERPRET PSALM 118 WITH THE *SONG OF SONGS*?

It seems to me that there are a number of reasons why Ambrose might have wished to use the *Song of Songs* as an interpretive key to Psalm 118. I hesitate to call all of them “reasons” because they are rather more general motives for, or aspects of, his approach to the exegesis of the psalm. Together, however, they provide an interesting and reasonable account. First, Ambrose makes a revealing statement in his *Expositio in Lucam*. It is almost an aside at the end

⁷ I have checked the indices of the *Chaine Palestinienne*; the *Biblia Patristica: index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique* vol. 3 : Origène and vol. 6 : Hilaire de Poitiers, Ambroise de Milan, Ambrosiaster, (Paris : CNRS, 1995); Hilaire de Poitiers, *Commentaire sur le psaume 118*, t.2, ed. March Milhau. Sources Chretiennes, 347 (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

⁸ The *Biblia Patristica* vol. 3 gives no indication that Origen commented on the *Song of Songs*, apart from incidental references, in any works, other than his large commentary on it or his two homilies.

⁹ This is a rough numerical estimate only. In section 11 only two verses of the *Song* are mentioned, but they are essential to the sense of the whole. We will analyze this section below.

of his discussion of the annunciation of the incarnation to Mary and the reasons why it occurred after she was betrothed to Joseph. At 2.7 he says:

We have learned about the order of the truth [the historical events], we have learned of the counsel taken [Joseph considering whether or not to divorce Mary quietly]; let us learn now the mystery.¹⁰ It is well that she is betrothed, yet a virgin, since she is a type of the Church, which is immaculate, but married [to Christ]. As a virgin she [the Church] conceives us, as a virgin she gives birth to us without pain and sorrow. And so perhaps holy Mary was joined in marriage to one [Joseph] but made pregnant by another [the Holy Spirit], since indeed each of the individual churches (*singulae ecclesiae*) are made pregnant by the Spirit and grace, but married (*ad speciem*) to a specific bishop in time [by virtue of his office].¹¹

The *ad speciem* is an interesting phrase having a legal and religious significance. The root meaning comes from the verb *specio*: to see, view. So *species* is something present to view, an appearance, a semblance, and so forth. It signifies the subdivision of a genus; and as a legal term, it signifies a specific circumstance or situation, a special case. The implication here is that the bishop is a temporal “proxy” for Christ, the real bridegroom. Individual bishops will succeed one another in time; but *by his office* each bishop has a spousal relationship, as the representative of Christ, to his particular church. One might say that the church is betrothed to the office of the bishop. As an exegetical, sacramental term, *species* signifies the external appearance of something that contains a mystery. With regard to the sacraments, it signifies the external, tangible, visible sign, water for example.¹²

This text from the commentary on Luke is crucial for our understanding of Ambrose’s use of the *Song of Songs* in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*. It lifts the veil on his understanding of his

¹⁰ Note the three levels: the plain text, the moral deliberation, the mystical interpretation.

¹¹ Didicimus seriem ueritatis, didicimus consilium : discamus et mysterium. Bene desponsata, sed uirgo, quia est ecclesiae typus, quae est immaculata, sed nupta. Concepit nos uirgo de spiritu, parit nos uirgo sine gemitu. Et ideo fortasse sancta Maria alii nupta, ab alio repleta, quia et singulae ecclesiae spiritu quidem replentur et gratia, iunguntur tamen ad temporalis speciem sacerdotis (*In Luc.* 2.7).

¹² Mazza, 18-9.

identity as a bishop and priest. He sees himself – in a mystical, wholly spiritual, but real, sense – as standing in relation to the particular church of Milan as Christ stands to the Church. In his commentary on Luke, he sees the relation of Joseph to Mary as signifying Mary’s status as virgin and bride, just as the Church is virgin and bride. So in the logical working out of the typology: if the Church is the virgin bride, he, Ambrose, stands in for the real bridegroom and acts in the person of the bridegroom, as his vicar (*ad speciem*), to the congregation of Milan. This is an early formulation of classic Roman Catholic theology of the priesthood.¹³ It implies that, as a proxy for Christ the true bridegroom, Ambrose is a mystical spouse of his particular church. Here is a case of *mysterium* in practice; and I think it is one reason among others why Ambrose took his responsibilities as bishop so seriously – why, for example, he fought for his basilicas so fiercely. I think that the idea of a spiritual espousal to his immediate and particular church, composed of men and women of all walks of life, is the fascinating key to Ambrose’s use of the *Song of Songs* in his *Expositio*, but it does not stand alone. There were other motives as well, none of them imperative but together suggestive. I have called them “aspects” because they seem to me to be the result of circumstances or elements of his thought that would dispose Ambrose to use the *Song of Songs*, rather than clear causes.

THE FIRST ASPECT: A MATTER OF PERSONAL TASTE

A principle as lofty and spiritual as mystical espousals with one’s church does not come from nowhere. There is a world of ideas and inclinations behind it. We might place them under headings of culture, education, anthropology. Without going that far afield for the present, I

¹³ See, for example, Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus*, 26-27; Thomas J. McGovern, *Priestly Identity: a Study in the Theology of the Priesthood* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2002), 86, 106-115. This theological development is based on the New Testament teaching of Christ and on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, 5.21-32.

would like to suggest that the most basic, fundamental reason why Ambrose used the *Song of Songs* is that he liked it. His use of the *Song* was a matter of personal taste; it came into nearly all of his writings in one way or another. He was a civil servant, successful and fully integrated into the sophisticated social networks of Roman bureaucracy. Like other well educated Romans of his day, he was at home with Virgil and he read and enjoyed Ovid. If his hymns are any indication, he probably engaged with success in the cultivated pastime of writing poetry. Such a man would enjoy and appreciate the beautiful, evocative metaphors of the *Song of Songs*; it would please him and perhaps reassure him in a way to think that the Church uses such poetic and erotic language to express her love for God. Once a bishop, images from the *Song* would have come to mind spontaneously as engaging and appropriate ways to enhance some point he was trying to make. More important, as bishop of Milan, he preached to men and women of his own rank and background; he knew it would please them too and perhaps move them to a new and more spiritual view of their lives without vitiating the old. In fact, we find what seem to be nothing more than spontaneous, incidental references to the *Song of Songs* throughout his works. The one exception was, as we said, the *De Officiis*. Ambrose's clergy would, of course, have read his other treatises; but he leaves the *Song of Songs* out of his instructions for them, both because the bridal imagery does not properly belong to them and because many of them appear to have been young men in need of the moral formation Ambrose was dispensing to them: *decorum* was, as we have already mentioned, the goal and the external verification of a well formed moral life.

One charming example of an incidental use of the *Song of Songs* occurs in the *De Paenitentia*. Ambrose is describing the scene at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Lk.7:36-50). Simon had invited Jesus to dinner. While they were eating, a penitent woman came in and began to

wash Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair; then she poured fragrant oil over them and kissed Jesus' feet. While all this was going on, Simon and his guests began to murmur and say, "Doesn't this man know who this woman is?" (Lk.7:36-50) Ambrose seems to ask himself, "What was Christ thinking as they murmured?" He finds the answer: "Love is signified by a kiss; and so the Lord Jesus himself said, 'Let her kiss me with the kisses of her mouth.' (Sg.1:1)."¹⁴ The *Song of Songs* places these words in the mouth of the bride, so not only is there a transposition here (not unheard of in Ambrose); but also for those who know the story, there is also a touch of poignancy and humor. Ambrose has countered Simon's muttering with a quiet rejoinder on the part of Jesus. This fits the context of Jesus' defense of the woman's actions that follow, but it is not a necessary addition to the story or the point Ambrose wishes to make in the *De Paenitentia*. Still, it does enhance our appreciation of Christ's handling of the situation in Luke, and it is just the kind of subtle humor that rhetoricians prized. Suppose this passage, or something like it, were to come from a homily. What effect would it have on the families assembled in Church who heard it? They would remember the passage for sure and thank God for a bishop with a sense of humor.

Another example may be seen in the *De Spiritu Sancto* (2.5.37-40). Ambrose is arguing for the divinity of the Holy Spirit and discussing here his role in the incarnation of Christ. After quoting both Mt. 1:20 ("For that which shall be born to her is from the Holy Spirit") and Lk.1:35 ("The Holy Spirit shall come upon you"), he moves to the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1 ("A rod shall go forth from the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise from his root"). He explains that the root is Jesse, the rod Mary and the flower of Mary Jesus, "who, destined to exude the good odor of the

¹⁴ *De Paenitentia* 2.8.68-69.

faith throughout the whole world, came forth as a bud from a virginal womb, as he himself says, “I am the flower of the field and the lily of the valley” (Sg.2:1).¹⁵ Ambrose continues for a few more lines with a description of the passion in terms of the cut, bruised flower that still keeps its fragrance. None of this pertains to the argument for the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Yet it does add charm and beauty to the discourse, and it describes the fruits – faith and eternal life – that will come from the incarnation (39-40). Ambrose’s writings are filled with similar ornamental examples.¹⁶

I would like to add one final consideration to this short discussion of Ambrose’s personal tastes. We know that his brother Satyrus refused to marry;¹⁷ His sister Marcellina was a consecrated virgin. If Ambrose had not been rerouted into the episcopacy, would the family of three have been sufficient? Or would he have married, if for no other reason than to carry on the family name?¹⁸ Nothing from his former life, except, questionably, his age, would indicate that he was inclined to the celibate life. He revered consecrated virginity, but he was also at home with his secular education and the imagery from the *Song of Songs*. I am only suggesting that he may have thought about marriage and family life and made them part of his interior landscape

¹⁵ Et secundum Lucan, dixit [angelus] Mariam: *Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te* (Lk.1:35). Opus ergo spiritus virginis partus est, opus spiritus fructus est ventris, secundum quod scriptum est: *Benedicta tu inter mulieres et benedictus fructus ventris tui* (Lk.1:42). Opus spiritus flos radicis est, ille, inquam, flos, de quo bene est prophetatum: *Exit virga de radice Iesse et flos de radice eius ascendet* (Is.11:1). Radix Iesse patriarchae Iudaeorum, virga Maria, flos Mariae Christus, qui ‘bonum odorem’ fidei toto sparsurus orbe, virginali ex utero germinavit, sicut ipse dixit: *Ego flos campi et lilium convallium* (Sg.2:1). Flos odorem suum et succisus reservat et contritus adcumulat nec avulsus amittit. Ita et dominus Iesus in illo patibulo crucis... (*De Spiritu Sancto* 2.5.37-39). Note: there is a difficulty with the Latin text here, but it may be supplemented by Ambrose’s comments on the same prophecy from Isaiah in his *In Luc* (2.24).

¹⁶ For example: *De Spiritu Sancto* 2 Prol.11-14 ; Letters: to Sabinus (6.34 (45).4); to Faustinus (2.8 (39).6); *Explanation Psalmorum XII*, 36.66.

¹⁷ *De Excessu Fratris* I.59.

¹⁸ There was a close family bond between the three siblings, Marcellina, Satyrus, and Ambrose. Ambrose says of his friendship for his brother Satyrus: *numquam enim in me totus fui, sed in altero nostri pars maior amborum, uterque autem eramus in Christo*. *De Excessu Fratris* I.6. And see also nos. 7-8. Is there more to these sentiments than the expression of sorrow at his death?

before the change of career. Now a bishop, he had the integration and patterns of thought on a purely human level that would allow him to devote himself affectively as well as intellectually to Christ and the Church of Milan. Boniface Ramsey and Craig Saterlee both have pointed out that, when Ambrose speaks of the soul and the Church as the bride of Christ, he is speaking also of his own soul: his appreciation of the imagery is a reflection of his own deep and personal love for Christ.¹⁹ They also refer to his letter to Irenaeus, which we saw earlier.²⁰ I would like to look at a passage from it here because Ambrose makes an observation that reveals, I think, the interior route he himself has taken. He recognizes that the human soul has an innate desire for pleasure and delight. He says that if we make the effort to direct our innate tendencies to the highest good, we do not wither; instead the soul expands and deepens her capacity to love.

So if the soul with her innate faculties for desire and pleasure has tasted this true and highest Good, and if she has drunk deeply from it with these two affections, banishing sorrow and fear, then she burns with incredible ardor. Having kissed the Word of God, she knows no restraint, nor can she be satisfied. She says, “You are sweet, Lord, and in your delight, teach me your statutes.” (Ps.118:68). Having kissed the Word of God, she desires him above all beauty, loves him beyond all joy, delights in him beyond all perfumes (Sg.4:10); she longs to see him often, to gaze at him again and again. She desires to be drawn, that she may follow. “Your name,” she says, “is a perfumed oil poured out.” (Sg.1:2-3).²¹

¹⁹ See Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 45-6; Crag Alan Saterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 81-3.

²⁰ See part 2, The “Milanese Circle.”

²¹ Letter to Irenaeus (*Ep.*11.10, CSEL 82.1, 83-4) Hoc igitur verum et summum bonum sicut illo concupiscibili suo et delectabili anima gustaverit et duabus his hauserit adfectionibus, excludens dolorem et formidinem incredibiliter exaestuatur. Osculata enim Verbum Dei modum non capit nec expletur dicens: *Suavis es, domine, et in iucunditate tua doce me iustificationes tuas*. Osculata Dei Verbum, concupiscit *super omnem decorem*, diligit super omnem laetitiam, delectatur *super omnia aromata*, cupit frequenter videre, saepe intendere, cupit “adtrahi” ut sequi possit. *Unguentum, inquit, exinanitum est nomen tuum*,

This sounds like Augustine in the *Confessions*.²² It is Ambrose, however, who in this spontaneous letter to a friend, shows us that beneath the reserve of the Roman senator there lay a passionate heart.²³

THE SECOND ASPECT : A ROMAN CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Ambrose grew up in a household marked by forms of feminine religious life; his mother was, in all probability, a pious widow, his older sister a consecrated virgin. The family remembered with admiration an ancestor, Soteris, a virgin-martyr. This would have given him an early exposure to the bridal imagery of *Song of Songs*, since by the middle of the fourth century, the association of the *Song of Songs* with consecrated virginity was well established. By way of example, one might refer to the opening paragraphs of Jerome's letter to Eustochium where such imagery (with references to Ps.44(45) as well as the *Song*) is presented and taken for granted. Jerome is in no sense breaking new ground here. Another example would be the first letter of Athanasius (or Pseudo-Athanasius) to virgins where verses from the *Song of Songs* as well as the example of the Virgin Mary²⁴ are presented as the spiritual ideal for women whose lives are

²² de quo imo altoque secreto evocatum est in momento liberum arbitrium meum, quo subderem cervicem leni iugo tuo, et umeros levi sarcinae tuae, Christe Iesu, adiutor meus et redemptor meus? quam suave mihi subito factum est carere suavitatibus nugarum, et quas amittere metus fuerat, iam dimittere gaudium erat. eiciebas enim eas a me, vera tu et summa suavitas, eiciebas et intrabas pro eis omni voluptate dulcior, sed non carni et sanguini, omni luce clarior, sed omni secreto interior, omni honore sublimior...; et garriebam tibi, claritati meae et divitiis et saluti meae, domino deo meo (Augustine, *Conf.*9.1).

²³ See also Goulven Madec, "La Centralité du Christ dans la spiritualité d'Ambroise," in *Nec Timeo Mori: Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant' Ambrogio*, Milano, 4-11 Aprile 1997 a cura di Luigi F. Pizzolato e Marco Rizzi (Milan: Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1998), 207-220.

²⁴ See for example the First letter to Virgins 11, 19, 30, esp.31-end in David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 274-91. Susanna Elm also mentions an anonymous homily dated to the early fourth century (before 325) addressed to the fathers of virgins, in which the state of virginity is described as a progress towards "the immaculate bridal chamber of Christ," and so forth. It seems also that both male and female virgins were sometimes thought of as "engaged to Christ." See Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 34-39.

given to God and to the Church.²⁵ So it is no surprise to find this imagery in the earliest treatises of Ambrose's episcopal career, the *De Virginibus* and the *De Virginitate* and to hear Jerome's praise of these treatises to Eustochium.²⁶ The Roman virgin-martyr Agnes also figures in the first book of the *De Virginibus*; Ambrose grew up in the shadow of her catacomb and of her story. If his sister Marcellina received the veil from Pope Liberius, and if Paulinus's story is true, of the young Ambrose offering his hand to be kissed, in imitation of the bishop who had come to visit,²⁷ then Ambrose grew up with a firsthand look at the complex relations between a reclusive life of virginity and the clerical hierarchy of the Church. All of this would have been a seedbed for reflection on the *Song of Songs*.

THE THIRD ASPECT: AMBROSE'S NICENE BACKGROUND

Ambrose's childhood and youth in Rome would also have exposed him to a thoroughly Western interpretation of the Arian controversy.²⁸ Unlike Hilary, who tells us that he had not so much as heard of the faith of Nicaea (as opposed to something else) until shortly before his exile,²⁹ Ambrose knew something, and probably a great deal, about Julius's endorsement of Athanasius, about Liberius's pro-Nicene stance, and about the circumstances leading to his exile. There is the possibility that Ambrose as a child, older members of his household, or family

²⁵ Perhaps it is significant that towards the end of the *De Viduis* Ambrose applies to holy widowhood the same counsels Paul gives in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 with regard to virginity. He assimilates the motives for remaining a widow to those governing the choice of virginity. See *De Viduis* 13.80-14.83.

²⁶ At, si tibi placet scire, quot molestiis virgo libera, quot uxor adstricta sit, lege Tertulliani ad amicum philosophum et de virginitate alios libellos et beati Cypriani volumen egregium et papae Damasi super hac re versu prosaque composita et Ambrosii nostri quae nuper ad sororem scripsit opuscula. In quibus tanto se fudit eloquio, ut, quidquid ad laudem virginum pertinet, exquisierit, ordinarit, expresserit (Jerome, *Ep.* 22.22).

²⁷ Paulinus, *Vita*, 4.

²⁸ See McLynn, 35-7 for an account of the '350s' in the entourage of Pope Liberius at Rome, with whom the family had connections.

²⁹ See Hilaire de Poitiers, *Traite sur la Trinite*, vol.1, Sources Chretiennes, 443, ed.M. Figura and J. Doignon (Paris : Cerf, 1999), 13.

acquaintances had met Athanasius in Rome. In any case the Nicene controversy and Athanasius's role in it would have been known to Ambrose from his early years. Athanasius is his primary source for the *De Fide*, and the lynch pin of Ambrose's theological thought is the full divinity of the Son and his full equality with the Father. This is the message of his lapidary and memorable doxology to his hymn *Splendor Paternae Glorae*: "in Patre totus Filius, / et totus in Verbo Pater" (2.31-2).³⁰ The idea is given pride of place even in the earliest of his writings, the *De Virginibus*. In Book 3, he has Liberius begin his homily at the veiling of Marcellina with an explicitly Nicene presentation of Christ as the fully divine Spouse of the consecrated virgin. We have here a suggestive constellation: Liberius, the divinity of Christ, and the consecration of virgins. As one reads through the opening paragraphs of the homily, phrases of the Nicene creed pass in review as well as proof texts and sticking points of the Arian controversy.³¹ Ambrose's Liberius ends this first part: *Haec quantum ad fidem*. That is, these statements are what you are to believe as a consecrated virgin. The same would be true of the bishop, still relatively new at his task, at the writing of this treatise.

After this early theological formation, Ambrose began his episcopal career with an intensive study of Philo and the Latin and Greek fathers, as he himself tells us, in order to fulfill his

³⁰ Fontaine, *Hymnes*, 187; see also part 2, ch. 3, note 35. In the early *De Spiritus Sancto* (3.15.104) Ambrose also says: Nolite duobus dominis servire (cf. Mt.6:24). Non sunt enim duo domini, ubi dominatus unus est, quia pater in filio, filius in patre (cf. Jn.10:38), et ideo dominus unus.

³¹ Here follows a condensed version of the first part of this sermon. This is not the statement of a bishop unsure of his faith or uncertain in his expression of it: ante omnia generatus ex patre; unigenitus in caelo, deus ex deo; lumen ex lumine, non impar generantis, non potestate discretus; *Quod erat* inquit *in principio*: habes eius aeternitatem; *erat* inquit *apud patrem*: habes indiscretam a patre inseparabilemque virtutem; et *deus erat uerbum*: habes eius divinitatem; *Nemo enim bonus nisi unus deus*. Si enim non dubitatur quia deus filius, deus autem bonus est, utique non dubitatur quia deus bonus filius. Ipse est quem pater *ante luciferum genuit* ut aeternum, Ipse est *in quo complacuit pater*, ipse est patris brachium, quia creator est omnium, patris sapientia, quia ex dei ore processit, patris virtus, quia *divinitatis in eo eorporaliter habitat plenitudo*. Si igitur virtus dei Christus, numquid aliquando sine virtute deus? Numquid aliquando sine filio pater? Si semper utique pater, utique semper et filius. Perfecti ergo patris perfectus est filius. Nam qui virtuti derogare, derogat ei cuius est virtus. Inaequalitatem non reeipit perfecta divinitas (*De Virginibus* 3 1.2-4).

duties of teaching and preaching as bishop.³² This means that he, like Hilary, came to a knowledge of Origen, Basil, Didymus the Blind, and others in large measure as an adult. He was not exposed to Origen as a young man, as Basil, Gregory of Nazianus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Evagrius had been.³³ Further, his initiation into the thought of Origen passed through, in part at least, the discerning adjustments of Athanasius and Basil.³⁴ Ambrose also had Simplicianus at hand, who seems to have been a level-headed adviser, though we know little about him. In any case, by the time Ambrose read Origen in depth, he already had informed ideas about the Nicene faith.³⁵ Origen remained one of Ambrose's sources for his exegesis of the Scriptures.³⁶ Origen also wrote a spiritual commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Hence, I would like to suggest that the difference between Origen's bride and Ambrose's may give us some insight into the contribution Ambrose's Nicene faith may have made to his exegesis of the *Song of Songs*.

³² Ambrose, *De Officiis* I.4.

³³ The *Philocalia* reflects the enthusiastic endorsement characteristic of young men, even though passages have been chosen to present Origen in an orthodox light. See Jean Gribbaumont, *Saint Basile: Evangile et Eglise*, Spiritualite Orientale, 36 (Bégnolles-en-Mauges: L'Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1984), 230-33.

³⁴ Gribbaumont concludes his discussion of Basil's Origenism thus: "Des héritiers d'Origène, le plus discret est Basile; il choisit, il critique, mais il rejoint les intuitions fondamentales, et en fait la doctrine du magistère (H. Dorries). Si les deux Grégoire, puis Didyme, Ambroise, Evagre, et tant d'autres, ont pu se nourrir d'Origène en toute sécurité, c'est grâce à cette maîtrise du chef des Cappadociens." (Gribbaumont, 242).

³⁵ In a letter to Clementianus, a Milanese layman, Ambrose gives the following assessment of Origen: "I know that nothing is more difficult than to discourse on a reading of the Apostle, since Origen himself is far inferior in [his exegesis of] the New Testament than in [that of] the Old..." (Etsi sciam quod nihil difficilius sit quam de apostoli lectione disserere, cum ipse Origenes longe minor sit in novo quam in veteri testamento,) *Ep.* 65(75). Though Ambrose admired Origen's exegesis, he knew his limitations. See the analysis of this passage in Savon, "Un dossier", 80-3. He compares Ambrose's exegesis of verses from Gal. 4:1-3 and Rom. 4:15, 7:7 with that of Origen. Ambrose's interpretations are more literal and maintain a clear distinction between the Old and New Testaments.

³⁶ Origen was a most wonderful and admired exegete, the *summus expositor* (John Scottus Eriugena, cited by Bernard McGinn, "The Spiritual Heritage of Origen in the West: Aspects of the History of Origen's Influence in the Middle Ages" in *Origene maestro di vita spirituale: Origen: Master of Spiritual Life: Milano 13-15 Settembre, 1999*, a cura di Luigi F. Pizzolato e Marco Rizzi (Milano: Vita et Pensiero 2001), 264). He was also a daring metaphysician. See King, 79, note 3: [Origen's] "errors," to quote W. R. Inge, "are more instructive than [a] docile orthodoxy" (*Origen*, Proceedings of the British Academy, v. 32, 22 ff.). Scholars are beginning to realize that Origen is much more useful to us, if we let him be, without glossing over the difficulties. See King, Tzananikos, and Dively-Lauro (already mentioned), Karen Jo Torjesen, "'Body', 'Soul' and 'Spirit' in Origen's Theory of Exegesis," *Anglican Theological Review*, 67(1), 1985, 17-30; ; Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: a History of an Idea*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Mark J. Edwards, "Origen No Gnostic; or, On the Corporeality of Man," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 43 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 23-37.

What I mean – and this is stating it simply – is that for Origen progress on the road to perfection, the summit of which in this life is represented by a fully participative reading of the *Song of Songs* (the noetic embrace) is primarily an individual task. The Church and the sacraments have an essential but supporting role. It is ultimately based on Origen's metaphysical principles, according to which life on earth in the Church and in a body is one stage – although a unique stage due to the Incarnation – in a progressive return to the original perfection of pre-fallen souls.³⁷ Origen's maidens, for example, who accompany the bride, are less perfect souls following her lead. For Ambrose, on the other hand, it is the Church through the sacraments that constitutes the bride. Individual souls are “brides” inasmuch as they are members of the Church. This does not mean, of course, that Ambrose has no sense of the deep personal commitment an individual Christian may have towards Christ, which might appropriately be thought of in terms of bridal imagery. It does mean, however, that in the shift of emphasis between the two men, the role of the Church is formative for Ambrose in a way that it was not in Origen. For Ambrose, baptism opens the doors of the church for the individual Christina standing in the font and, by

³⁷ P. Tzamalikos, *The Concept of Time in Origen* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). This is a lengthy but balanced and articulate account of Origen's concepts of time and of the restoration of all things. Here follows a brief recapitulation: “The advent of the Logos in the world takes place as long as the world exists” (265). The visible manifestation of the Logos in the incarnation is a unique, historical event, that has and will only happen once. (271-76). But there are different stages to the resurrection of the body (409). The penultimate stage is when all rational creatures are united in the resurrected “body” of Christ.... When restoration of all rational creatures will have taken place, the entirety of Christ's resurrected “body” will enter into the divine being. This is how the realization of the “perfection of resurrection,” the “surrender” of the kingdom from Christ to the Father and the absolute end is adumbrated. This final end will be realized through a “jump” of this “body” through Christ unto the radically transcendent reality over the chasm which defines the world as “out” of God. In his commentary on John there is a comment on the saying in John 4,14 “but the water I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”¹⁴⁶ This “springing” is regarded as reminiscent of a similar notion: the “skipping” of the bridegroom in the *Song of Songs*, a book which Origen regards as containing the most secret truths of Christian faith. It is also significant that this prospect is portrayed as “greater” than “life.” What this means is that this “jump” marks the “end” of the world's existence itself. That “Christ is life” and the Father “is greater than life” alludes to the radical transcendence of God to space and time.... Of all the conceptions of Christ it is only Wisdom and Logos that are not related to the existence of the world. Therefore, to “jump” to a reality which is *after* and *above* the world, is to enter into a reality which is “greater” than “life,” that is, a reality beyond the world, namely, the divine reality (410-411).

that fact, the gates of eternity. Further, Christ the eternal, fully divine bridegroom of the Church receives the baptized soul into the Church and into his love from where he is seated *hic et nunc* at the right hand of the Father. As we shall see in the next section, Ambrose actually speaks in these terms. It is his signature coalescing of images: the Church with Christ, the individual soul with Christ, the sacraments, time, and eternity all form a mosaic showing the one unified hidden mystery of divine intervention.³⁸

Both Lewis Ayres and Khaled Anatolios speak, from different perspectives, of an organic, if I may use this word, development of ideas over the course of the fourth century that gradually resulted in a Nicene consensus. Ayres speaks of a “pro-Nicene culture.” or a “pro-Nicene life of the mind.”³⁹ Anatolios analyzes the development in terms of Gabriel Marcel’s idea of levels of reflection on experience: a more or less unevaluated “flow of experience” is interrupted by a “break,” which requires new reflection and adjustment of our thinking or retrieval. By analyzing the developments in thought over the course of the fourth century according to this model, Anatolios provides both a constructive and a comprehensive view of a developing intellectual custom.⁴⁰ I think both of these approaches are immensely fruitful because they focus on the broad picture of intellectual habits of thought, rather than on particular doctrinal issues. The issues are important; but in order to understand the kind of attitude I am trying to pinpoint in

³⁸ See also Augustine: “Just as he ascended, you see, and still didn’t depart from us, so we too are now there with him ... if he has attached us to himself as his members in such a way that even with us joined on he is his very same self (*ut etiam nobis coniunctis idem ipse sit*), ... we too are going to ascend, not by our own virtue, but by our and his oneness (*sed nostra et illius unitate*).” Augustine, *Serm.*263.2-3, quoted by Ayres, 308.

³⁹ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: an Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 274-7. All together create an atmosphere in which ideas gradually become clearer and more developed, but also an atmosphere in which tradition is normative. When, for example, Eusebius returned from Nicaea unhappy after having signed the council decree, he apologized to his local community!

⁴⁰ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: the Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), *passim*; for Marcel’s model, 34; for the fundamental assumptions and breaks that led to Nicaea, 36-41.

Ambrose, something broader is needed. The idea of “culture” implies ideas that are integrated into an environment of thought, worship, and life, which is precisely what takes place in the local churches. Ambrose’s Nicene culture was marked by a deep awareness that Christ is co-eternal with God the Father (*consubstantial*) and that our salvation, therefore, originates with a divine overture and consists in our union with him through the Church.⁴¹ Both of these aspects – the divine gesture of love and union with the divine Christ through the Church – find an appropriate image in the marriage of the bride. Through the image of the bride, therefore, Ambrose finds a metaphor with which he can appropriately and adequately express his Nicene understanding of the Church. This double identification of the bride with the Church and with the individual members that comprise the Church is the hallmark of Ambrose’s presentation of the *Song of Songs* in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*.

Before proceeding, I would like to look at an interesting example of Ambrose’s use of the *Song of Songs* in the *De Sancto Spiritu*. This early treatise is a theological exposition, not a moral exhortation. It is perhaps surprising to find Ambrose – following Didymus the Blind in part – arguing from a verse of the *Song* to the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. He does, however, think of the verse as a Scriptural base for a convincing argument. His vision of the Church and Christ’s saving acts that constitute it is apparent in the text, even though arguing to this vision is not his purpose in this treatise.

Following Didymus and arguing from Romans 5:5 – “The love of God has been poured forth into our hearts through by Holy Spirit”; *caritas Dei diffusa est in cordibus nostris per Spiritum Sanctum* – Ambrose says that the Holy Spirit is the divine dispenser of the gift, equal to the

⁴¹ See Ayres, 311, and the entire discussion: 302-311.

Father and the Son, and not the gift itself.⁴² In the preceding paragraphs the argument turned on the use of the preposition *de*: grace has been poured forth *from* the Spirit; the Spirit himself is not what is poured forth. Here the argument turns around the preposition “through” (*per*), but the reasoning is the same. He reinforces the argument with a different but similar case: the pouring forth of the name of the Son like oil (Sg.1:3). The crux of the argument lies in the distinction between what is poured out and the “pourer”: the grace poured out is such that it is not the source but can only come from a divine Source. After citing the verse from the *Song of Songs*: “Your name is a perfumed oil poured forth” (Song 1:3),⁴³ Ambrose continues, “Nothing could be more significant or outstanding than the import of this statement.”⁴⁴ For perfumed oil contained in a bottle holds onto its fragrance and as long as it is restrained within the confines of the bottle the fragrance cannot be shared by many but it keeps its strength. When ‘the oil is poured forth’, it is spread abroad far and wide.” So also, the name of Christ before his coming was held within the confines of Israel (Ps.75(76).2), but afterwards it was spread abroad throughout the whole world (Ps.8:2). “So the effusion of this name signifies in a sense an abundant largesse of exuberant graces and heavenly goods; whatever was poured forth came from a surplus of abundance [that is, the divinity]” (I.8.96). Ambrose argues from this verse of the *Song of Songs* to the divinity of the Source of the spiritual grace, symbolized by the oil poured out; and he states plainly that the verse from the *Song* referring to the oil poured out is a strong argument for the divinity of the Giver of the oil, the Son and by extension the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ Didymus makes the same argument,

⁴² De Spiritu Sancto I.8.94-97.

⁴³ See also *De Myst.* 6.29 where this verse is used with others to describe the post-baptismal anointing. Compare with *De Sacr.* 3.2.8-10.

⁴⁴ Cuius virtute sermonis nihil potest esse praestantius (*De Spiritu Sancto* I.8.58).

⁴⁵ For the sake of brevity I have coalesced three or four arguments into one. After this section it continues with a development of the oil theme to include verse 10 from Ps. 44(45) where the Holy Spirit is identified with the oil of

though without the exegetical comment. For both, therefore, the scriptural metaphor of oil poured out is a valid, even a strong, argument for the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

It may seem strange – an abuse of metaphor – that Ambrose and Didymus could argue from the “pouring forth” to the divinity of the “pourer”; yet, if God is the author of the *Song*, as of the whole of Scripture, the argument may be thought of as proceeding from an effect to the existence of a divine cause. The logic of this argument may not be particularly convincing. What is impressive, though, is the fact that for these men, the metaphor of oil poured out was divine and truth-bearing. This opens to us a whole new way of reading the *Song of Songs*.⁴⁷ It also shows us that as Ambrose read the *Song*, his focus was on the revelation of Christ’s divinity through the metaphors surrounding the bridegroom. It is this divine Christ approaching the Church and operating within her that we see in the stanzas of the *Expositio*.

THE FOURTH ASPECT: THE SACRAMENTS

The fourth aspect follows closely from the third because if Christ operates through the institution of the Church and it is the formative environment for the Christian life, the sacraments are the primary means by which this life is constituted and maintained. This is clearly Ambrose’s understanding of the sacraments: they make the Church – the Church *is* the community of the baptized and the Eucharis is the essential way in which Christ continues to communicate his life

gladness with which the Son of Man (verse 3) is anointed. All of these “oil” arguments have sacramental overtones because of the chrism used in the rites of initiation, by which the baptized receive the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁶ See example 4 above. For another example see *De Spir. Sanct.* 2.10.111-112. The strength of the argument comes not from the metaphor itself but from the presence of it in the divine economy of revelation in the Scriptures. It is a means by which God chooses to reveal himself in the Scriptures. See the following paragraph.

⁴⁷ Didymus and Ambrose were not the only ones to argue doctrine on the basis of the *Song of Songs*. The Donatists, for example, used Sg.1:7 “Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon (*meridie*)?” as a proof text for locating the true Church in Africa (*meridie*!). See Bonnardière, 226-7.

to the faithful. One striking feature of Ambrose's sacramental catecheses is precisely this: that his explanations of the sacraments and their effects make extensive use of imagery from the *Song of Songs*. So again, as we saw in part two with regard to the Eucharist, there is a suggestive connection between the *Song of Songs* and Ambrose's teaching on the sacraments. In the *De Bono Mortis*, his allegorizing of the fruits and spices of the garden of the *Song* was transparent in references to the formative reading of Scripture as well as the food of the Eucharist. A look at the *De Mysteriis* and the *De Sacramentis* showed that Ambrose used the same verses from the *Song* there as he had in the *De Bono Mortis*. Here I would like to look at his explanation of the sacrament of baptism in the same catechetical treatises. The analysis will show that the idea of the Church that emerges from Ambrose's *mystagogical* catechesis is the same as the image of the bride we shall find in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*.

For Ambrose, as for the entire Christian tradition, baptism is the indispensable foundation. It leads the neophytes vicariously but truly through the death into the resurrection of Christ. Then, the post-baptismal anointing (Confirmation) seals them with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the Eucharist nourishes them with the very body and blood of Christ. Ambrose's *mystagogical* catecheses, explain the rites. They are highly figurative; each element and gesture receives a typological explanation from the Old Testament. It is incredibly rich: water, oil (for anointing and sealing), wood, gestures of raising the hand or facing East, bread, wine, paradise, white garments, and so forth: all are elucidated and validated by Old and New Testament events, images, and texts. Verses from the *Song of Songs* fit perfectly into this scenario. Some are traditional, others are Ambrose's own contribution. Watching Ambrose perform the rites and show

the mysteries hidden within must have been a marvelous sight.⁴⁸ In the paragraphs that follow, I would like to look first at the tradition and then to analyze the chapter on the rite of baptism from the *De Mysteriis*. Since the *De Sacramentis* is the practical, homiletic equivalent – and complement – to the more polished *De Mysteriis*, some passages from it will also come into the discussion as well, though on a secondary level.

Nuptial imagery belonged to a longstanding tradition of sacramental catechesis. Daniélou has assembled texts.⁴⁹ He points out that Tertullian is the first we know of to speak of baptism as a nuptial bond, but he places the bond between the soul and the Holy Spirit. Origen shifts the metaphor to a bond of the soul with Christ.⁵⁰ Zeno of Verona uses nuptial imagery indirectly when he speaks of the baptismal font as the womb of the Church;⁵¹ Cyril of Jerusalem uses this metaphor also, along with the others. So nuptial imagery, in combination with that of paradise (Adam fell and Christ rose, both in a garden), and various aspects of the beauty of the baptized soul, free from sin and filled with grace, led to the use of a certain number of verses from the *Song of Songs* as standard elements in the execution and explanation of the rites. Daniélou thinks the use is widespread. He cites Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the *Song of Songs*, as well as Theodoret of Cyr.⁵² Daniélou surmises that the tradition of referring to the *Song of Songs* may go

⁴⁸ For a vivid description of the ceremonies surrounding the rites of initiation in Milan, see Garry Wills, *Font of Life: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Mystery of Baptism* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁹ Jean Daniélou, *Bible et Liturgie: la théologie des sacrements et des fêtes d'après les pères de l'église*, 2^e ed (Paris : Cerf, 1958), 259-280.

⁵⁰ Daniélou, *Bible et Liturgie*, 260. "Quand l'âme vient à la foi, recréée de l'eau et de l'Esprit-Saint par la seconde naissance, elle est reçue par l'Esprit-Saint. La chair accompagne l'âme dans ces noces avec l'Esprit. O bienheureux mariage, s'il n'admet pas d'adultère" (*De anima*, XLI, 4 ; Wasnik , 57-58. "Le Christ est appelé l'Époux de l'âme, que l'âme épouse quand elle vient à la foi" (*Hom. Gen.* 10:4).

⁵¹ Zeno of Verona, I.55, (*Day*, 79) 2.28 (*Day*, 97). Also see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 650-651.

⁵² See Daniélou. *Bible et Liturgie*: the tunic taken off [of the "old man" or sin, in baptism] in Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, 263-5; the eyes of the bride are like a dove [symbol of the Holy Spirit] in Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose, 265; the teeth of the bride are like a flock of sheep, sheared and coming up from the

back to the early days of the Church when Christians took from the Synagogue liturgical symbolism and practice.⁵³ The *Song of Songs* was, it seems, interpreted allegorically in Jewish communities from the beginning.⁵⁴ In any case, there is evidence that the rabbis were providing allegorical interpretations as early as the first century; the earliest Christian allegorical treatments come from the late second century.⁵⁵ Ambrose, therefore, was following a long and well established practice. Augustine also points indirectly to this tradition, though he did not follow Ambrose in his liberal use of the *Song of Songs*.⁵⁶ He clearly remembered Ambrose's use of it on the occasion of his own baptism; as he implies, indirectly, in the *De Doctrina Christiana* (2.6).⁵⁷

So sermons on Baptism may contain a number of standard verses from the *Song of Songs*: (1) the well used reference to sheep coming up white and clean from the washing (Sg.4:2); (2) with reference to the removal of one's clothing before descending into the font, the remark of the bride that she has taken off her tunic (Sg.5:3); (3) the description of the bride from the LXX ascending all in white (Sg.8:5). Cyril of Jerusalem integrates verses and images from the *Song of Songs* into the fabric of his catechetical texts.⁵⁸ His *Procatechesis* opens with a mosaic redolent of allusions to the *Song*:

washing in Cyril, Ambrose, Augustine, 265-8; the bride is black but beautiful, in Ambrose, 268-9; "Who is this who comes up all white..." in Cyril and Ambrose, 269-71. We will see the full development of this imagery in Ambrose below.

⁵³ Daniélou, *Bible et Liturgie*, 261.

⁵⁴ This is something of an irresolvable question. See Treat, 4.

⁵⁵ Treat, 5-6. In the second half of the second century, Melito of Sardis and Theophilus of Antioch are the first known Christians to refer to the *Song*, Treat 8-9.

⁵⁶ Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, "Le Cantique des Cantiques dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin," *Biblia Augustiniana, Ancient Testament*, fasc.18, 225-228. Bonnardière has gathered references to it in his writings and, after examining them, comes to the conclusion that he only refers to the *Song* in texts related in some way to baptism. I think this conclusion is too narrow.

⁵⁷ *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.6. We will look at this later in connection with Ps.118, stanza 16.

⁵⁸ We have two series of catechetical sermons from Cyril: pre-baptismal, Lenten, sermons or conferences, dating to the earliest years of his episcopate (Edward Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem, The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2000). 22-3) and the properly mystagogical conferences dating to the last years of his life. (Following Alexis Doval, I assume that the Mystagogical Catecheses are genuinely those of Cyril. See Alexis James Dorval,

Now the fragrance of blessedness is upon you, you the Enlightened. Now you are gathering spiritual flowers for the weaving of heavenly crowns. Now the perfume of the Holy Spirit has breathed over you. Now you are in the vestibule of the royal palace. May you be led in by the King (Sg.1:4). For now the blossoms have appeared on the trees. (cf.Sg.2:12-13)

There are other places in the Lenten conferences where Cyril weaves in the *Song of Songs* and uses it as a figurative “proof” for some point he is making. In conference 14, paragraph 5, for example, he describes the place of the crucifixion and resurrection (once visible to all in Jerusalem but now enclosed in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) and shows the fittingness of the place by means of verses from the *Song of Songs*. Thus, the tomb of Christ was in a real garden; Cyril describes it by means of the garden of nuts (Sg.4:11); the garden enclosed (Sg.4:12); the sealed fountain (Sg.4:15). Later, in paragraph 10, he describes the season of the Resurrection also in terms of the blooming garden of the *Song* (2:11-13).

Cyril’s references to the *Song of Songs* add color and richness to his catechesis, but they are integrated into a balanced whole made up of many diverse Scriptural texts. They do not occupy so much space as to carry the weight of an argument or provide the primary metaphor for the sacramental mystery under discussion. With Ambrose, on the contrary, they do carry the weight of the arguments, though more imagery is included in the *De Mysterioris* – a polished work for a wider audience – than in the *De Sacramentis*. In his Mystagogy, the *Song of Songs* becomes an essential element of his teaching. It is clear that this is a question of emphasis, rather than of

Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogue: the Authorship of the Mystagogic Catecheses, Patristic Monographs Series, 17 (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001). See also Yarnold, 23-32) The mystagogical catecheses are probably too late to be, in their present form at least, a source for Ambrose. But the Lenten catecheses certainly could have been, and probably were, a source of inspiration for him. A detailed study of Cyril’s influence on Ambrose is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is complex because there is a nexus of texts that belongs to the larger tradition of baptismal catechesis. But I think that Cyril’s use of the Song of Songs clearly influenced Ambrose. The example given below is one case in point.

something wholly new. It is a subtle shift; but it seems to me that it has far reaching consequences. I would like to give an example.

In his third Lenten conference (no.16) Cyril encourages the *competentes* to repent sincerely and to be of good hope because even if they have committed grave sins, none can be so great as to crucify the Lord and even this sin was forgiven (Acts 2:37ff.). He strengthens this argument with texts from Isaiah (4:4) and Ezekiel (36:25). Then, he continues:

Angels will dance around you, and say, “Who is this that comes up all white, leaning on her kinsman?” (Sg.8:5, LXX). For the soul who was formerly a slave now has chosen her master himself as her kinsman. He accepting her sincere resolution, shall address her: “Behold, you are fair, my love; behold, you are fair” (Sg.4:1). “Your teeth are like flocks of shorn sheep” on account of your confession with a good conscience [coming] “one by one, all of them bearing twins” (Sg.4:2/6:6) on account of the twofold grace. I mean the grace accomplished [in you] by water and the Spirit or the grace declared [to you] by the Old and by the New Testaments. And may it happen that after you all have run the race of the fast, remembering my words, bringing forth fruit in good works, and standing blamelessly near the spiritual bridegroom, you may receive from God the forgiveness of sins.⁵⁹

In the *De Sacramentis* Ambrose begins with a similar passage and the same verse from the *Song of Songs*. The angels wonder and ask “Who is this...?” (Sg.8:5). This verse is followed, not by the *Song* 4:1-2/6:6, but by two New Testament verses, the second of which has eschatological overtones. Together they refer to the fullness of salvation. Ambrose conflates baptism and eternity:

Next, you are to come to the altar. You have begun to come; the angels have been watching you; they have seen you arriving and suddenly they have seen that human condition, which before was stained with the dark squalor of sins, shine resplendent. And so, they said, “Who is this, who comes up from the desert all white?” (Sg.8:5). The angels, therefore, marvel. Would you like to know how much they marvel? Here the apostle Peter saying that things have been granted to us “that the angels wish to see.”

⁵⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses ad Illuminandos* 3.16 from *Cyrrilli Hierosolymorum archiepiscopi opera quae supersunt omnia*, 2 vols.(Munich: Lentner , 1848).

(1Pet.1:12). And again, “What eye, he says, has not seen, nor ear heard: the things God has prepared for those who love him.” (1Cor.2:9).⁶⁰

So where Cyril is focused on the upcoming sacrament of baptism, Ambrose shows his neophytes that they now belong to a community that spans heaven and earth, time and eternity. It is as if he draws back a curtain, so that his neophytes can see heaven and the angels admiring their new-found splendor.

In the *De Mysteriis*, Ambrose develops the same ideas centered around Sg.8:5, but with greater focus on the *Song of Songs*.⁶¹ He begins by telling the baptized that they have received white robes as a sign of their new found innocence. He quotes Isaiah: “If your sins be as scarlet, I shall make them white as snow” (Is.1:18). Then he switches registers from direct address to the baptized – the usual mode in the *De Sacramentis* – to an identification of them *as* the Church.

The Church, having these [white] robes, put on by means of the bath of regeneration, says in the *Song of Songs*, “I am black and beautiful, Daughters of Jerusalem”: black by the frailty of my human condition, beautiful by grace, black because I am made up of sinners, beautiful by the sacrament of faith. Viewing these robes, the daughters of Jerusalem in stupefaction say, “Who is this who comes up all white?” (Sg.8:5) She was black, how has she suddenly now become white?⁶²

Here Ambrose attributes the same question from the *Song of Songs* to the daughters of Jerusalem – whoever they may be – rather than the angels. He goes on to associate it with an eschatological event, since he “remembers” that some of the angels had also asked a parallel question as Christ

⁶⁰ Sequitur, ut veniatis ad altare. Coepistis venire, spectarunt angeli, viderunt vos advenientes, et humanam condicionem illam, quae ante peccatorum tenebroso squalore sordebat, aspexerunt subito refulgere, ideoque dixerunt: *Quae est haec, quae ascendit a deserto dealbata?* (Sg.8:5) Mirantur ergo et angeli. Vis scire, quam mirentur? Audi apostolum Petrum dicentem ea nobis esse conlata, quae *concupiscunt et angeli videre* (1Pet.1:12). Audi iterum: *Quod oculus, inquit, non vidit nec auris audivit, quae praeparavit deus diligentibus se* (1Cor.2:9) *De Sacr.* 4.2.5, CSEL 73, 47-48.

⁶¹ What follows is a presentation of sections from Ambrose’s text with commentary. See *De Myst.* 7.34-42, CSEL, 102-106.

⁶² Haec vestimenta habens ecclesia, *per lavacrum regenerationis* adsumpta, dicit in Canticis: *Nigra sum et decora, filiae Hierusalem*, nigra per fragilitatem condicionis humanae, decora per gratiam, nigra, quia ex peccatoribus, decora fidei sacramento. Haec vestimenta cernentes filiae Hierusalem stupefactae dicunt: *Quae est haec, quae ascendit dealbata?* Haec erat nigra, unde nunc subito dealbata? (*De Myst.* 35).

ascended into Heaven: “Who is the King of Glory?” (Ps.23(24).7-10). So again baptism is associated with heaven and with the Ascension in particular:

Indeed, the angels also doubted, when Christ rose from the dead. The powers of Heaven doubted when they saw that flesh was ascending into Heaven. Finally, they began to say, “Who is this King of Glory?” (Ps.23(24).8) As some were saying, “Lift up your gates, You Princes (LXX), and be lifted up, You Everlasting Portals. And the King of Glory shall come in” (Ps.23(24).7), others doubted saying, “Who is this King of Glory?” In Isaiah also you have it that the powers of Heaven doubted and said, “Who is this, who comes up from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozra, glorious in his white robe?” (Is.63:1).⁶³

So the Church, that is the neophytes, rising from the font and Christ rising into Heaven both cause the *same* stupefaction. The verse from Isaiah adds further nuances; it is the opening verse in a dialogue that describes a prophetic vision of the Paschal victory and resurrection of Christ.⁶⁴ Ambrose has woven together, therefore, Old Testament prophecies (*Song* and *Isaiah*), the sacramental event, and the eschatological Christ resurrected, ascended [Ambrose has just shown us a literary “moving picture” of his rising], and seated *now*, as Ambrose speaks, at the right hand of the Father. Mazza says of this procedure:

Typology, and therefore mystagogy, brings out the connection between the saving events of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Church’s life; this connection is a relationship of *true and proper* identity (my italics). The events correspond, are superimposed, and are seen as identical, even though it must immediately be added that the

⁶³ Dubitaverunt enim etiam angeli, cum resurgeret Christus, dubitaverunt potestates caelorum videntes, quod caro in caelum ascenderet. Denique dicebant: *Quis est iste rex gloriae?* (Ps.23(24).8) Et cum alii dicerent: *Tollite portas, principes vestri, et elevamini, portae aeternales, et introibit rex gloriae* (Ps.23(24).7), alii dubitabant dicentes: *Quis est iste rex gloriae?* In Esaia quoque habes dubitantes virtutes caelorum dixisse: *Quis est iste, qui ascendit ex Edom, rubor vestimentorum eius ex Bosor, speciosus in stola candida?* (Is.63:1) (*De Myst.*7.36).

⁶⁴ “Who is this that comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, glorious in his white robe, marching in the greatness of his strength?” “It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save.” “Why is thy apparel red, and thy garments like his that treads in the wine press?” “I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my raiment. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption has come. I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold; so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath upheld me. I trod down the peoples in my anger, I made them drunk in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” (RSV Is.63:1-6).

veritas surpasses the *figura* in perfection, without, however, rendering it outmoded and useless.⁶⁵

He adds in a footnote that the *veritas* requires the *figura* in order to be properly understood.⁶⁶ As Ambrose stands before the newly baptized, he lifts the veil on eternity and shows them that by baptism they are in direct contact with the ascended Christ. And then he shows them Christ, viewing from Heaven the baptism that has just taken place, making a response.

Christ, however, as he looks at his Church in white garments – she for whom he himself, as you have it in the book of Zachariah the prophet, had donned filthy garments (Zach.3:3) – or as he looks at the soul, clean and washed from the bath of regeneration, says, “Behold you are beautiful, my Love, behold, you are beautiful. Your eyes are like doves.” (Sg.4:2). In the form of a dove the Holy Spirit descended from Heaven. The eyes are beautiful, as we said earlier because he descended as a dove.⁶⁷

This is no rarified environment of long-sought and hard-won perfection, marked by *ascecis*. This is baptism, the entrance to eventual perfection. Yet Ambrose’s Christ is enamored of his bride. He sees in her all the beauty of grace and innocence; and this beauty applies as much to the individual soul as to the whole because they are sacramentally identical. This is clear in the following excerpt: the beauty of the Church is precisely *in* the baptized. Christ continues to praise the bride: “Your teeth are as flocks of sheep (Sg.4:2); your lips are like a scarlet thread (Sg.4:3). Ambrose comments that this is high praise and that the Church is compared to these sheep because, she has

⁶⁵ Mazza, 36; 191 notes 95, 96.

⁶⁶ If I may be pardoned such a homely image, this is like “accordion” exegesis; one may expand it to the limits of time and space or reduce it to one event, it is still the same tune, the same divine revelation, with differences of modality, of course.

⁶⁷ Christus autem videns ecclesiam suam in vestimentis candidis, - pro qua ipse, ut habes in Zacchariae libro prophetae, *sordida vestimenta* suscepit -, vel animam regenerationis lavacro mundam atque ablutam dicit: *Ecce formosa es, proxima mea, ecce es formosa, oculi tui sicut columbae*. In cuius specie spiritus sanctus descendit de caelo. Formosi oculi, sicut diximus supra, quia sicut Columba descendit (*De Myst.* 7.37).

within herself many virtues of such souls, as those who remove their abundant sins in the bath [of baptism], who offer to Christ a mystical faith and moral grace, and who speak of the cross of the Lord Jesus. In *these* (my emphasis) the Church is beautiful.⁶⁸

As he gazes on the loveliness of the Church, Christ cannot resist. Again, this is the power of baptism:

And so, God the Word says, “You are all fair, my Love, and there is no blemish in you” (Sg.4:7) because your fault has been drowned [in the bath of regeneration]. “Come here from Lebanon, my bride, come here from Lebanon; you shall go forth and pass through from the beginning of your faith” (Sg.4:8). For having renounced the world, she has passed through worldly occupations and beyond to Christ. And again, God the Word says to her, “How beautiful and sweet you have become, my Dearest, in your delights. Your stature is like a palm tree and your breasts are clusters of grapes.” (Sg.7:6-7).⁶⁹

The Church responds to this extravagant expression of love with the final plea of the *Song*.

Who will give you to me as a brother sucking the breasts of my mother? If I find you out of doors I will kiss you and they will not despise me. I shall take you and lead you into my mother’s house and into the private chamber of her who bore me. You shall teach me (Sg.8:1-2).

Ambrose continues:

Do you see how, delighted with the gift of graces, she desires to arrive at the more intimate mysteries (*interiora mysteria*)⁷⁰ and to consecrate all of her senses to Christ? Still, she seeks; still she rouses her charity and asks the daughters of Jerusalem to rouse it

⁶⁸ Harum gregi comparatur ecclesia, multas in se habens animarum virtutes, quae per lavacrum superflua peccata deponant, quae mysticam fidem et moralem gratiam deferant Christo, quae crucem domini Iesu loquantur. In his formosa est ecclesia (*De Myst.*7.38b-39).

⁶⁹ When the imagery of the Song of Songs is most intense, Ambrose substitutes “Word” for “Christ.” We find this in the commentary on Ps.118. It is his way of reminding his audience that all of this imagery should “launch” them into a spiritual relationship with Christ. This is one small example of the dynamic power of the Song of Songs as it is found in the entire tradition of Christian mysticism. The love is spiritual, yet it is so real and deep that only the Song can begin to capture it in terms of human language and experience. “For the highly metaphorical language of the *Song* speaks to the soul at a level beyond words.” (Kingsmill, 199). Unde ad eam uerbum deus dicit: *Tota formosa es, proxima mea, et repraehensio non est in te*, (Sg.4:7) quia culpa demersa est; *ades huc a Libano, sponsa, ades huc a Libano; transibis et pertransibis a principio fidei*, (Sg.4:8) eo quod renuntians mundo transierit saeculum, pertransierit ad Christum. Et iterum dicit ad eam deus uerbum: *Quid pulchra et suavis facta es, caritas, in deliciis tuis. Statura tua similis facta est palmae, et ubera tua botryes* (Sg.7:6-7) (*De Myst.*7.39).

⁷⁰ The neophytes are on the point of entering into the church. This refers to the mysteries of the Eucharist, explained in the following section of the treatise.

up for her, by whose grace, that is the grace of faithful souls, she desires to provoke her Spouse to a richer more abundant love for her.⁷¹

So although baptism is a most auspicious beginning, there is room for growth in Ambrose also; though note that, where in Origen, as we said, the daughters of Jerusalem are the less perfect maidens who accompany the bride as a leader, for Ambrose they are the faithful souls whose grace as it increases will cause the bridegroom to love the bride more ardently.⁷² The daughters, therefore, are not followers of the bride; they *are* the bride; they are those within her who cause the bridegroom to love her.

Ambrose's dialogue between the bride and bridegroom continues through one last exchange. In response to this ardent desire of charity and delighted at the beauty of her loveliness and grace (41), now that no sins among the baptized (*in ablutis*) soil her, the Lord Jesus says:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm” (Sg.8:6). That is: You are lovely, my Sister, wholly beautiful, nothing is lacking to you. Set me as a seal upon your heart, by which your faith may shine forth in the full [reality or mystery of the] sacrament. Let your works also be luminous and manifest the image of God [Christ], according to whose image you are made. Do not let persecution weaken your charity, which many waters cannot quench, nor floods drown (Sg.8:7).⁷³

At paragraph 42 Ambrose ends with a brief exhortation to the baptized. The imperatives he uses are in the second person singular: *repete et serva* (“recall” and “guard” or “keep”). One might think that Christ is still speaking to the Church; but as the paragraph progresses we realize that it

⁷¹ Vides, quemadmodum delectata munere gratiarum ad interiora cupit mysteria pervenire et omnes sensus suos consecrare Christo? Adhuc quaerit, adhuc suscitatur caritatem et suscitari eam sibi poscit a filiabus Hierusalem, quarum gratia, hoc est animarum fidelium, sponsum in amorem sui uberius desiderat provocari (*De Myst.* 7.40).

⁷² See Torjesen, “Body,” 25; for Origen the *Song of Songs* is the full, highest, manifestation of the Word in Scripture, “the bridegroom’s perfect marriage-song” (the subtitle of King’s monograph). If one is capable of grasping this revelation and integrating it into one’s life, one becomes the bride. This is far beyond the reach of the ordinary faithful, who read of Scripture and live from it primarily on the somatic/literal and psychic levels, without being able to progress, as yet, to the noetic/mystical level (See note 52).

⁷³ Pone me ut signaculum in cor tuum, ut sigillum in brachium tuum, (Sg.8:6) hoc est: ‘Decora es, proxima mea, tota formosa es, nihil tibi deest. Pone me ut signaculum in cor tuum, quo fides tua pleno fulgeat sacramento. Opera quoque tua luceant et imaginem dei praeferant, ad cuius imaginem facta es. Caritas tua nulla persecutione minuatur, quam multa aqua excludere et flumina inundare non possint (Sg.8:7). *De Myst.* 7.41.

is Ambrose who is speaking to each of the baptized, now wholly identified, even grammatically with the Church. By the beginning of the next paragraph he has transitioned to “the people” (*plebs*).

Therefore, recall that you have received a spiritual seal: “the Spirit of Wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and fortitude, the Spirit of knowledge and piety, the Spirit of holy fear.” And guard what you have received. God the Father has sealed you, Christ the Lord has confirmed you and given you “as a pledge the Spirit in your hearts” (2Cor.1:22) as you have learned from the reading from the Apostle.⁷⁴

This is a marvelous – and surely unforgettable – catechesis in which Ambrose hands over to the newly baptized through the *Song of Songs* their identity as the Church. There are three ideas running through this entire section of the *De Mysteriis*. First, the perfection that comes from the sacraments is the same as the definitive perfection of eternal life. The innocence of baptism must be maintained with fidelity until the end and brought to perfection, but it *is* essentially the same in this life and in the other. Second, the bridegroom of the Church is the fully divine and glorified Christ. Third, the Church is identified with individual baptized souls. They are the Church; she is the baptized. So as Ambrose speaks of the Church in the flamboyant, grand phraseology of the *Song of Songs*, he reminds the baptized that the object of this extravagant love of Christ is each and every one of them. These three ideas – the efficacious perfection of baptism, the divinity of Christ, and the total identification of the individual Christian with the Church – are the same as those communicated by the *Song of Songs* in Ambrose’s stanzas of Psalm 118.

⁷⁴ Unde repete, quia accepisti signaculum spiritale, Spiritum sapientiae et intellectus, Spiritum consilii atque virtutis, Spiritum cognitionis atque pietatis, Spiritum sancti timoris, et serva, quod accepisti. Signavit te deus pater, confirmavit te Christus dominus, et dedit pignus, spiritum, in cordibus tuis, sicut apostolica lectione didicisti (*De Myst.* 7.42).

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter with preliminary observations on the subject matter and structure of Psalm 118. We also noted that Ambrose appears to be the only early Christian exegete to create a deliberate parallel between Psalm 118 and the *Song of Songs*. So of course, the question is why would one want to associate these two Scriptural texts? On the most basic level, one might reply that since Christ is the fulfillment of the Law, a text like the *Song of Songs* would usefully reflect back on the psalm, in order to make plain how he fulfilled the Law. Nevertheless, there seems to be little or no trace of such back-reading from other early exegetes.

There are, however, indications that Ambrose had a special reason for reading the two texts together. The rest of the chapter was dedicated to an examination of five possible indications. None of them alone would be a sufficient reason. Yet they do create a nexus of factors. First, and most significant, Ambrose sees his role as bishop in relation to the church at Milan in terms of the *Song of Songs*. Ambrose, the poet, saw the spiritual drama, for lack of a better word, in his relation to the Milanese church: he saw himself as proxy to Christ in the affairs of his particular church. When he celebrated the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil, he was in a sense orchestrating the espousals of the bride. This is the most important factor. There are four more, which might best be thought of as “aspects” of his disposition to use the *Song of Songs*. First aspect: we know enough about Ambrose by now to see that the idea of using the *Song* would appeal to him. His character and his personal tastes were such that he had a special love for the *Song of Songs*. Second, it is likely that he grew up with some exposure, at least, to the imagery of the *Song of Songs*, since his older sister Marcellina was a consecrated virgin and he lived in a pious, senatorial household at Rome, where her vocation and the ecclesial framework

for it would have exercised an influence on the young Ambrose. Though Jerome enters the scene later, it is clear that by his time networks of high born Roman virgins were already in place.

Third, in virtue of his Roman upbringing, Ambrose belonged to what Lewis Ayres calls the “pro-Nicene culture.” Even before his episcopal election, his habits of mind were formed according to fundamental principles that would lead him, again not without his poetic sense, to think of Christ in his work of salvation as the bridegroom of the Church. This image was, of course, based on an Old and New Testament foundation, and it fits Ambrose’s principles as well as his temperament. Finally, for a man of pro-Nicene culture, the Church is the primary receiver of Christ. It is in the context of the institution of the Church that Christ deploys his grace and dispenses his gifts.

Salvation is his work in her. Yet who is the Church if not her members, the baptized? So the sacraments legitimately performed by the bishop and his priests have a primary significance, since they form and maintain the divine reality of the Church. In his mystagogical catecheses, therefore, Ambrose elucidates the sacraments he has administered, not only by explaining, but also by drawing his initiates into the imagery of the *Song of Songs*. Under his guidance, they become the bride; the sacraments *are* their nuptials with Christ. If this nuptial, bridal imagery were restricted to Ambrose’s sacramental theology, we could perhaps leave it there and be finished with it. But we have already seen it make inroads into the *De Bono Mortis*. Shortly we will see it throughout his commentary on Psalm 118. The bridal imagery of the *Song of Songs* is fundamental and pervasive, therefore, in Ambrose. It represents his vision of himself and his vision of the Church. At the end of stanza 22, we will see in a more specific way how it represents his vision of the fulfillment of the Law in Christ.

SECTION TWO

THE *SONG OF SONGS* IN THE
EXPOSITIO PSALMI 118

INTRODUCTION

In the last section we saw that the didactic Psalm 118, filled with repetitive praise and petition, is focused both on the precepts of the Law and on the desire of the psalmist. We also examined Ambrose's principles of exegesis and his preference for a binary alternation between the moral and mystical aspects of a Biblical text. By this method he discerns both the practical lesson and the revealed truth hidden under Biblical metaphor and Old Testament typological history. In terms that resonate with his poetic genius, he describes his method as representing the two eyes of the Church: one sees the sweetness of moral teachings and the other the penetrating depths of mystical truth. These are the eyes of the *Church*; that is, the processes of reading and interpreting Scripture and the resultant growth in holiness are accomplished within the sacramental economy of the Church. We saw that this understanding of the sacramental life of the Church combined with a sense of balance in Ambrose himself – a balance stemming from his Roman education and heritage, his sense of *decorum*, his personal integration (seen, for example, in his ease with Virgil and Ovid) – all led him to a large and deeply human concept of the *Song of Songs*, in contrast to Origen's highly spiritual approach. Finally, we considered reasons why Ambrose might have been disposed to use the *Song of Songs* as an exegetical key to a psalm dedicated to the moral precepts of the divine Law.

I would like to add another reason here that comes directly from Psalm 118 and provides an immediate framework for our analyses of Ambrose's commentary. Faced with the intense didacticism of this psalm, the poet in Ambrose reached instinctively for an over-arching metaphor

he could use to refract the endless variations on moral precepts into images both he and his congregation could appreciate. It was surely a daunting task to write a commentary on this psalm. At the beginning of the second stanza (*Beth*), he appears to heave a sigh of relief as if to say that, having made it through the first, he had decided to continue: “Our discussion of the eight previous verses did not turn out to be irrelevant, and so we resolved to go through with the following [eight verses].”¹ The term he uses here is *absurdus*, meaning *inappropriate, ridiculous, irrelevant*. His use of this word probably represents a gesture of modesty, but the fact that he chose it and that he even mentioned it signifies the challenge he had felt. Augustine also begins his commentary on this psalm with excuses for having taken so long to write it. He says that he has commented on all the other psalms in the Psalter but has delayed with this one because the simplicity of it is deceptive. He senses the profundity of the message, but the text itself seems so obvious that no commentary is necessary. This is an interesting dilemma, but I think it represents the real challenge for a commentator of Psalm 118.

To the degree that it appears obvious, to the same degree it usually seems to me to be more profound, so much so that I cannot even show how profound it is. Indeed, even if the meaning of other texts is hidden in obscurity, the obscurity itself is apparent. Yet the obscurity of this [text] is not, since it offers such a surface [meaning] that one would suppose the reader or listener to have no need of an expositor.²

It may be that Augustine’s difficulty sheds some light on Ambrose’s solution. By interpreting the precepts and petitions of the psalm in terms of a drama of love, of seeking and find-

¹ superiorum octo uersuum non absurda nobis cecidit disputatio, ideoque et sequentia persequi studium fuit (*Exp. Ps. 118.2.1*).

² psalmum uero centesimum octauum decimum, non tam propter eius notissimam longitudinem, quam propter eius profunditatem paucis cognoscibilem differebam.... quia quotiescumque inde cogitare tentavi, semper uires nostrae intentionis excessit. Quanto enim uidetur apertior, tanto mihi profundior uideri solet; ita ut etiam quam sit profundus, demonstrare non possem. Aliorum quippe, qui difficile intelleguntur, etiamsi in obscuritate sensus latet, ipsa tamen apparet obscuritas; huius autem nec ipsa; quoniam talem praebet superficiem, ut lectorem atque auditorem, non expositorem necessarium habere credatur. (Augustine, *In Ps. 118*, Proem.4-19).

ing, of fidelity and infidelity; and generally by tapping into the whole range of human emotion and response, he may identify the teachings of the psalm with the immediate, living needs of his congregation. It is a literary device that is without limit and highly practical. Further, by aligning the moral efforts and spiritual growth of the members of his congregation to a dramatization of the history and goal of salvation, he gives them a deeper sense of their own identity as Christians than bare moral precepts ever could. This is not to say that Ambrose uses only the *Song of Songs* to comment on the psalm but that this element of personal application and example is ready to hand, and that he often makes use of it.

In the present section, we will take a brief look at Ambrose's prologue to his *Expositio*. Then we will analyze five representative stanzas: Stanza 1 (*Aleph*) The Longing of the Bride; Stanza 11 (*Caph*) Fainting with Desire; Stanzas 16 (*Ain*) and 17 (*Phe*) The Praises of the Bride; Stanza 22 (*Tau*) The Prayer of the Lost Sheep and the Marriage of the Bride. Other stanzas might have been chosen, but I think these five give a varied and representative picture of Ambrose's use of the *Song of Songs* throughout the *Expositio*.

Before beginning our analysis, perhaps a word about Ambrose's use of Origen in his *Expositio* is in order. The *Palestinian Catena* reveals many borrowings of Ambrose from Origen. Marguerite Harl gives multiple references in her notes to the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition of the *Catena*. The Origen of the *Catena*, however, is not the whole of Origen, which Ambrose probably read. Also, as we said earlier, Origen makes no use of the *Song of Songs* in his commentary on Psalm 118. I have decided, therefore, to mention Origen only when bringing him into the discussion pertains directly to the *Song of Songs*. In their respective Prologues, Origen and Ambrose both comment on the significance of Psalm 118 as an alphabetical psalm. Both note that

there are eight verses under each letter, that the combination of unity with “eight” is significant, and that “eight” signifies the resurrection of Christ on the eighth day. After this, they differ.

Ambrose adds a pastoral note concerning the Milanese liturgical practice of delaying the participation of the neophytes in the offering of gifts on the altar.³ Origen, who knew that in the Hebrew text the first word of each verse begins with the letter assigned to the whole stanza, says that the unity of each stanza under one letter combined with the perfect number (eight) of verses beginning with that same letter signifies the perfection of moral teaching gained from a study of this psalm. He says – referring to the plethora of terms in it signifying law, precept, judgment, and so on – that this psalm contains moral teaching like none other.⁴ For Origen, a psalm that deals with moral precepts would represent, as we saw in the last chapter, the all-important first step in the process of enlightenment leading ultimately to the definitive encounter of the soul with the Word through the *Song of Songs*. Ambrose, of course, also prized the moral teaching in the Psalm. Our researches of the last section, however, have put us in a position to see that Origen would have no inclination to use the *Song of Songs* in his commentary on Psalm 118. Since for Origen, the progress from moral to natural to mystical knowledge was the necessary order that brings spiritual perfection to the soul, one could not safely or profitably begin a study of the *Song of Songs* until the moral and natural sciences had been acquired. It is no surprise, therefore, to find the *Song of Songs* totally absent from Origen’s commentary, as far as we can reproduce it, on Psalm 118.⁵ Ambrose, on the other hand, has no qualms about combining the two.

³ We will examine this below.

⁴ Origen, *Proeimum* to the Palestinian *Catena*. See Harl, *Chaine*, 182.

⁵ The *Biblia Patristica* vol.3 devoted to Origen verifies that with only occasional exceptions, Origen’s commentary on the *Song of Songs* is restricted to his two homilies and his large commentary on the *Song*.

CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE TO THE *EXPOSITIO*¹

The opening paragraph of the Prologue appropriately sets the tone for what follows with a double portrait of David the Prophet in terms of Ambrose's exegetical principles. "Though David the prophet rang out mystically like a resounding trumpet, he was also a great master of moral teachings."²

The superior grace of this psalm shows how far he excelled in ethical teachings; for though all moral teaching is sweet, here especially by the sweetness of his song and the charm of his psalmody, he delights the ears and soothes the soul. Where the teachings of other moral psalms shine like the stars, the teachings of this psalm are like the noon-day sun burning with heat and bright with splendor.³

The tenor of Psalm 118, therefore, is primarily moral, yet the moral teachings are of the highest order and announce mystical truth.

It is interesting that Ambrose associates the idea of sweetness (*suavitas* and *dulcedo*) with morality. We have already seen examples of this: (1) the moral eye of the Church is sweeter, the

¹ Note: in the analyses of the *Expositio* that follow many paragraphs go across pages in the CSEL edition. Line numbers, however, begin again at the head of each page. This causes some confusion, since, for example paragraph 2, line 25 may precede paragraph 2, line 3 on the following page. I have decided to label all paragraph numbers that fall on two pages a and b. Taking the numbers above as an example, this will give 2a.25-2b.3.

² Licet mystice quoque uelut tubae increpuerit sono Daudid propheta, tamen moralium magnus magister (Prol.1.1-2)

³ I have given a shortened translation of the following; the italics are my own: quantum in eo excellat ethica, psalmi huius summa declarat *gratia*, siquidem cum *suauis* omnis doctrina moralis sit, tum maxime *suauitate* carminis et psallendi *dulcedine* delectat aures animumque *demulcet*. Meritoque plerisque locis moralium psalmorum. sententias tamquam stellarum diffudit lumina, quae elucent atque eminent; centesimum uero et octauum decimum psalmum uelut pleni luminis solem meridiano feruentem calore in processa libri constituit aetate, ut neque matutini ortus semiplena exordia neque uespertini occasus quidam senilis defectus claritati aliquid perfecti splendoris decerperent (*In Ps.118* Prol.1.2-12).

mystical keener;⁴ (2) the sweetness of caresses and the passion of the lover expressed in the *Song of Songs* is mystical *and* moral;⁵ (3) in part two we also saw that when Ambrose describe the foods from the garden of the *Song of Songs* and associates them with the texts of Scripture, he distinguishes different types among them; the more persuasive ones are sweet as honey and bring by virtue of this sweetness compunction (i.e. moral healing) to the conscience of the sinner.⁶ Many other examples show that Ambrose consistently connects sweetness with moral rectitude.⁷ Why does he make this connection? A clue may be found in the association he also makes between *grace* and sweetness.⁸ As we saw above, the *summa gratia* of Psalm 118 shows how greatly David excelled in ethical matters. He also contrasts the sweetness of morality with the bitterness (*amaritudo*) of sin.⁹ I think these associations reflect the impact of baptism in the lives of the Christians at Milan. Baptized as adults, they saw their lives suddenly and radically purified

⁴ See p.295, note 1.

⁵ p.300, note 15.

⁶ est etiam fortior sermo, qui coufirmat cor hominis ualidioribus scripturae caelestis alimentis. est etiam sermo suasorius, dulcis ut mel et tamen peccatoris conscientiam in ipsa suauitate conpungens (*De Bono Mortis* 5.20).

⁷ When describing the belly of the bride from the *Song*: et uenter eius [of the bride] non solum aceruo tritici, id est cibis fortioribus caelestis mysterii saginetur, uerum etiam tamquam liliis quibusdam *moralium suauitate* repleatur (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.20*); Sint ergo sermones tui proflui, sint puri et dilucidi, ut morali disputatione suauitatem infundas populorum auribus et gratia uerborum tuorum plebem demulceas, ut volens quo ducis sequatur (*Ep. 36.5*).

⁸ Sane ut caduca tibi noueris communia esse cum floribus ita etiam laeta cum uitibus, quibus generatur uinum, *quo cor hominis laetificatur* (Ps.103:15). Atque utinam, o homo, huius generis imiteris exemplum, ut ipse tibi laetitiam iocunditatemque fructifices. In te ipso suauitas tuae gratiae est, ex te pullulat, in te manet, intus tibi inest, in te ipso quaerenda iocunditas tuae est conscientiae (*Hex. 3.12.49*); Ipse est enim ager, quem benedixit dominus, ... In hoc agro uua illa repperitur, quae expressa sanguinem fudit et mundum diluit, in hoc agro est ficus illa, sub qua sancti requiescent spiritalis gratiae suauitate recreati (*De Jac. 2.1.3*).

⁹ Meritoque ad tantum ecclesiae decorem, cui Christi sanguis inrutilat, spiritus sanctus inlclamat: *quam pulchra et suauis facta es, caritas, in deliciis tuis!* (Sg.7:6) pulchra decore uirtutis, *suauis* iucunditate *gratiae*, remissione uitiorum, quam nulla uexat *amaritudo* peccati, et ipsa iam caritas, quae diligendo dominum ipsius et nomen acceperit, quia deus caritas est (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.22*); mihi de corpore dei fons fluxit aeternus. meas *amaritudines* bibit Christus, ut mihi suae donaret *gratiae suauitatem* (*Exp. Ps. 118.18.20*); Venit ergo dominus in amaritudinem fragilitatis humanae, ut conditionis amaritudo dulcesceret, uerbi caelestis suauitate et gratia temperata (*De Inst. Virg. 5.34*); cf. also itaque liberato peccatore factum est in ea [domo] gaudium magnum, et redoluit domus tota suauitate gratiae (*De Poen. 2.7*).

and transformed by the sacrament.¹⁰ Henceforth, all efforts to live a virtuous life would have been understood in the context of that wonderful Easter Vigil when they, under the careful guidance of Ambrose, were reborn.¹¹ For Ambrose and his neophytes *gratia*, *suavitas*, and *moralia* are all connected.

The sacramental association with the moral teaching of the psalm is borne out by the multiple references to baptism and the sacraments in the following paragraphs of the Prologue and by Ambrose's explanation of the title of the psalm. He says, following Origen – as we saw above – that just as children begin to acquire the art of learning with the alphabet, so we learn the art of living through the alphabetical eight verse stanzas of this psalm.¹² The number eight is significant because on the eighth day there is a solemn purification (*purgatio*): under the old Law it was the rite of circumcision; then since the entire world was polluted by sin, Christ rose from the dead also on the eighth day: “But when the day of Resurrection came, restored to life in Christ (Eph.2:5), we arose and stood upright (Ps.19:9) in the newness of life exhibiting the grace of our purification by water (*ablutionis*).”¹³ Ambrose then refers to the sacrament of baptism by name when he explains that the newly baptized wait another eight days after receiving the sacraments before they offer their gifts at the altar (an indirect reference to the Eucharist), so that they may be instructed first, lest the ignorance of the one offering contaminate the mystery of what is

¹⁰ Ambrose's term is *statim* meaning *immediately, without delay*. licet in baptismo statim sit plena purgatio,... (Prol.2b.11).

¹¹ Augustine gives a moving account in the *Confessions* of his own profound joy and happiness (*dulcedine mirabili*) in the days following his baptism (Conf.9.6, end): et currebant lacrimae et bene mihi erat cum eis.

¹² quem [psalmum] per singulas Hebraeorum digessit litteras, ut, quemadmodum paruulorum ingenia primis litterarum elementis adsuescunt discendi usum adsumere, ita etiam nos huiusmodi elementis usum discamus uiuendi (Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmi 118* Prol.1). Cf. Origen, *Proeimum* to the Palestinian *Catena*. See Harl, *Chaine*, 182-4.

¹³ I wonder if *praefero* here refers to the white garments of the baptized. ubi autem uenit dies resurrectionis, conuiuificati domino Iesu (cf. Eph.2:5) resurreximus et erecti surnus (Ps.19:9) in nouitate uitae praeferentes ablutionis gratiam (Prol.2:4-6).

offered.¹⁴ Finally, Ambrose explains that the title of the psalm is “Alleluia,” for God is truly praised in those hymns in which is found the remission of sins.

Ambrose adds that the place of the psalm – after Ps.117 – prophetically confirms the title and sacramental associations of this psalm: “In the preceding psalm the passion of the Lord was foretold, which cleansed this world, in order to make a worthy people who would praise God with a pure mouth.”¹⁵ Since Psalm 118 follows directly after, the true and full interpretation of it derives from the post-resurrection life of the Church; the Law of which it sings is that by which “the people worthy to praise God” must live. In light of the text from the *De Mysteriis* we analyzed under the “Fourth Aspect” above, I think we can see how close a connection there might be in Ambrose’s mind between Psalm 118 and the *Song of Songs*: one of the key links is the sacraments that make possible a life of moral integrity and that also define and maintain the Church as the bride of Christ. Note again also the close association here in Ambrose’s thought between the Church and the individual people who become her members by means of baptism.

¹⁴ unde licet in baptisate statim sit plena purgatio, tamen, quia ablutionis ipsius sacrificiique rationem baptizatus debet cognoscere, non offert sacrificium nisi octauum ingreditur diem, ut informatus agnitione sacramentorum caelestium non quasi rudis hostia, sed quasi rationis capax tunc demum suum munus altaribus sacris offerat, cum coeperit esse instructor, ne offerentis inscitia contaminet oblationis mysterium. (Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmi 118* Prol.2). See also Saterlee, 181.

¹⁵ denique in superiore psalmo passio domini praemissa est, quae mundum hunc diluit, ut dignos faceret populos qui deum immaculato ore laudarent (Prol.3).

CHAPTER TWO

STANZA ONE (*ALEPH*): THE LONGING OF THE BRIDE

This opening stanza of the *Expositio* is representative of the whole in the sense that the whole range of possible interpretations of the *Song of Songs* is suggested here. It shows the breadth of Ambrose's vision of the Church and of the life of Christians within the Church. It contains the salient elements of his exegetical approach to Scripture. Finally it shows us Ambrose the classical orator deploying his considerable forensic and rhetorical skill in the service of Christian perfection. One can imagine the delight and satisfaction of his audience as they listened. This last point also suggests another dimension to the *Expositio Psalmi 118*. As we go through the stanzas of the psalm, we will see Ambrose making greater use of rhetorical technique and more frequent – often engaging and delightful – allusions to literary texts than in the other treatises we have examined. This would imply perhaps a diverse and cosmopolitan audience for his *Expositio*.

Stanza 1 is divided into three parts: first, an introduction, (1-3); second, a long allegorical commentary – through the lens of the *Song of Songs* – on the first two verses of the psalm (4-13); third, a brief commentary on the last six verses of the stanza (14-19). This pattern of a long development of one or two significant verses followed by brief summaries of the rest is typical of the *Expositio* as a whole.

INTRODUCTION (1-3)

At the beginning of every stanza of his commentary, Ambrose gives a translation of the name of the Hebrew letter under which the stanza lies. Here it is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*. In Latin, he says, it means *doctrina* (doctrine).¹ Then he gives the opening two verses of the psalm:

Blessed are they who are blameless in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.
Blessed are they who scrutinize his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart.²

Following Hilary and Origen, he gives the conventional interpretation of the order of the two verses. The psalmist has placed the verse concerned with moral conduct before that concerned with intellectual inquiry. This is fitting, since one must acquire moral rectitude and purity under the law before searching into the testimonies of the Lord. This, again, is Origen's principle of the ordering of the spiritual sciences based on the books of Solomon. Ambrose reinforces his point with quotations from the Book of Wisdom ("Wisdom shall not enter a malicious soul" Wsd.1:4) and from *Proverbs* ("The evil shall seek but not find me" Prov.1:28). He explains: "Since the eye of the mind is blinded by a lack of integrity and iniquity darkens it, it cannot discover the profound mysteries."³ Then he adds a nuance of his own, which we have seen before:

The moral teachings, therefore, come first, the mystical second. In the former is life, in the latter knowledge, such that if you seek perfection, life cannot be without knowledge, nor can knowledge be without life. Each by nature requires and supports the other.⁴

¹ A discussion of these letter names and the provenance of them is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

² Beati immaculate in via, qui ambulant in lege Domini. Beati qui scrutantur testimonia eius, in toto corde exquirunt eum. (Ps.118.1-2).

³ quia inprobate caecatur mentis oculus et caligante sibi iniquitate mysteria profunda inuenire non potest (*Exp.*1.2.19-20).

⁴ prima igitur sunt moralia, secunda mystica. in illis uita, in his cognitio, ita ut, si perfectionem requiras, nec uita sine cognitione nec cognitio sine uita sit, utrumque adstipuletur alteri (*Exp.*1.2.24-7). *Adstipulor* is based on the verb *stipulor*: to extract a promise of guarantee. The prefix *ad* adds a nuance of "towards another"; it means to be obliged by something or someone, to join in a covenant or a demand with someone, to stipulate; to corroborate or support

As with the example from Psalm 1 of the leaves and fruit, so here again, Ambrose states that moral and mystical teachings are related in such a way that each is richer for the pursuit of the other. He continues:

And so Scripture says, “Sow for yourselves unto justice, harvest the fruit of life, illumine yourselves with the light of knowledge” (Hos.10:12). It does not say first “illumine” but “sow,” and not only “sow” first “unto justice,” but also “harvest the fruit of life” and in this way you “illumine [yourselves] with the light of knowledge,” such that [your] perfection is commended not only by what has been sown but also by the fruits received.⁵

This passage from Hosea is a *locus classicus* for the traditional discussion of the relationship between $\pi\rho\acute{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$ and $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$.⁶ Origen and Didymus cite the same passage. Evagrius and Cassian passed the distinction on to the ascetic and monastic culture. The interesting element here is that Ambrose stresses the complementarity of moral and mystical teaching (preceding page) *before* he turns to the text from Hosea and he presents this text as evidence for this complementarity, rather than for a simple progression from practice to theory. This may look like a minor point; but I think it reflects Ambrose’s personal approach to Scripture and also, more important, his pastoral need to bring the diverse audiences of his congregation into a mystical understanding of Scripture, and of their own identity in terms of it, without requiring the long and steady apprenticeship of a study circle such as those grouped around Origen and Didymus,⁷ and of course around Evagrius and the monastic communities. In a sense, he “explodes” the received restrictions inherent in the idea of philosophical and theological progress without wholly abandoning

another (in an argument). See the OLD and Blaise, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Tournout: Brepols, 1954).

⁵ ideoque ait scriptura: *seminate uobis ad iustitiam, uindemiate ad fructum uitae, inluminare uobis lumen cognitionis* (Hos.10.12). non prius *inluminare*, sed *seminate*, nec solum *seminate* prius *ad iustitiam*, sed etiam *uindemiate*, inquit, *ad fructum uitae*, et sic *inluminare lumen cognitionis*, ut perfectio non solum consitis, sed etiam receptis fructibus adprobetur (*Exp.*1.2).

⁶ See Harl, *Chaine*, 122-125 with notes; 545-547.

⁷ Layton, *Didymus* and also *Didymus and the Allegorical Tradition*.

the theoretical framework. At least, what follows is a panoramic view of the whole of salvation in which the bride of the *Song*, who was once a whore and now stands as the bride of Christ, and the adulterer, standing before Ambrose in his congregation, come into close and central focus.

Then, paragraph three of the introduction to stanza one contains one of the passages we considered in the theoretical discussions in chapter three of the last section. We saw there that Ambrose emphasizes the non-progressive, complementary relationship between Solomon's books: mystical teachings are found in Proverbs and moral teachings in the *Song of Songs* ("where the sweetness of caresses and the affections of the lover are expressed").

THE BRIDE OF THE ETERNAL BRIDEGROOM: WHO IS SHE? (4-13)

This section – still a commentary on the first two verses of the psalm – justifies all the accolades Augustine and others have handed to Ambrose for his rhetorical appeal. It is a magnificent piece, as rich and beautiful, and at times subtly humorous, in the delivery as in the content. Ambrose begins, *Constitue ergo virginem desponsatam*.... After the theoretical discussion of moral and mystical teaching, it is time now for a story that will serve as an example. "And so, imagine a virgin betrothed...." This is the dramatic setting for the *Song of Songs*: it opens with a young woman longing for the kisses of her beloved. Origen begins similarly, but where he raises the level at once to a spiritual plane, Ambrose takes his time.⁸ He fully engages the imagination of his audience. His virgin is a young Roman maiden, who might have been betrothed to a Scipio, or any number of eligible men of the Senatorial elite:

So imagine a virgin betrothed for a long time and burning with a rightful love, who knew from the commendation of reliable witnesses the many and illustrious deeds of her

⁸ Cf. Origen, *In Ct. Cant.* 1.10-20, Baehrens, 89.

beloved. With her desires in suspense, and repeatedly made to wait, she can no longer bear the delay, she has done everything possible to see her betrothed. [Understand] that at long last she will attain her desires, but at the unexpected arrival of her bridegroom she is flustered and does not seek the introductory greetings, no exchange of words, but she demands immediately what she has desired.⁹

What she demands is, of course, the opening line from the *Song of Songs*: “Let him kiss me.”

Ambrose has moved into a narrative and descriptive style. The scene is recounted in an elegant period. Though it looks like the beginning of a story, it is primarily a vivid and emotional description of her waiting, a short *ekphrasis*. The period is developed within a dependent clause after the principal verb *constitue*. The skeleton is made of feminine accusative participles modifying *uirginem*, all stand as the subject of the infinitives *quaerere* and *exigere*. These are enhanced by relative clauses, temporal phrases, an *ut* clause, and other subordinate material. By this subtle change in style he has extended an invitation to his audience to listen to his story, to look at his portrait, and to enjoy the imagery, instead of looking for a logical argument. It lasts only for a moment, but it is enough to establish a base for the interpretations that follow; that is, this little portrait is the rightly ordered, secular, human love that stands as the counterpart to the adulterous love Ambrose will address shortly and the spiritual love of the bride. If I may be allowed to explain one metaphor by means of another, this little story of the young woman waiting for her beloved is like the weight in the pulley: it starts the upward movement of everything else; it is not the important part of the exegesis, but without it the mechanism fails. This is also the *somatic* level of the plain text.

⁹ Constitue ergo uirginem desponsatam multo tempore et iusto feruentem amore, quae multa praeclara opera dilecti probabilium testium adsertione cognouerit, desideriiis suspensis dilatam frequenter iam non ferentem moras, quae omnia fecisset, ut sponsum uideret, aliquando uotis potitam suis ad inprouisum sponsi aduentum gaudio turbatam non quaerere primordia salutationis, non uerborum uices, sed statim quod desiderasset exigere (*Exp.*1.4).

In the next sentence, Ambrose moves to the mystical level, establishing a parallel between the Roman virgin and the Church as the mystical bride.

And so in the same way the holy Church, who was betrothed in Paradise at the beginning of the world, prefigured in the flood, announced by the Law, called by the prophets, had long awaited the redemption of mankind, the beauty of the Gospel, the coming of her Beloved. Impatient at the delay she rushed to his kisses, saying, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” and delighted with the kisses, she added “for your breasts are better than wine.”¹⁰

This is the standard mystical interpretation of the bride of the *Song of Songs*, but there are two significant twists here. First, Ambrose makes the betrothal of the bride take place at the moment of creation in Paradise; so he enlarges the scope to the whole span of creation and salvation. The Church here is not, as elsewhere, the gentile successor to the Hebrew Synagogue.¹¹ She is the primordial bride, who has been present through all the vicissitudes of salvation history. Second, it is she herself who is prefigured by the flood, announced by the Law and called by the prophets. The flood, the Law, and the Prophets show her – and in this she is like Origen’s bride – her destiny. Growing impatient throughout the generations of long waiting for the coming of Christ, she was at last the happy bride, when he finally came. Ambrose’s mystical bride represents, therefore, the human race in relation to God as creator and savior, Jew and Gentile, for all time.

In the next paragraph (5), he turns to a moral interpretation of the same image. He uses the comparative *moralius*, “more moral,” in order to show, I think, that he intends now to emphasize the moral side of an essentially mystical interpretation of the Church. The main question is: how did the Church comport herself during all those ages of waiting for the bridegroom? In a

¹⁰ ita ergo et sancta ecclesia, quae in primordiis mundi desponsata in paradiso, praefigurata in diluvio, adnuntiata per legem, uocata per prophetas diu redemptionem hominum, euangelii decorem, dilecti expectasset aduentum, inpatiens morae in oscula ruit dieens: *osculetur me ab osculo oris sui* et delectata osculis adiecit: *quoniam optima ubera tua super uinum* (Sg.1:1; Exp.1.4)

¹¹ See, for example, Ambrose’s exegesis of “I am black but beautiful” in Ps.118, 2.9-15.

magnificent period, Ambrose tells the story of the Old Testament Church. He identifies her as *caro*, “flesh”; here it is a generic term for human nature after the fall. So note that although above there is no question of sin – he just describes the Church as a mystical reality – now sin enters the picture. We are not in Origen’s study circle of the elite but in the imperial church of Milan in the late fourth century, where sin is a more pertinent topic. Since *caro* is feminine in Latin, Ambrose transitions easily from “flesh” to the feminine attributes of the Church; this is rather awkward in English, but I have tried to keep the “flavor” of the period and so use the relative pronoun “who.” It is a narrative description but also a vivid *ekphrasis*, like that of the Roman virgin above. Under multiple modifiers, the bare bones of the period are, after the main verb, an accusative subject (*carnem*) followed later on by a helpful *eandem* and two infinitives (*inarsisse, orare*). This is grand style, intended to engage the attention of his listeners and readers. In an intense build-up, one unified picture emerges, in which the whole image is commensurate with the contour of the text. This is perhaps as close as words come to painting a picture. Ambrose will resort to this procedure again in paragraph 9 when he describes the lustful man in search of a prostitute. Note also the word play here: *crinibus cincinnis* and *affectato decore... dedecens*.¹²

For the content, Ambrose moves in opposite directions through two Scriptural texts. The first, from Isaiah, describes the sinful conduct of the Church, the second her ascendant life after conversion as she awaits the coming of the Lord. Note that Paul writes to Timothy about separate

¹² The close association of similar terms is a regular feature of Ambrose’s style. One finds it often throughout this commentary. See for example *immundus* (unclean) with *mundus* (world) at 1.5b.12-13; *desinat* (leave off doing) with *desistat* (cease to be) at 1.8a. 25-26.

roles for men and women. Ambrose makes no distinction here; both men and women are the Church in this context. The two Scriptural texts are as follows:

The Lord said: ...the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet....” (Is.3:16)

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire, but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. (1Tim.2:8-10)¹³

Ambrose must have been pleased to find two parallel texts, so apt for his purposes, but he embellishes them both and thereby evokes the entire prophetic tradition in which Israel is up-braided as an unfaithful wife for her sins of idolatry, and at the same time he appeals to the moral teachings of Paul in general, which laid the foundation for the life of Christians after the Resurrection. To use Nauroy’s expression, Ambrose speaks Scripture in his own words. For example, the phrase *crinibus cincinnis* is not, as far as I know, found in Scripture, but in the context here it is highly evocative of the descriptions of harlots found elsewhere in the Old Testament.¹⁴ Similarly, *murmurans* and *transgrediens* resonate the stormy history of the discontent of Israel in the desert, the contentious resistance to Christ mounted by the Pharisses, the injunctions of Paul in his epistles.¹⁵

In order to highlight, and enjoy, Ambrose’s marvelous picture, I will place the English and Latin side by side.

¹³ These verses are taken from the RSV. They do not necessarily reflect the exact text Ambrose used, but they suffice to indicate his Biblical source and his use of it.

¹⁴ See for example Ez.16 *passim*; Prov.7:6-23.

¹⁵ See for example Ex.15:23-4, 16:8-12, 17:3; Num.14:27-9, 17:5; Deut.1:7; 1Cor.10:10, Phil.2:14-5. The classic scenario is well summarized at Ps.105(106):24-6.

Expositio in Ps.118.1.5a.8-5b.2

Et ut moralius dicamus, intellege mihi carnem illam, quae madefacta fuerat in Adam serpentis ueneno, quae criminum marcebat fautore, quae procedebat in filiabus Sion alta ceruice et nutibus oculorum et itinere pedum trahens tunicas et pedibus suis ludens (cf. Is.3:16), crinibus cincinnis et compositis uultibus atque redimiculis et omni affectato decore plus dedecens, eandem tamen plurimis edoctam oraculis, quod uenturus esset qui serpentis inlecebris exclusis sancti spiritus infunderet gratiam, ut omnis caro uideret salutare dei, (cf.Lk.3:6) omnis caro ad deum ueniret, inarsisse desiderio, sed metuentem, ne ut inpatiens, ut lasciua, ut luxuriosa, ut querula, sicut ante fuerat, displiceret, quamuis longiore quam ferre iam poterat morantis aduentus dominici expectatione quateretur, non inmurmurantem tamen nec transgredientem, sed *leuantem in omni loco puras manus sine ira et disceptatione* (1Tim.2:8) *in habitu ornato, cum uerecundia et sobrietate ornantem se, non intortis crinibus aut auro aut margaritis aut ueste pretiosa* (1Tim.2:9), sed his quae castitatis et bonae conuersationis decerent gratiam, orare dicentem: *Osculetur me ab osculo oris sui*, quoniam *optima ubera tua super uinum*. (Sg.1:1)

Speaking from a moral standpoint, consider that flesh, who in Adam was drunk with the poison of the serpent, who was sickened by the stench of sin, who went forth among the daughters of Zion with arched neck and glancing eyes, trailing her dresses on the path behind her, and mincing with her feet, (cf. Is.3:16) with curled ringlets, artful mien, and headdresses: more disgraceful with every affected ornament; that same flesh, however, instructed by many prophecies that one would come who would shut out the wiles of the serpent and pour upon her the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that all flesh would see the salvation of God (cf.Lk.3:6) and all flesh come to God, [she] burned with desire, though fearing lest she, impatient, wanton, extravagant, and petulant as she was before, might displease him; this waiting, nevertheless, for the coming of the Lord, who had delayed, proved longer than she could bear; neither murmuring, nor transgressing, but *raising in every place pure hands, without anger or contention*, (1Tim.2:8) *in comely dress, with modesty and sobriety, arrayed not with curled and braided locks, not with gold, pearls, or costly clothing*, (1Tim.2:9) but with all that was fitting to the grace of chastity and a good life, she prayed, saying, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” since “your breasts are better than wine.” (Sg.1:1)

Thus far, Ambrose has identified the bride of the *Song of Songs* with a Roman maiden awaiting marriage, with the mystical Church of all time pure and holy, and now with the repentant harlot, that is with *caro*, the whole race of fallen man. Note, again, that not only is this last interpretation an interesting and radical departure (as Hervé Savon remarks)¹⁶ from the tradition based on Origen, but it also by multiple allusions aligns the bride to the entire prophetic tradition.

¹⁶ Hervé Savon, “Ambroise lecteur d’Origène,” *Nec Timeo Mori*, 232-4.

The *Song of Songs* is one book among 22, the number of books in the Hebrew Scriptures; it should be understood in terms of the whole: the prophetic books show the infidelity of the bride, the *Song of Songs* shows how things should be between God and his people. As we said in the Introduction to this dissertation, this is a point made by some modern exegetes. So it is interesting that Ambrose seems to think along the same lines.¹⁷ More than that, his bride here combines both sides of the picture – the sinful and the pure – and this forms the metaphorical backdrop for the rest of the homily. The last half of paragraph five continues the *ekphrasis* given above, but with a new twist:

By now, *caro* (flesh), desiring to cling to Christ, hastened to be married, that she might be one spirit [with him; cf. 1Cor.6:17] and become the flesh of Christ, she who before belonged to a prostitute. She says “Let him kiss me” – The Word of God kisses us when the Spirit of knowledge illumines our understanding – and like one despising all her pleasures and delights, desiring passionately (*cupiens*) to adhere to heavenly mandates, she says, “For the precepts of your testaments are better than every appetite of the flesh and sensual pleasure of the world.” She remembers that formerly in Eve she had fallen as long as she put the pleasure of the body over and above the heavenly mandates. “Your name is a fragrant oil poured forth”; that is, this world (*mundus*) was stinking (*faetabat*), totally foul (*immundus*) with the impurities of varied crimes; now the sweetness of chastity, the perfumed oil of faith, the flower of integrity breathe forth everywhere. And she [the mystical bride] comes from the level of moral teaching to that of the mystical, saying, “The King has introduced me into his chamber; we exult and rejoice in you; we love your breasts more than wine” (Sg.1:4). For the kiss is a single gesture, but the business [of marriage] is the secret of the bridal chamber.¹⁸

There are several interesting points here. First, by his aside, within dashes, Ambrose identifies *us*, all Christians, with the bride not only through the medium of “flesh” but also

¹⁷ Especially Davis and Kingsmill. See the General Introduction, 19-20.

¹⁸ iam uolebat adhaerere Christo caro, iam festinabat innubere, ut esset unus spiritus (cf. 1Cor.6:17) et fieret caro Christi, quae erat ante meretricis. “osculatur,” inquit, “me” – osculatur nos dei uerbum, quando sensum nostrum spiritus cognitionis inluminat – et tamquam despiciens omnes iucunditates et delectationes suas, caelestibus cupiens inhaerere mandatis ait: “quoniam optima praecepta testamentorum tuorum super omnem adpetentiam carnis et saeculi uoluptatem.” meminerat enim se in Eua ante sic lapsam, dum uoluptatem corporis praefert mandatis caelestibus. *unguentum exinanitum nomen tuum* (Sg.1:2/3), hoc est: totus immundus impuritatibus diuersorum facinorum faetebat hic mundus; nunc spirat ubique suauitas pudicitiae, unguentum fidei, flos integritatis. et a moralibus uenit ad mystica dicens: *introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum. exultemus et laetemur in te; diligamus ubera tua super uinum* (Sg.1:4). simplex est enim osculum, negotiosum autem cubiculi secretum. (Exp. 1.5b)

through the medium of the kiss. The Word kisses *us* whenever we receive from the Spirit an increase in understanding, knowledge that illumines our *sensum*.¹⁹ The Latin *sensus* may refer to the physical senses, to mental perception, to the ability to make judgments, to one's "sense" of things; it refers both to the mind and the heart, as in the English, "He is a man of good sense." By what means does Spirit illumine the mind and heart of the Christian? Ambrose answers: by our efforts to attain knowledge, that is through the Scriptures, which we read at home or in Church.²⁰ So when we participate in the life of the Church and read or listen to the Scriptures we prepare to receive the kiss.

Second, after the first verse "Let him kiss me..." the bride of the *Song of Songs* continues, "For your breasts are better than wine." Ambrose sets us up for this but then makes a substitution: "For the precepts of your testaments are better than every appetite of the flesh and sensual pleasure of the world." This resonates the second verse of Psalm 118: "Blessed are they who scrutinize his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart."²¹ Thus the testimonies of the Lord are identified with the breasts that are better than wine.

Third, the whole passage is charged with emotional and sensual imagery: the bride is filled with a desire for divine knowledge that balances and replaces her former desires for sensual pleasure. She is repulsed by her past life and views it as the stench of sin as opposed to the sweetness, fragrance, and beauty of her new found love. Finally, rising from moral to mystical considerations, she realizes that she has entered – and Ambrose has us enter with her – the bridal chamber where we are all filled with exultation, rejoicing, and love. There the real business

¹⁹ See Origen, Baehrens 91.21-92.4; 223.26-224.18.

²⁰ See below, 383, note 33.

²¹ Beati qui scrutantur testimonia eius, in toto corde exquirunt eum. (Ps.118:2).

(*negotium*) of marriage begins. Why all this emotion? Ambrose is stacking up joy against joy, pleasure against pleasure, eliciting with no apologies the imagination of his audiences: trying to show that the pleasures of love when the bridegroom is Christ are greater and more satisfying than the others. He is saying, which do you prefer: the kiss of the Word or the appetites of the flesh, the fragrant oil of the name of Christ or the stench of sin? Because if you choose the former, then the sweetness of chastity, the fragrance of faith, and the beauty of integrity will envelop you and you will enter into the true marriage of the Church with Christ. This is a direct and an astute appeal to pleasure.²² I think it is fairly certain that Ambrose is directly addressing baptized Christians in this homily, but there were probably catechumens and interested pagans in his audience as well. The breadth of his scope and the down-to-earth appeal seem to suggest their presence. Ambrose also seems to be facing a challenge from some of the sophisticated members of his congregation, who may have received baptism more for professional advantage than out of faith.

Fourth, Ambrose and we with him enjoy a lively presentation. The last statement is mildly reminiscent of Ovid's *Amores* and other Latin love poetry, where sensual images may be powerfully represented by suggestion only. In Latin it runs: *simplex est enim osculum, negotiosum autem cubiculi secretum*, as if to say, "A kiss is a one-time deal, but the real thing is the secret of the chamber." Ambrose grew up on Latin love poetry. He subtly alludes to it here, no doubt for the enjoyment of some in his audience, but also in order to plant a seed he may exploit later on as the basis for a spiritual interpretation. It was this double climate of enjoyable and

²² See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.5, 1175a 29-37.

polished rhetoric along with the unpacking of Biblical metaphor that captivated and finally enlightened Augustine.²³

With paragraph six Ambrose moves the discussion from Old Testament imagery to New Testament directive. He says:

In the Gospel also there is a most beautiful (*pulcherrimus*) passage concerning moral teaching: that each one should cleanse his own vessel. The Lord says, “You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean.” (Mt.23:26). For unless each one cleanses the inside, even if he appears attractive and just on the outside, he shall be like a whited sepulcher (Mt.23:27), so that on the outside indeed he may appear just, but on the inside he is really stinking (*faetidus*). Such is doctrine without the innocence of life; [for] doctrine itself can have no reward where innocence has no grace: “to the wicked God says: “What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?” (Ps.49:16)²⁴

This passage in connection with what follows, and the whole tenor of the description of the bride, seems to indicate that there is a problem in the church at Milan. Some of the members of the congregation put in a good appearance; they are quite knowledgeable when it comes to the teachings of the Church. The innocence of their lives, however, leaves something to be desired. At the end of paragraph 12, Ambrose asks point blank: “How can one be so pious in his opinion but so base in his sin?”²⁵ One may speculate about the members of Ambrose’s audience who might fit this description: with education and leisure enough to cultivate theological opinions,

²³ et delectabar sermonis suavitate,... veniebant in animum meum simul cum uerbis, quae diligebam, res etiam, quas neglegebam. neque enim dirimere poteram. et dum cor aperirem ad excipiendum quam diserte diceret, pariter intrabat et quam vera diceret Augustine, (*Conf.* 5.13-4).

²⁴ In ipso quoque euangelio pulcherrimus de moralibus locus est, ut unusquisque uas suum mundet, dicente domino: *Phariseae caece, munda prius quod intus est calicis et parapsidis, ut fiat et id quod foris est mundum.* nam nisi se unusquisque intus mundauerit, etiamsi foris speciosus uideatur et iustus, similis erit dealbatis sepulchris, ut foris quidem iustus uideatur, intus uero sit faetidus. nam nisi se unusquisque intus mundauerit, etiamsi foris speciosus uideatur et iustus, similis erit dealbatis sepulchris (Mt.23:27), ut foris quidem iustus uideatur, intus uero sit faetidus. sic est doctrina sine uitae innocentia. sed nec ipsa doctrina potest mercedem habere, ubi gratiam non habet innocentia. *peccatori autem dixit deus: quare tu enarrasti ustitias meas?* (Ps.49:16). (*Exp.* 1.6)

²⁵ Unde tamen tam religiosus in opinione, qui tam probrosus in crimine? (*Exp.* 1.12)

and capable – if only they would do so – of *reading* the Scriptures at home.²⁶ They would have possessed a copy of the Scriptures but were engaged in lives where serious temptations were a regular problem. This situation reflects the difficulty of expedient conversion bishops faced in the late fourth century. Milan would have been no exception.²⁷

This is the real problem addressed in this first stanza of Psalm 118: the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the lack of total and lasting conversion. One must *be* morally good before wishing to appear so.²⁸ Ambrose's solution is more complex than one might think. It is not simply: "Clean up what is inside so that appearance and reality line up." His solution has two aspects: one is that there is no difference between the inside and the outside, since the actions of men are visible to an entire spiritual universe; the second is that it is only through a diligent and meditative reading of Scripture and through sincere participation in the life of the Church that one may come to realize the real impact of this spiritual universe. The conclusion will be that it is as foolish as it is dangerous to commit serious sin. If one understood how foolish it is – by scrutinizing the testimonies of the Lord – one would be less likely to abandon the way of moral rectitude. The sin singled out here is adultery or fornication. This is the sin Ambrose seems to prefer for homiletic chastisement, whether because it was prevalent, or because he considered it paradigmatic in some way. In any case, it represents all that is in direct opposition to the imagery of the bride. So it may perhaps stand for all the others.

²⁶ Note Ambrose's comment at 1.11 (See note 33 below): *si domi non legas*

²⁷ A bishop's ability to adapt his sermons to the social and cultural position of his audience was soon seen as crucial (Ambrose, *Ep.* 36. 5-7). It became a virtue, and was listed as the most important among other prerogatives recommended in treatises on correct episcopal behavior (Gr. Naz. *De fuga* 2.28-9). The bishops could see that the faith of their fellow citizens, even though now openly declaring themselves Christian, was failing - a faith that implied doctrinal certainty, high moral behavior, and social commitment. Rita Lizzi Testa, "The Late Antique Bishop: Image and Reality," *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 531.

²⁸ They asked the faithful to adopt true humility in order to acquire virtue, not the semblance of humility (*virtutem non speciem humilitatis*). *ibid.*

What I find so interesting here is that Ambrose is not just pointing out to his people their weaknesses and telling them to repent. He is looking for a real solution by appealing to their emotions, their fundamental sense of reality, and in the final analysis to their desire for pleasure and for the good life. In all of this there was, of course, a large scope for the rhetorician in Ambrose.

Paragraph seven is a brief recapitulation. Ambrose cites again the first two verses of the psalm, reminding his audience that these verses are still the subject matter and that the first is moral, the second mystical. He says that David sang these verses in his prophetic role as a mouthpiece for all mankind (*caro*). He sang them – as Ambrose said in the Prologue – after having composed Psalm 117, in which he had described the passion of Our Lord and seen prophetically the fruits of salvation. This caused him to exclaim with the opening words of the psalm: “Blessed are the blameless...”²⁹ This paragraph serves as a marker to keep the audience on track for the main line of the argument, and it stands as the basis for Ambrose’s next question: “But who is blameless?” (*Sed quis est immaculatus?*). It seems to me that the following paragraphs (8-13) have enough forensic oratory in them to both delight and alarm his audience. The development is so intense, it looks indeed like a veiled warning to some in the audience.³⁰

He begins paragraph eight, therefore, with the question: “Who is blameless?” Surely not the one who walks in any sort of way but he who walks in the way that is Christ who said, “I am

²⁹ ubi ergo ei diuina sacramenta reuelata sunt et induit dominicae resurrectionis laetitiam et passionis degustauit gratiam, uidit iustorum congregationes, populos redemptorum, perditorum salutem; mortuorum resurrectionem, sanctificationem sacramentorum, exclamauit dicens: *beati immaculati in uia, qui ambulant in lege domini* (Ps.118:1), hoc est: ecce maledicta terra in Adam coepit habere beatitudinem, si tamen legem domini non derelinquat; ecce immaculatus est homo, qui erat ante pollutus. quam pretiosum est iam custodire praeceptum domini, quam pretiosum etiam praecepti ipsius scire mysterium! (*Exp.* 1.7)

³⁰ Note: I do not think Ambrose was warning anyone in danger of punishment for adultery under Roman law. He is concerned here with all sexual disorder from a Christian perspective.

the way” (Jn.14:6). He who walks in this way does not know error (unlike the Manicheans); and since this way is the Law of the Lord, he is the one who walks in the Law, who without deviation, hesitation, resistance:

scrutinizes the testimonies of the Lord (Ps.118:2), which though mystical, contain nevertheless moral teachings also; for the one who searches into the testimonies of the Lord may better walk in the way.³¹

Again, the inseparable duo of moral and mystical teaching: one cannot advance far in the moral life without help from the mystical side that comes from a meditative, participative reading of Scripture. Ambrose argues for the rest of the homily that one will fail in the Christian life without it. This section is too long to translate fully, but I will give pertinent sections of it and summarize the rest. Larger portions of it in Latin will be found in the notes.

In paragraph nine, Ambrose zeroes in on one prime example, an adulterer. Adultery, fornication, sex with one’s maidservant, or keeping a mistress all come under the same title. In an *ekphrasis* as vivid as that in paragraph four he describes the adulterer in action:

Though the occasion for possession [of a woman] is ready to hand, he scouts out everything, often casting his eyes in different directions, careless of justice but anxious for his reputation, he blushes at the attestation of his sin, who feels no shame at the sin. And if by chance he should recognize that someone has witnessed his crime, shame restrains his intemperance.... How much more, if he lifts up the eyes of his mind and considers that everything is full of angels: air, earth, sea, and the churches, over which angels preside – for the Lord sends his angels for the defense of those who shall be heirs to the heavenly promises – is he able to renounce the sin he has planned! Whence comes this crowd of the blameless, if not from among those sinners? The nature is the same, but the discipline is different. [Astonishingly perceptive statement!] Circumcision is nothing, Gentile is nothing,³² but the observance of the commandments of God augment the grace of nature itself.

³¹ Si quis ergo in uia ambulat, scrutetur testimonia domini. quod licet mysticum sit, tamen etiam moralia in se habet, quoniam melius potest ambulare in uia, qui scrutatur domini testimonia (*Exp.* 1.9.8-10).

³² nam ut quis intemperantissimus, captus adulterinae cupiditatis aestu et uictus libidine uel indulgens flagitiis, qui repugnare nolit adpetentiae suae carnis, conuersus huc atque illuc; si neminem forte uideat, in facinus ruit, idem tamen quamuis parata occasione potiendi, explorat diligenter omnia, in diuersum oculos suos incuriosus iustitiae, sollicitus famae detorquet frequenter, erubescit testimonium erroris, qui non erubescit errorem, ac si quem forte

Once again Ambrose insists that the blameless, who walk in the Law, and sinners come from the same source. Though the particular example is the sin of lust, the real argument is about appearances: who sees what? There are Christians in his church who, like the Pharisees, are clean on the outside but sordid within; they think no one sees them, not even God, but in reality are wholly exposed. The angels, God, and the bishop all see.

In the following paragraphs (10-12), Ambrose begins to ask direct questions. He addresses the adulterer personally, using the second person singular, and his questions require a “yes” or “no” answer. He is warming up to a judicial *interrogatio*, in which the prosecutor asks a series of questions which the accused, or witness brought forward by the accused, must answer and his only options are “yes” or “no.”³³ It is a particularly intense moment during a trial, in which the questioner seeks damning evidence. Ambrose begins: “Would you not fear the presence of the angels, if you believed they were present? Would you not fear not only to act but even to speak or to think anything depraved? You fear if a man is present, do you not fear the presence of God the Father and the Son?” He continues:

But you do not wish to believe, lest you should find yourself able to beware. You do not wish to hear, though we read in Scripture that God knows the secrets of men (Ps.43:22).... You are like a blind man who, surrounded by a crowd, thinks he is alone and begins to perpetrate what he thinks is secret.... Do not think that you sin without a witness because you have avoided the presence of men. Those who accuse you are more

spectatorem cognouerit facinoris sui, uerecundia sequestrat intemperantiam et, quamuis cum ancilla uel meretrice uulgari, ubi nullum sit deprehendendi periculum, temptamenta molitur libidinis, pudore tamen inceptum deserit, quanto magis, si quis alleuet mentis oculos et consideret plena esse angelorum omnia, aera, terras, mare, ecclesias, quibus angeli praesunt – mittit enim dominus angelos suos ad defensionem eorum, qui heredes futuri sunt promissorum caelestium – concepto potest renuntiare peccato! unde ista turba innocentium, nisi ex illis peccatoribus? eadem natura est omnium, sed diuersa disciplina. circumcisio nihil est et gentilitas nihil est, sed observatio mandatorum dei naturae ipsius auget gratiam. (an) merita commutat ille, qui dicit: tenebrae in circuitu, et parietes me operiunt; peccatorum meorum non erit memor altissimus? (*Exp.*1.9).

³³ Lausberg, 354. *respondebit enim, quae nocere causae non arbilrabitur; ex pluribus deinde, quae confessus erit, eo perducetur, ut quod dicere non vult negare non possit;* (Quintillian, *Inst.*5.7.15). See also Lausberg, 766 ff.

numerous than those you can avoid. Your own accuser you cannot avoid, your conscience.³⁴

Ambrose's finesse in this paragraph is remarkable. Not only does he understand the subtle play of conscience in the face of temptation – one knows deep inside that if one sees enough, one may have the courage to resist, so it is better not to believe in order not to need to resist – but he also nails the sinner with the one totally inescapable witness, his own interior conscience.

Now that Ambrose has lifted the veil on the inward secrets of his sinner's conscience, he presents at 11 the positive side of this interior world. He reminds him of the story of the prophet Elisha who, during the Assyrian siege, saw that angelic armies of God were protecting the city. His servant could not see them and was afraid until Elisha prayed and the servant's eyes were opened (4Kings.6:15-17). Ambrose then addresses the sinner and says that Christ the bridegroom stands before him asking to enter:

Lift up the eyes of your mind and see not only the angels but also the Lord, who says to you, "Open to me, my Sister, my Love" (Sg.5:2). He knocks at the door when you are asleep; if, however, once you are awake, you watch, or once called, you open the door of your heart, he will enter. But if you flee the prophetic reading; if you do not read at home and you do not wish to listen in the church, will you not be like him who turns a blind eye, lest he see what he could see...? For when you come to church and assert that you are a Christian, you appear to be in good health. You open your eyes, by which you can see, but as you pretend to listen to what is read, you close [your eyes], lest you see yourself. Even if to others you appear to see, you cover with hands of perfidy and intemperance the eyes of your soul and you instill into your heart a blindness that is worse

³⁴ Non reueritus esses angelorum praesentiam, si praesentes esse crederes? non metueres non dicam facere, sed loqui aut etiam cogitare quod prauum est, si tibi scriptura diuina suasisset, quia deus cogitationum arbiter, secretorum testis est uerax, sicut ipse ait: *estote mihi testes, et ego testis, dicit dominus deus, et puer meus quem elegi*? (Is.43:10). hominem uereris praesentem, dei patris et filii non uereris praesentiam? sed non uis credere, ne possis cauere; non uis audire, cum legitur, quia deus nouit occulta hominum (Ps.43:22), ne incipias scire quod timeas et timere ne pecces. audi ergo scripturam diuinam, ut conuertaris a uia praua et maligna. noli, sicut caecus oculis corporalibus aut sicut surdus, qui eo, quod non potest uidere aut audire praesentes, solum esse se credit et in plurimorum coetu, dum putat nullum esse praesentem, perpetrare adoritur quod arbitrator esse secretum - non enim potest uidentes uidere qui non uidet -, similiter et tu mentis caecatus oculis noli aestimare quod sine teste delinquas, quia hominis praesentiam declinare potuisti; plures sunt qui redarguant quam quos cauere potuisti. ipsum te fugere tui accusatorem non potes, quem conuenit propria conscientia, et si negas aliis, tibi non negas, et si homini infitiaris, deo fateris, et si uolueris negare, tuae cogitationes reuincunt (*Exp.1.10*).

because it is voluntary, that seeing you may not see and hearing you may not hear (Mt.13:13).³⁵

So the adulterer in his sleep of sin is also the bride! He has but to hear the knock and open, to read and to listen, in order to join the company of the blameless and claim his true title [of bride]. There is a note of pathos in this paragraph. The adulterer is a man of good standing at church. He looks wholesome but he is willfully blind and the bishop knows the sad truth. Ambrose holds out a sympathetic hand: in paragraph 11, he appeals to the deepest interior recesses of his heart. In this way he “softens him up,” so that he may punch him all the harder in paragraph 12. It is a biting, formal *interrogatio* with eight questions in one short paragraph and two more in paragraph 13.³⁶ No one need reply, of course, but it must have been a great display. At the end of paragraph 12 Ambrose asks the question mentioned earlier. Though there are no verbs in it, we

³⁵ Heliseo adsistebant angeli quos uidebat, et ideo agmina hostium non timebat; sed timebat puer eius, qui angelos non uidebat. aperuit oculos eius ad uocem prophetae gratia dei, uidit angelorum exercitus et credidit esse praesentes, quos antea, quia non uidebat putabat absentes. et tu lege prophetam, ut uideas, lege, ut aperiat oculos tuos, ne te hostilis legio perterreat et obsessum esse te credas qui liber es, qui munitus es spiritalibus turmis, si prophetam non derelinquas. cum tibi propheta loquitur, quia deus dixit: *ego caelum et terram compleo*, cum tibi propheta dicit: quia plures nobiscum sunt, quia in circuitu nostro angeli sunt, attolle oculos mentis et uidebis non solum angelos, sed etiam deum, qui dicat tibi: *aperi mihi, soror mea, proxima mea*. pulsat ad ianuam et quando tu dormis; si tamen uel excitatus euigiles uel uocatus ianuam tui pectoris aperias, introibit. quodsi fugias lectionem propheticam, si domi non legas, in ecclesia audire nolis, nonne, sicut ille, qui auerso coniuet obtutu, ne uideat quod possit uidere claudit oculos, ne aspiciat, cui potestas uidendi est, aut sicut in furore plerique iniicere manus oculis suis, ita et tu primo auerteris coniuenti magis dissimulatione quam refragatione praerupta? nam cum ad ecclesiam uenis et christianum te adseris, sanus uideris, aperis oculos, quibus possis uidere; sed dum audire dissimulas quae leguntur claudis, ne uideas tibi, etsi aliis uidere uideris, incis etiam quasdam perfidiae et intemperantiae manus oculis animae tuae et caecitatem infers cordi tuo, quod est grauius, uoluntariam, ut uidens non uideas, audiens non audias (*Exp. 1.11*).

³⁶ Putas te solum esse, cum fornicaris, et non recordaris quia oculi domini uident orbem terrarum? non audis dicentem: *eece uenit hora, ut dispergamini unusquisque in sua et me solum relinquatis; sed non sum solus, qui a pater mecum est?* (Jn.16:32). adest ergo pater, adest et filius dei, adsunt ministri, adsunt Cherubim et Seraphim, quae dicunt: *sanctus sanctus sanctus, plena est terra maiestatis tuae* (Is.6.3). plenus est mundus sanctarum uirtutum, quia plenus est nequitiarum; plenus est orbis terrarum remediis, quia plenus est laqueis. putas quod III lupanari Chnsti te non uideat, quem uidet lupanar intrare? putas quod in adulteno te non deprehendat, quem uidet adulterium cogitantem? num parietes refugit, qui spectat errores, et secretum criminis auersatur, qui scenam criminis intuetur? an putas tunc primum te intrare meritorum, cum fornicem meretricis ingrederis? intrasti iam, quando cogitationes tuas meretrix introiuit, intrasti iam, quando ad potiendae prostibulae cupiditatem gressu mentis intrasti, pulsasti lupanaris fores, quando ad mulieris concupiscendae decorem oculos mentis aperuisti. et si uerum audire uis, quomodo te in lupanari non uidit Christus, quando te uidit, quia adulterando in corde tuo te ipsum lupanar esse fecisti? denique ipse dicit dominus Iesus: *qui uide rit mulierem ad concupisceendum eam iam adulterauit eam in corde suo* (Mt.5:28). unde tamem tam religiosus in opinione, qui tam probrosus in crimine? (*Exp. Ps.118.1.12*).

see now from the context that it is a direct address: “How can you be so pious in your opinions, you who are so base in your sin?”

Ambrose concludes his address to the adulterer, in paragraph 13, with the reflection that the devil and his angels also see him when he sins. They are the ones who drive him into sin. Yet there is no point in passing the blame off onto them; Eve tried the same excuse and she was still held responsible.³⁷ The act of adultery, therefore, is not only wrong; but the rationalizing, emotional road to it is pure delusion.

It seems to me that this section of the homily is extraordinary in the extent to which Ambrose has probed – within the context of fourth-century exegesis – the psychology of the struggle for moral integrity. It is not a simple question of moral preparation (Ps.118:1) followed by mystical insight (Ps.118:2). In this regard, a clear distinction between x and y is schematic; Ambrose repeated often that the moral and mystical aspects of life, as of Scripture, are complementary because he saw that the reality of spiritual growth is complex. The moral preparation easily goes awry, as in the case of the adulterer who, in some sense, as a Christian in good standing, had set out on the road to perfection. He still comes to church every Sunday and looks fine. Somehow, though, the lessons from Scripture do not “take,” they do not make him blameless. The adulterer is adept at keeping up appearances but is caught in a web of sin. Is there a note of frustration in Ambrose’s final question of paragraph 12, mentioned above? The adulterer’s sin is

³⁷ Sed adquiesco tibi, quod Iesus te nolit uidere, nolit reuincere qui nolit accusare, nolint uidere et angeli; sed uidet diabolus qui tecum introiuit, immo qui te introduxit. uident ministri eius qui te circumdederunt, ne uideres angelos dei, uidet Belial, uidet legio, qui te inpulerunt, ne quis reuocaret, ne quis teneret. noli putare, quod concludium tibi praestet silentii, qui uult tecum supplicii habere consortium. studet plures similes sui uidere et in eo habet gloriam, quod plures perditos fecerit. ipse est incentor, ipse accusator; ipse in ludam introiuit, ipse eum ad prodicionem impulit, ipse misit ad laqueum. quanti dicturi sunt in illo die aduersus eum: “tu nos circumuenisti, tu inpulisti!” exemplum quaeris? accipe dicentem Euam praeuaricationis suae auctorem fuisse serpentem. sed illum implicauit, non se absoluit, cui respondit dominus: “non praeceperam, ne gustaretis de ligno solo, quod est in medio paradiso?” respondebit ergo et pluribus: “diabolum audistis suadentem noxia; me non potuistis audire uitalia mandantem?” (*Exp.P.118.1.13*)

partly his fault, because “hearing, he does not hear”; but Ambrose knows how difficult it is to get out of that trap. This is why, I think, he goes back and forth between threats and hard questions, on the one hand, and an astonishingly tender invitation from Christ: “Open to me, my Sister, my Love” (Sg.5:2), on the other. This is also why Ambrose assures his audience that the bride comes from the ranks of sinners.

So I think Ambrose has recourse to the *Song of Songs* in part, at least, because he knows that no amount of preaching or listening to Scripture can convert someone like the adulterer of this homily. The only bait strong enough to pull him out of the web of sensual pleasure is a higher love, one that is as intense but more satisfying because it appeals to his innate desire for true goodness and beauty.³⁸ It is this love that the *Song of Songs* encapsulates. Ambrose knew, I think, by personal experience the draw of that love. This is why he insists that the worst sinners are only the sleeping bride. The *Song* was a tool in the hand of a bishop who presided over a church that had become mainstream and sophisticated. In the basilica that was frequented by members of the imperial bureaucracy, where being a Christian was becoming a political advantage, the need for a conversion beyond the appearances may have seemed a heavy responsibility for the bishop.

³⁸ If I may be permitted a somewhat fanciful digression, I would like to mention Augustine. Yes, he is intelligent and perceptive beyond the ordinary, but his actions until the time of his conversion seem to have been thoroughly conventional. He was on the threshold of conversion, Monica had arranged a good marriage for him, his concubine had returned to Africa. Augustine, however, could not wait for marriage and so he finds a new concubine, she is a side-number to an otherwise high-level life. I am not suggesting that Ambrose was speaking to Augustine in this homily but only that variations on Augustine’s theme must have been fairly ordinary occurrences in Milan. Further, Ambrose was too shrewd a rhetorician to make an appeal with arguments that had no hope of success. In this homily he appeals to the disgust of sin, the fresh loveliness of purity, to the interior judge of conscience, to the tender love of Christ ready to overcome all odds. All of these themes we see in Augustine. Again, not that Ambrose was speaking to Augustine here: but the resonances of this homily and the resonances of the *Confessions* fit. In the on-going discussion about how much influence Ambrose might have had on Augustine, it seems to me that on one level there was simply contact. Of two men in the complexities of their lives, one passed on to the other the life experience, the challenges, the probing of morality, the liberating joy of the spiritual life. This can easily happen over the course of a few Sunday sermons. It is an imprint that Augustine would have taken back with him to Africa.

THE LAST SIX VERSES OF STANZA 1 (14-19)

As we said earlier, Ambrose generally develops his commentary around one or two significant verses of a stanza. The rest receive summary treatment; they may or may not fit into a unified commentary of the stanza as a whole. In paragraphs 4-13 Ambrose has commented on verses one and two only of stanza one. In paragraphs 14-19 he comments on the remaining six verses, which in this stanza do actually fit into the manifold picture of the Church Ambrose has developed. After the last irrefutable question of paragraph 13 – in which God says to Eve, “You listened to the devil persuading you for [your] harm; were you not able to listen to me commanding you for life?”³⁹ – Ambrose lists the next four verses of the psalm (vv. 3-6). Then, he zeroes in on the *nimis* (exceedingly, very much) of verses 4: “You have commanded your precepts to be kept with exceeding care (*nimis*).” In Paradise God gave a commandment to Adam but perhaps God did not add the “*nimis*” and so Adam fell, thinking he could keep some commands but not others. Failing in one command, however, caused him to leave the right way; the serpent found him *extra viam* and robbed him of everything, leaving him naked. God, therefore, instructed Adam through the Law, the prophets, the Gospel and the apostles – again, the long process of education – to keep every aspect of the law. Ambrose then returns to direct address: “If while walking on the roadway you are hardly safe from a robber, what will you do if he finds you wandering off the track?... Pray that the Lord may direct your ways.” This leads to verse 5: “O that my ways may be steadfast in the keeping your statutes!” and then to six: “Then I shall not be put to shame as I gaze upon all your commandments.” Still in direct address, Ambrose continues: In Adam and Eve you were naked, you covered yourself with foliage because you were ashamed,

³⁹ diabolum audistis suadentem noxia; me non potuistis audire uitalia mandantem? (*Exp.* 1.13)

and you hid. God said “Adam, where are you?” “When he says it to him, he says it to you” (*cum illi dicit, tibi dicit*). This is a typical Ambrosian ploy: if anyone is dozing, he will wake at the remark, “Yes, you!” There is no use in obeying one command but disobeying another. If one has refrained from murder but is convicted of adultery – Ambrose is still on the charge – even the secular laws will condemn him.

In his commentary on verses seven and eight, the last two of the stanza, Ambrose returns to a more serene, larger view of the Christian life. Characteristically, he develops this view in terms of the bride of the *Song of Songs*. This development ties the final paragraphs back to the earlier descriptions of the bride undergoing the long process of conversion and preparation. Here we have the happy ending: she marries the bridegroom and begins her new life. To the dilemma posed by the adulterer, the man of appearances, the only real solution is to enter fully into the life of the bride.

He begins in paragraph 16 by citing the last two verses, with an interpolation like the personal comment we saw above:

“I will praise you, Lord, in the right way of the heart” – do you see the ways you are to steer? – “when I have learned the judgments of your justice.

I will guard your precepts; do not utterly forsake me.”⁴⁰

The phrase I have translated as “the right way of the heart” is *in directione cordis*. It is often translated as “with an upright heart.” This is not incorrect, but it obscures somewhat Ambrose’s play on *directio* with *dirigo* and his connection of these with *uias*, all of which tie this verse back to the first verse of the stanza: “Blessed are the blameless in the way” –who steer aright – and

⁴⁰ Confitebor tibi Domine in directione cordis – aduertis quas uias dirigas? – in eo cum didicero iudicia iustitiae tuae. Iustificaciones tuas custodiam, non derelinquas me usquequaque (vv.7-8, with an aside from Ambrose).

“walk in the Law of the Lord.”⁴¹ Though Ambrose predates Cassian, the *directio cordis* here has the same ring as the purity of heart (*puritas cordis*) Abba Moses describes in the *Conferences* as the goal (*scopos*) of the monastic life.⁴² It is the heart the makes a straight line towards the Lord; interestingly, Moses calls deviation from this line a “fornication” against God.⁴³ Ambrose seems to imply in his aside here that the right way of the heart is a deep, habitual formation derived from the divine precepts (*iudicia iustitiae tuae*). The ability to praise the Lord and guard the precepts come from this deep moral formation, though note that the last phrase of the stanza, as of the entire psalm, is a cry for help.

So what are these *iudicia iustitiae*? After citing the last two verses, with the monitory aside, Ambrose focuses on the last half of the first of the two verses: “when I have learned the judgments of your justice.” He says that the psalmist, David, wishes to learn “the judgments of your justice.” But, Ambrose continues, the “judgments” here require a mystical interpretation, even though the logic of the verse would imply that this knowledge is what will allow the psalmist to praise the Lord in the right way of the heart. So clearly, we are still in a tight reciprocal relationship between the moral and mystical interpretations:

At this place [in the psalm] he [David] affirms that he wishes to have a fuller knowledge of mystical teachings, so that he may enter into the interior sanctuary of the heavenly mysteries and so that the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ (Col.2:3) may be revealed to him. Whence Solomon says, “Draw us; we shall run after you in the perfume of your fragrant oils. The king has introduced me into his chamber” (Sg.1:4.)

⁴¹ Beati immaculati in via qui ambulant in lege Domini. Beati qui scrutantur testimonia eius in toto corde exquirent eum (Ps.118:1-2).

⁴² finis quidem nostrae professionis ut diximus regnum dei seu regnum caelorum est, destinatio uero, id est scopos, puritas cordis, sine qua ad illum finem impossibile est quempiam peruenire (Cassian, *Conf.*1.4).

⁴³ Uerum oportet nos seire ubi nostrae mentis intentionem debeamus habere defixam et ad quam destinationem semper animae nostrae reuocemus intuitum: quam cum potuerit obtinere mens, gaudeat et a qua distractam se doleat atque suspiret totiensque se a summo bono sentiat reccidisse, quotiens se ab illo intuitu deprehenderit separatam. *fornicationem* iudicans uel momentaneum Christi contemplatione discessum. A quo cum deuiauerit paululum noster obtutus, rursus ad eum cordis oculos retorquentes uelut *rectissima linea* mentis aciem reuocemus (Cassian, *Conf.*1.13), my italics.

and perhaps what he says above: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Sg.1:1) signifies the grace of the Holy Spirit descending, as the angel said to Mary: “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you.” (Lk.1:35)⁴⁴

Mystical teachings allow the prophet, and the Christian after him, to enter the interior sanctuary, to see the treasures of the wisdom of Christ. The revelation is a kiss, that is a gift of grace from the Holy Spirit, and the interior sanctuary is the king’s nuptial chamber. Without saying so expressly, Ambrose implies that the goal of the mystical teachings is a personal knowledge of Christ, a practical and transformative, rather than an intellectual, knowledge. He continues:

When the king introduces her [the bride of the *Song*] into his chamber, the time of the passion, the piercing of his side, the effusion of blood, the anointing at the sepulcher, the mystery of the resurrection are announced to her, that she may receive the kiss as a betrothed bride. The *Church*, however, [my italics] is introduced into the chamber of Christ no longer as a fiancée but as a married woman; she does not enter the bridal chamber only, but she has received the keys from a legitimate union. And so, as one who dwells in the bridal chamber, she says, “My Love is a sachet of myrrh lying between my breasts.” (Sg.1:12)⁴⁵

In this passage he makes a distinction between the bride of the *Song of Songs*, on the one hand, who is a figure in a prophetic book and to whom the future events of salvation are announced, and the Church, on the other, who is the bride actually married to the king. She holds the keys;

⁴⁴ hoc loco mystica plenius cognoscere se uelle testatur, ut ingrediatur penetralia mysteriorum caelestium et aperiantur sibi thesauri sapientiae et scientiae in Christo abseonditi (Col.2:3). unde et Salomon ait: *adtrahe nos; post te in odore unguentorum tuorum curremus. introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum.* (Sg.1:4) et fortasse illud, quod ait supra: *osculetur me ab osculis oris sui*, significat spiritus sancti superuenientis gratiam, sicut angelus ad Mariam dixit: *spiritus sanctus superueniet in te, et uirtus altissimi obumbrabit tibi* (Lk.1:35) (*Exp.*1.16, 3-12). I translated *penetrable* here as “interior sanctuary” because in classical Latin, the term has sacred, religious connotations; it signifies the interior chamber of a temple; the shrine for the *penates* in a Roman house; and by extension the home itself. Ambrose would have been sensitive to this in his use of the word: in the *De Isaac* (4.11), for example, he uses *penetralia* as an equivalent to *cubiculum* in his explanation of Sg.1:4, also quoted here. A word search in the CLCLT reveals many other similar uses.

⁴⁵ quando autem introduxit eam rex in cubiculum suum, passionis tempus, lateris conpunctio declaratur, sanguinis effusio, sepulturae unguentum, resurrectionis mysterium, ut osculum quasi sponsa acceperit, in cubiculum autem Christi sit introducta ecclesia non iam quasi tantummodo desponsata, sed etiam quasi nupta, nec solum thalamum sit ingressa, sed etiam legitimae clauis copulae consecuta sit. ideoque quasi in thalamo sita ait: *colligatio guttae frater meus mihi, inter media ubera requiescit* (*Exp.*1.16, 12-21).

she alone dwells at length in the nuptial chamber. We have returned to the idea we saw earlier in the first bridal episode of the contrast between the kiss and the actual marriage, now recast into an Old and New Testament contrast. It is the *negotiosum cubiculi secretum* (the secret of the chamber, the permanent engagement, as opposed to the simple kiss).

Ambrose then adds two finishing touches to his image: the bridal chamber is both the private room of every Christian where he or she may pray in secret and the body of Christ from which the Church dispenses through open doors the greatest gifts: the sacraments, true peace, the fact that death is a sleep rather than a total destruction, and the resurrection. This is Ambrose's signature double portrait of the Church. As both a mystical entity comprising the whole of redeemed mankind and as each individual soul in the most private and personal aspects of human nature, symbolized by the room where one prays in secret. This is a large and central idea in Ambrose. It is why the moral and mystical sides of life and of the Scriptures are complementary and both essential. Together they make the composite image.

And if we seek the bridal chamber, he himself teaches us, who says "But you, when you pray, go into your room and closing the door pray to your Father in secret" (Mt.6:6). The chamber of the Church is the Body of Christ. The king introduces her to all the hidden mysteries there, he gives her the keys, so that she may open for herself the treasures of the knowledge of the sacraments, open the doors that used to be shut, and know the grace of rest and tranquility, the sleep of the dead, the power of the resurrection.⁴⁶

Finally, in paragraph 17 Ambrose adds a specific reference to baptism.⁴⁷ It is the married church, who looking around the bridal chamber, found (*repperit*) the justifications of the Lord

⁴⁶ quodsi cubiculum quaerimus, ipse nos edoceat, qui ait: tu autem cum orabis, *intra in cubiculum tuum et clauso ostio ora patrem tuum in abscondito*. cubiculum ecclesiae corpus est Christi; introduxit eam rex in omnia interiora mysteria, dedit ei clauas, ut aperiret sibi thesauros scientiae sacramentorum, clausas ante fores panderet, cognosceret quietis gratiam, defuncti somnum, uirtutem resurrectionis (*Exp.* 1.16, 21-8).

⁴⁷ In illo cubiculo iustitias domini Iesu nupta repperit. quae sunt illae iustitiae? utique sacramenta baptismatis, sicut legimus, quia, cum uenienti ad baptismum diceret Iohannes: *ego a te debeo baptizari, et tu uenis ad me?* (Mt.3:14), respondit Iesus: *sine modo; sic enim decet nos implere omnem iustitiam* (Mt.3:15). in illo cubiculo iustificationes

(*iudicia iustiae tuae*). These justifications consist in two treasures: baptism (*sacramenta baptismatis*) and the counsel of God (*consilium Dei*). Ambrose alludes here to the verdict on John's baptism mentioned in the Gospel. Jesus is praising John, and Luke describes the reactions of the crowd:

When they heard this all the people and the tax collectors justified God [*iustificaciones*], having been baptized with the baptism of John; but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God [*consilium Dei*] for themselves, not having been baptized by him. (Lk.7:29-30)

What is the relation here between baptism and the “counsel of God”? Each has both a mystical and moral side. The Pharisees placed themselves outside of the counsel of God by refusing John's baptism, and so they lost the divine remedy for moral failure. “Let us follow the counsel of God, for nothing can be more sublime; for this thing is divine, by which the remission of sins is accomplished.” Again, the sacraments, the Church, and the life of Christians in the Church are inseparable for Ambrose.

In these paragraphs (16 and 17) there has been a progression in which one figure and image after another is added to a manifold picture: from David, to the bride of the *Song*, with an assimilation of the Virgin Mary to her, to the prophetic announcement of the events of salvation given as betrothal gifts to the bride, to the Church who is the fulfillment of the prophetic bride who dwells definitively in the bridal chamber, and finally to the Christian who seeks the bridal chamber, where he or she finds Christ and the Church, the dispenser of his gifts. It is a complex, simultaneous build-up of prophetic figure, realization of the figure, and the actualization of the

didicit, consilium dei cognovit, sicut scriptum est, quia *omnis populus audiens et publicani iustificauerunt deum, baptizati baptismo Iohannis; Pharisei autem et legis periti consilium dei spreuerunt in se, non baptizati ab eo* (Lk.7:29-30). quod illi spreuerunt, nos elegimus et sequimur consilium dei, quia nihil potest esse sublimius; hoc enim diuinum, quo fit remissio peccatorum. cum didicerit itaque iustitias domini, deum timens non confundetur. denique et Paulus ait: *in nullo confundar* (Phil.1:20) (Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. 118.1.17*).

figure in the *hic et nunc* of life in the Church. This is yet another example of Ambrose's intensely polyvalent grasp of the fullness of divine revelation.⁴⁸

The last two paragraphs are a commentary on the final prayer of the stanza: "Do not forsake me utterly." With characteristic balance – in every sense – Ambrose concludes that no one should presume that he will never be forsaken, nor should he grieve that he may sometime be forsaken. Christ himself was forsaken on the cross, but not utterly forsaken, since he knew no corruption and rose again. The *Song of Songs* does not come into these final paragraphs.

CONCLUSION

In the first stanza of the *Expositio*, the bride of the *Song of Songs* is a metaphor for the totality of the mystery of salvation. Betrothed in Paradise, brazen in sin, repentant, and finally united to Christ, she, as *caro* (flesh), represents the itinerary of the Church at large and of every Christian. Ambrose presents life in the Church under the banner of the bride as the richer, sweeter, more beautiful counterpart to the life of mere human and sensual pleasure. The sexual disorder that results from a life given to sensual pleasure is both ugly and delusional, compared to the life of those who are blameless and walk in the Law of the Lord. Yet, the blameless have all come from the ranks of sinners, if not in actual fact at least by their birthright as *caro*. The bridegroom, however, knocks at the door even of the most hardened sinner; "she" has only to awake and open the door, in order to become the spotless bride. The process of awakening can be difficult, especially for those who are already compromised, looking for excuses, even if adept at keeping up appearances. It is accomplished primarily through the sacraments and the

⁴⁸ We cannot separate out these levels; they are not meant to be separated. The moral level is there and the mystical, but one cannot say one is here, the other is there. This is a profoundly contemplative, mystical view of spiritual reality.

reading of Scripture, but an important part of this reading is listening to the readings in Church in the context of the liturgical service and, though Ambrose does not mention it, listening to the sermon! After working through the difficult case of the Christian who frequents the services but lives in sin – the classic challenge in the Christianizing of a city – Ambrose turns, in the final sections of the stanza, to a celebration of the marriage of the Church and describes her life in the bridal chamber. This chamber is not only the dwelling of the mystical bride with the bridegroom; it is the private room of each Christian where he prays in secret, it is the baptistery, the basilica where both the liturgy is celebrated and the Scriptures read. Finally, in the last scene we have an image of Ambrose's bride looking around the bridal chamber to see what she can find: the image is of a young bride setting up house in her new home. So by implication the chamber is the ordinary life of Christians, which Ambrose has blessed in a sense by taking it up into his unified, spiritual vision of the whole of Christian life under the metaphor of the bride. The weight of the pulley is now at the bottom; but the fact that Ambrose began with a leisurely description of a young Roman virgin waiting for her betrothed and then ended with the suggestion of another homely image makes wholesome ordinary human love significant as the conceptual base of everything else.

The *Song of Songs* is of immediate and practical use to Ambrose. It is an evocative image that speaks more effectively than unadorned moral exhortation to a large and diverse congregation. With it he appeals to the hearts as well as the minds of his congregation, to make them aware of a higher spiritual life. Ambrose is not asking for renunciation but for right order, what he calls *disciplina*, so that without abandoning the normal course of life, which normally includes marriage and family, one may enter into the spiritual marriage and life of the ecclesial bride.

CHAPTER THREE

STANZA ELEVEN (*CAPH*): FAINTING WITH DESIRE

INTRODUCTION

Just as in the first stanza Ambrose “spoke” Scripture in his own words, here he speaks the classical authors. By his allusions to the tradition handed down from the Comedians, Ovid, Vergil, and to a lesser extent Cicero, he creates a synthesis that reveals much about himself and his audience. He was at the center of Roman power and culture in the late fourth century. He was educated into it and, though he moved to the Northern cities of the Empire, he never left the environment. Once a bishop, he preached to the same class to which he had belonged as a layman. We saw in part two that the *De Bono Mortis* could be understood, on the one hand, by those who had no real acquaintance with Platonism as a preparation for death; but, on the other hand, for those with a serious interest in Platonic philosophy, there was a subtext that challenged their varying degrees of either opposition to or interest in the Christian Church. Here also, one may understand stanza 11 with no prior initiation into the classics. With that initiation, however, a charming lesson opens in which Roman literary culture is assimilated into a higher Biblical meta-culture, if I may use this term. Anna (the mother of Tobias) and David stand side by side with Phyllis and Dido (both unnamed) as exemplars of desire and longing. The most striking point in this synthesis is the ease and simplicity with which Ambrose moves between Scripture and the classics. It seems as if, for Ambrose and we may suppose for his audience as well, it was

a totally natural move, though by no means unconscious or unintentional. In an essay aptly entitled, “Doing What Comes Naturally? Vergil and Ambrose,” Ivor Davidson describes Ambrose’s use of Virgil:

As Ambrose sees it, the lingering charm of poetic language and imagery is a natural thing for the educated Christian mind; but it deserves to be handled with a light touch as something that is part of an assured elegance rather than a studied effort to conjure up images that might distract from the supremacy of biblical themes.¹

This statement implies that Biblical themes reign supreme, with no distracting intrusions from extraneous material. Yet, the assured elegance of the Christian preacher breathes without effort the charm of poetic language and allusion. This is precisely what Ambrose accomplishes in stanza eleven.

There is an additional element, however, that adds both depth and color to Ambrose’s assured elegance here. He engages the tradition of classical love literature (the Comedians, Ovid, Virgil) as a complement to the image of the bride of the *Song of Songs*. So the question emerges: are the allusions to classical love poetry charming ornament, or do they enter into the essential message of stanza 11? And if they are part of the essential message, how do they contribute to the Biblical themes? One aspect of the answers to these questions comes from Ivor Davidson himself later in the same essay. Addressing the question mark in his title, he says that Virgil was a useful tool for Ambrose, perhaps even a necessary one, as he strove to straddle two worlds and to synthesize his ideal of a Christian economy with a Roman, classical past:

We must not be misled by the casualness of Ambrose’s evocation into concluding that his use of Vergil is of only superficial or formal significance to his message, or that it is marked by a lack of creativity.... Of course Vergil gives great texture to Ambrose’s style, contributes much to the honing of the poetic talent that made Ambrose’s own spiritual

¹ Ivor Davidson, “Doing What Comes Naturally? Vergil and Ambrose,” in *Romane Memento: Vergil in the Fourth Century*, ed. Roger Rees (London: Duckworth, 2004), 99.

verse such a powerful medium in his church's liturgy (and such a great influence on subsequent hymnody in the West)... But Vergil imparts far more than art, ornamental *color poeticus*. In so far as Ambrose operates at the interface of two worlds, Vergil provides a vital element in his intellectual capital. Ambrose is able to present his vision of a Christian future in terms that resonate suggestively with elements of the classical past; yet, by dramatically altering the contexts in which the classical verse appears and by ensuring its strict subordination to scriptural categories, he can contend that the arrival of this future involves a present acknowledgement that the past really *is* past. If it is natural to echo Vergil; it is natural also to insist that Vergil's realm has now become the kingdom of the one God and of his Christ.²

Davidson implies a double action: enhancing the Biblical text with Virgil and in the very process assuring that Virgil is both preserved and past. Davidson does not overstate the case. In 392, for example, when Ambrose delivered the funeral oration for the young Valentinian II, he evoked in a deliberate manner the dead Marcellus as he is presented at Aeneid 6.883-5; he fully exploits the pathos of Vergil's account of strewing lilies and flowers on Marcellus' tomb. Who could miss the association between the young Marcellus and Valentinian? Yet then Ambrose replaced the lilies of Rome with the perfume of Christ, the true lily from the *Song of Songs*. Though it may seem like a daring move, it leaves Vergil wholly intact as a treasured classic.

The same double action occurs in stanza 11 where Vergil and Scripture both serve the same end. In this Ambrose differs considerably from Jerome and Augustine. Where Jerome felt a personal need to distance himself from the pagan classics, in theory at least, Ambrose was at home. Augustine also had a self-consciousness and an unease in his own engagement with the classics absent from Ambrose. He laments his boyhood love for Dido and states in the *De doctrina christiana* that Scripture suffices for the formation of the Christian orator.³ Yet the *De civitate dei* is filled with allusions to classical authors. Of course differences between these men

² Davidson, "Doing," 107-8.

³ See also Davidson, "Doing," 97-8.

arose from other forces as well. Jerome – writing well within Ambrose’s lifetime – set himself up as a model of asceticism as he recounted (with considerable flourish) his famous vision in which God chastised him for being a Ciceronian: it was a public letter to the young Eustochium, who was embracing the ascetical life. Augustine wrote a generation later, from the provinces and, in later years, after the sack of Rome. Ambrose, in the “sunny,” relatively stable years of the 380s and at Milan, could engage his Vergilian “light touch,” much as Damasus would in Rome. Cicero, Ovid, the Comedians, and others, in addition to Virgil, were still the natural accoutrements of a well-ordered mind not only for Ambrose but also for his audience. No apologies or justifications were required.

Consistent with his procedure throughout the commentary, Ambrose begins stanza 11 with an explanation of the name *Caph*. In Latin, he says, it means *curvati sunt*, “they are bent over.” In paragraphs one and two he shows how this signification fits with the present stanza of the psalm; and he links it to the *Lamentations* of Jeremiah, another alphabetical text, to show that the verses there beginning with the same Hebrew letter also fit this interpretation of *Caph*. In paragraph three he begins his commentary on the first verse of stanza 11 (Ps.118: 81). Paragraphs 3-6 cover verse 81; 7-12 cover 82. This constitutes about one third of the commentary on 11. These are the paragraphs that concern us here. Paragraphs 13-29 cover the remaining six verses (Ps.118:83-9). The first two verses of stanza 11 are:

My soul has languished for your salvation and I have hoped in your word (*verbum*)
My eyes have languished with longing for your declaration (*eloquium*), saying, “When
will you comfort me?”⁴

⁴ Defecit in salutare tuum anima mea; in uerbum tuum speravi. Defecerunt oculi mei in eloquium tuum dicentes, “Quando consolaberis me?” (Ps.118:81-2). *Eloquium* is usually translated into English as “promise,” a declaration that brings hope and consolation. See Augustine below.

The same Latin verb, *deficere*, occurs in both verses, though in 81 the subject is “soul,” in 82 “eyes.” From verse 82 the question arises: how can eyes long for a spoken word? In most modern English Bibles, the term for which Ambrose’s Bible gave *eloquium* is translated as “promise.”⁵ The Latin *eloquium* signifies a word spoken, utterance; a pronouncement.

AMBROSE’S SOURCES

Before analyzing Ambrose’s text, I would like to look briefly at the texts of other commentators whom Ambrose probably read or, as in the case of Augustine, who may have read Ambrose. Many of the observations of these commentators appear in Ambrose’s text. But, in particular, since the verb *deficere*, as it is used in verses 81-2, has an obvious affective quality, it is interesting to see how the different commentators handle the emotional element. I think their comments highlight both Ambrose’s originality and the audience he targeted. In the Palestinian *Catena*, Origen places himself immediately in the context of spiritual longing for the Word and Didymus gives a wholly metaphysical, allegorical interpretation. Augustine, on the other hand, examines the meaning of the word *deficere*, in order to place it in the right spiritual context. Hilary has a brief philosophical discussion of the affective sense of *deficio*. He was perhaps the immediate source of inspiration for Ambrose.

The *Catena* on Psalm 118, verse 81:⁶

1. Origen: Since your Word has announced to me your salvation and the goods that come from it, I languish with desire, exhausted by the strength of my yearning (ὀρεξίς). I am wholly attached to the object of my desire, Jesus Christ, whose name signifies “salvation.”

⁵ The old King James version has: “Mine eyes fail for thy word” (Ps.118:82).

⁶ Harl, *Chaine* 1, 320-1. Again, the texts found in the *Catena* represent excerpts only. Ambrose may have had access to the original texts from which the *Catena* was taken.

2. Eusebius and Athanasius dodge the bullet, focusing instead on the second half of the verse.
3. Didymus: the soul “languishes for the salvation” of God [not when she seeks but] when she attains the object of her faith. Then, she is no longer “soul,” since she abandons the state by which she became a soul, that is attachment to a body. She becomes “spirit” and “intellect.”

The *Catena* on verse 82:⁷

1. Origen: My eyes, that is those of my soul, languish for your teachings, since they look for him: when will he approach, when will he appear? When one of us applies his mind to the Scriptures, to understand a text, without yet understanding it, he is, as it were, awaiting the coming of the Word and his arrival. In his intellect he sees him far off, indistinctly; the clearer he sees, the closer the Word comes, that is the Truth. When the Word comes to dwell within him, he will be consoled.
2. Athanasius: again, he has no comment for the first half of the verse. With regard to the second, he says that the psalmist is speaking of Christ: he is our consoler in the presence of the Father

Augustine:

1. Verse 81: Not every languishing or deficiency (*defectus*) should be imputed to a fault or penalty. There is also a praiseworthy and desirable *defectus*. For given that these two are contraries: *proficere* and *deficere*, when no indication of that with regard to which something is proficient or deficient is specified or understood, *profectus* is usually taken to be for the good, *defectus* for evil. When, however, something is added, *proficere* can tend to evil and *deficere* to good. [He gives examples from Scripture]. Here *deficio* is good: the psalmist is languishing for God’s salvation. This languishing signifies a desire for a good not yet attained but most avidly and vehemently desired. Who says this if not the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation (1Pet.2:9) from the beginning of the human race to the end of this world, in those who, each in his own time, have lived, live, and will live in this world desiring Christ? [He gives examples from the Old and New Testaments]. “Verbum” [in the second half of the verse] means “promise”; what hope brings, so that what is not seen may be expected by the faithful with patience (Rom.8:25; Heb.11:1)⁸

⁷ Harl, *Chaine* 1, 322-3.

⁸ Non omnis defectus uel culpa putandus est esse, uel poenae; est etiam defectus laudabilis uel optabilis. Nam cum sint inter se duo ista contraria, proficere et deficere, usitatus profectus in bono accipitur, defectus in malo, quando non additur uel subintelligitur in quid proficiatur uel deficiatur; cum uero additur, potest et malum esse proficere, bonumque deficere.... Sic et hic non ait : “Defecit a salutari tuo,” sed *Defecit in salutare tuum*, hoc est, ad salutare tuum, *anima mea*. Bonus est ergo iste defectus : indicat enim desiderium boni, nondum quidem adepti, sed audissimè ac uehementissimè concupiti. Sed quis hoc dicit nisi genus electum, regale sacerdotium, gens sancta, populus acquisitionis, ab origine generis humani usque ad huius saeculi finem, in eis qui suo quique tempore hic uixerunt, uiuunt, uicturi sunt, desiderans Christum?... *et in uerbum tuum speravi*: hoc est in promissum; quae spes facit ut per patientiam exspectetur quod a credentibus non uidetur (Augustine, *In Ps.118:81*)

2. Verse 82: the eyes are interior. This languishing of the eyes is happy and praiseworthy, because it comes not from weakness of soul but from the strength of desire for the promise of God. How can eyes languish for the word (*eloquium*) of God? A desire for prayer is the voice of the [interior] eyes.⁹

Hilary:

1. Verse 81: it is a property of human nature, when we cannot obtain what we desire, to be seized with a languishing of the soul out of an unrelenting passion of desire. And this is easy to recognize just from the reactions that come from our emotional state: the extent to which we are reduced to weakness of soul by the expectation of those whom we desire. The prophet, therefore, for whom God is the whole of his expectation, whose whole desire is in his commandments, declares, saying, “My soul has languished for your salvation.” Nothing else occupies his desire, and [in any event] the passion of a saint has no leisure for secular affairs. He languishes, therefore, out of a desire for salvation, and he languishes on account of the fact that he believes in the words of God. The salvation he longs for is Christ, whose name means “salvation.”...but we must understand what follows the languishing of the desiring soul.¹⁰
2. Verse 82: [what follows is:] My eyes have languished with longing for your declaration (*eloquium*) and they ask, “When will you encourage me” (v.82; Hilary’s Latin had *exhortatio*). Languishing of the eyes follows languishing of the soul. Just as we have considered the languishing of the soul, let us see what sort of languishing commonly belongs to the eyes. Imagine, therefore, a wife awaiting [the return] of her husband away on a trip, or a father awaiting the return of a long absent son, whom he expects to return at any moment. Will he not always be on the lookout on the route by which he expects him to come? The concentration and gaze of his eyes: will it not languish through anticipation of the mere sight of him? The Lord testifies that these were the desires of the prophets when he says, “Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you

⁹ Ecce rursus in oculis, sed utique interioribus, laudabilis et felix ille defectus, non ueniens ex infirmitate animi, sed ex fortitudine desiderii in promissum Dei; hoc enim ait: *in eloquium tuum*. Quomodo autem tales oculi dicunt: *Quando consolaberis me*, nisi cum tali intentione et exspectatione oratur et gemitur? Lingua enim loqui, non oculi solent; sed oculorum quodammodo uox est desiderium orationis (Augustine, *In Ps.118*, 82).

¹⁰ Naturae humanae est, ut, cum id quod desiderat non potest obtinere, per desiderii iugem cupiditatem animi defectione teneatur. Et hoc nosse ex ipsis adfectionis nostrae motibus promptum est, in quantam animi defectionem eorum quos desideramus expectatione redigamur. Propheta itaque, cui omnis ad Deum expectatio est, cui omne in mandatis eius desiderium est, loquitur et dicit: *Defecit in salutare tuum anima mea, et in uerbum tuum spero*. Non habet alia quae desiderium suum occupent, et sancti cupiditas non uacat saeculi rebus. *Defecit* igitur in desiderio *salutaris*, et *defecit* ob id, quia *in uerbis Dei* credat. *Finis enim legis Christus* Iesus est (cf. Rom.10.4) et hic est de quo *scripserunt Moyses et prophetae* (cf. Jn.1:45). Est autem *salutaris* ipso illo nomine quo Iesus nuncupatur. Iesus enim secundum Hebraicam linguam *salutaris* est; et idipsum angelus ad Ioseph loquens docet, cum dicit: *Et uocabis nomen eius Iesum; ipse enim saluum faciet populum suum a peccatis* (Mt.1:21). Causa itaque *defectionis* est desiderium *salutaris*. Desiderii autem hinc origo est, quod in uerbis Dei sperat. *Salutaris* enim noster Iesus est, qui et *desideratus* (Gen.49:26 VUL) et natus est. Sed defectionem animae desiderantis intellegendum est quid sequatur (Hilary of Poitiers, *Tract. in Ps.118.11.1*).

see, and to hear what you hear” (Mt.13:17). So the prophet languished in soul and eyes... but these are not the eyes of the body, but rather the gaze of the mind.¹¹

Where Origen, Didymus, and Augustine move fairly quickly onto a spiritual plane, Hilary takes the time to consider the human emotions that form the conceptual basis for an understanding of *deficio* as it is used by the psalmist. He gives examples from common experience and also points out the logical coherence between the two verses of the psalm: “languishing of the eyes follows languishing of the soul.” Yet there is an interesting tension in both Hilary and Augustine. Augustine thinks he needs to begin by specifying that *deficere*, though usually negative, can in certain contexts have a positive signification. Hilary also makes sure his readers understand that the psalmist has no secular passion mixed in with his languishing for salvation; and so he adds what seems like an cautionary aside: “The passionate desire of a holy man has nothing to do with secular affairs” (*et sancti cupiditas non uacat saeculi rebus*). I do not wish to make too much of these statements of Augustine and Hilary. Both men do, however, seem to think that an emotional ambivalence may surround the idea behind *deficere*. In addition to this, Hilary opens with a philosophical description of languishing. He describes it as a property of human nature, recognizable by physical signs; not attaining the object desired reduces the soul to a state of weakness (*defectus*). Augustine also takes the trouble to point out that the languishing of the psalmist is *not* due to weakness but to strength of desire. Hilary states that

¹¹ *Defecerunt oculi mei in eloquium tuum dicentes : quando exhortaberis me? Sequitur ergo defectionem animae defectio oculorum.* Sed ut de natura *defectionis* animae tractauimus, uideamus qualis *oculorum* soleat esse *defectio*. Pone igitur in expectatione aut peregrinantis uiri coniugem, aut iam diu absentis filii patrem, quem omni in tempore existimet reuersurum; nonne eo itinere, quo venturum opinabitur, semper intendet? Nonne intentio ac uisus *oculorum* contuitionis ipsius expectatione *deficiet*? Desideria haec in se prophetarum Dominus testatur, cum dicit: *Amen dico vobis, multi prophetae et iusti quaesierunt videre quae vos videtis, et audire quae auditis.* Propheta itaque et animo et oculis *deficit*. (3.) Sed hi nunc *oculi* prophetarum, licet Dominum *videre* desiderauerint, non sunt tamen corporis *oculi*; locuntur enim et expectant, et mentis potius est contuitio ista et loquella, non corporis.... In haec igitur *Dei eloquia oculis* loquentibus *defecit*, non tam uisu corporeo Dominum ex *eloquiis Dei* nuntiatum quam contemplatione animae et mentis expectans. (Hilary of Poitiers, *Tract. in Ps.118. 11.2-3*)

the faculty of vision, the ability to concentrate, gives out during the process of waiting. Finally, Augustine gives something of a definition: “This languishing is good: it signifies a desire for a good not yet attained but most avidly and vehemently desired” (*Bonus est ergo iste defectus: indicat enim desiderium boni, nondum quidem adepti, sed avidissime ac uehementissime concupiti*). Whether the good sought is real or apparent, this is a quasi-definition, of *deficere* in terms of vehement desire. All of these comments, and the ambivalence that lies beneath them, show that Hilary and Augustine are working in the framework of the Stoic teaching on the passions.

THE QUESTION OF DECORUM

In his introduction to the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition of Hilary’s commentary, Marc Milhau refers us to Cicero’s fourth *Tusculan Disputation* as a possible source for Hilary’s presentation.¹² He does not elaborate; but a look at the disputation (primarily 4.21-2) is revealing. In the third disputation Cicero had dealt with the question of grief; in the fourth he considers the other passions: fear, joy, and desire. The terms Cicero uses are not neutral; his choice of terms already reflects his definitions: the Greek *pathos* he names *perturbatio*. He says that Zeno defined *pathos* as “an agitation of the mind that is against nature and repugnant to right reason” (*aversa a recta ratione contra naturam animi commotio*; Tusc.4.11). Hence, right reason and passion are by definition opposites. He continues: “Some [say] more briefly that a perturbation is a more vehement appetite; but they mean that an appetite is more vehement, which is farther from the constancy of nature” (*Quidam brevius perturbationem esse appetitum uehe-*

¹² Hilaire de Poitiers, *Commentaire sur le Psaume 118*, ed. Marc Milhau, Sources Chrétiennes, n.344 (Paris: Cerf, 1988), t.1,37, note 8.

mentioem, sed uehementioem eum uolunt esse, qui longius discesserit a naturae constantia; Tusc.4.11). So the rule of thumb would be that whatever is more vehement than the constancy of nature is some sort of perturbation, more vehement if farther away, less vehement if less far. Note the terms: “vehement” and “constancy.” Cicero then gives the classic division of the passions: they arise from two perceived goods (*opinatis bonis*) and two perceived evils (*opinatis malis*). They are therefore four in number: from the perceived goods arise joy (*laetitia*) and desire (*libido*) – joy from a present good and desire from a future – and from perceived evils arise sadness (*aegritudo*) and fear (*metus*) – sadness from a present evil and fear from a future. *Aegritudo* signifies the mental equivalent of sickness: anxiety, grief, sorrow, anguish. *Libido* signifies generic impulse and includes the subspecies of anger and concupiscence (4.12). In the following sections, Cicero lays out a series of distinctions. Since Nature herself impels us to desire the good, when we seek the good with constancy and prudence (*constanter prudenterque*) our actions fall under the heading of volition (*voluntas*), that is, desire according to reason. When we attain the good by way of volition, we have joy (*gaudium* as opposed to *laetitia*): “For when the mind is moved by reason, with tranquility and constancy, then [the feeling] is said to be joy (*gaudium*).” (*nam cum ratione animus movetur placide atque constanter, tum illud gaudium dicitur*; 4.13). When we avoid evil with the same constancy and prudence we exercise caution (*cautio* as opposed to irrational *metus*). The wise man never succumbs to sadness (already established in Tusc.3). So there are four perturbations (*laetitia, libido, aegritudo, and metus*); but since anxious grief (*aegritudo*) has no opposite, there are only three *constantiae* (*voluntas, gaudium, and cautio*). (*Sic quattuor perturbationes sunt, tres constantiae, quoniam aegritudini nulla constantia opponitur*; 4.14). It is difficult to find an English equivalent for the plural of

constantia, but for the Stoics, these “constancies” are the key to virtue. Anything beyond these three is an inordinate perturbation. Thus, according to Cicero’s principles laid out in the Fourth Tusculanum, there is no room for *deficere*. In his discussion of the subspecies of *libido* (4.21), Cicero distinguishes desire proper (*desiderium*) from the feeling of need (*indigentia*). He defines *indigentia* as appetite that knows no satisfaction (*libido inexplebilis*). *Desiderium* he connects with the sight of someone absent and with what we have heard from others about desirable goods. *Desiderium* thus has a greater alignment with reason, where *indigentia* is raw appetite. Though the distinction between *defectio animae* (v.81) and *defectio oculorum* (v.82) comes from Psalm 118 itself, Cicero’s distinctions here fit Hilary’s consideration of them.

In his *De Officiis*, Ambrose also presents the Stoic ideal of constancy as the foundation of virtue. The excesses that disturb and diminish this constancy are “perturbations” of the soul.

For even if a certain power of nature is in every appetite, nevertheless that same appetite is subject to reason by a law of its own nature and it obeys it. Whence it pertains to the good watchman so to present himself in mind, that his appetite neither outruns reason nor deserts it, lest by outrunning, it should perturb reason and exclude it, or by disregarding, it should abandon it altogether. Perturbation [on the one hand] removes constancy, the abandoning of reason [on the other] produces indolence and betrays laziness. When the mind is perturbed, the appetite rushes far and wide and as if by some wild impetus, it breaks free of the reins of reason, nor does it feel the restraints of the driver, by which it could be turned back. Whence, it often happens that not only is the mind agitated and reason is lost, but even the countenance is enflamed either with anger or lust: it pales with fear, it cannot contain itself out of voluptuous delight and it carries on with giddy joy. When these things happen, it throws off that, as it were, natural censorship and gravity of manners, nor can the one quality be maintained which, when counsel must be taken and actions accomplished, keeps its authority and upholds what is becoming, namely constancy.¹³

¹³ Nam etsi vis quaedam naturae in omni appetitu sit, tamen idem appetitus rationi subiectus est lege naturae ipsius et oboedit ei. Unde boni speculatoris est ita praetendere animo ut appetitus neque praecurrat rationem neque deserat, ne praecurrendo perturbet atque excludat, eam deserendo destituat. Perturbatio tollit constantiam, destitutio prodit ignaviam, accusat pigritiam. Perturbata enim mente latius se ac longius fundit appetitus et tamquam efferato impetu frenos rationis non suscipit nec ulla sentit aurigae moderamina quibus possit reflecti. Unde plerumque non solum animus exagitatur, amittitur ratio, sed etiam inflammatur vultus vel iracundia vel libidine: pallescit timore, voluptate se non capit et nimia gestit laetitia. Haec cum fiunt, abicitur illa naturalis quaedam censura gravitasque morum nec

For Ambrose's clergy the full attainment of virtue consists in right reason and measure, and constancy of character, and these should be manifest externally in the evenness of manner, gesture, gait, and speech known as seemliness or decorum (*decus, decorum*).

If someone, therefore, maintains steadiness in all his life and due measure in each of his actions, and if he preserves order and constancy in his speech and moderation in his actions, decorum will be the preeminent quality of his life and it will shine forth as in a mirror.¹⁴

These passages show that Ambrose was keenly aware of the power and negative potential of intense passion, and the *De Officiis* would seem to preclude any positive import to it. For some reason, however, he made a discreet but direct appeal to passion in his commentary on stanza 11 of Psalm 118. I think there was both a personal and a pastoral motivation for this move away from the Stoic ideal, though perhaps it was not a move away, only a reconfiguration. Ambrose possessed *decorum* to a high degree. Even and adroit, he had the right manner and tone; even when he seems to us to have insisted beyond measure, he carried the day, because he had good judgment of people and circumstances and knew instinctively how far he could safely go. On the other hand, we have also seen glimpses of a more passionate side of him. In his first funeral oration for Satyrus, this side welled over, though it was seemly that it should do so on that occasion! Also, in 386, during the basilica crisis, the faithful of Milan saw something in Ambrose that mobilized them. Even allowing for the human charisms that gave him authority and popularity, a bishop does not garner this kind of support unless the faithful see real devotion and personal commitment in him. In spite of the political leverage he knew how to get from it,

teneri potest illa quae in rebus gerendis atque consiliis sola potest auctoritatem suam atque illud quod deceat tenere, constantia. (*De Off.* 229-30).

¹⁴ Si quis igitur aequabilitatem universae vitae et singularum actionum modos servet, ordinem quoque et constantiam dictorum atque operum moderationemque custodiat, in eius vita decorum illud excellit et quasi in quodam speculo elucet. (*De Off.* 225). See also *De Off.* 1.191.

the remarks Ambrose makes towards the end of stanza 11 show a man interiorly prepared for martyrdom; and this is the mark of a passionate attachment to an ideal.¹⁵ So Ambrose the passionate and the poet, knew how to exploit the emotional ambivalence inherent in intense desire.¹⁶

Returning to Ambrose's Platonic image above of the horse and driver, perhaps we could say that for Ambrose intense passion is compatible with decorum and constancy. It may even be desirable as a motivating factor. The real issue is one of control, not intensity. The teaching in the *De Officiis* is compatible with the passion of stanza 11, as long as the horses still feel the bit and the reins. We see Ambrose, therefore, in his address to his congregation drawing passion out of the hearts and imaginations of his audience, so that he can lift it, intact, into the sphere of Christian experience. He does it with ease, delight even, and calls to his aid the lovely, abandoned heroines of classical antiquity. Though he cites the *Song of Songs* once only, it is his answer to the classical tradition on an emotional level.

VERSE 81 – MY SOUL HAS LANGUISHED

After explaining the meaning of *Caph* in Latin (*bent over*), Ambrose begins his commentary on the first verse:

¹⁵ Quam pulehre nobis persecutionis processere tempora! intentus sicut mendicus erat intimae ad deum mentis affectus. illi adhaerebat nec ullas cogitationes obstrepentes sibi precantis animus sentiebat. totis uisceribus fundebatur oratio et quidam miscebatur sermo cum domino. cotidiana meditatio habebat iam contemptum perieuli et usum calcandae mortis receperat (Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. 118* 11.22).

¹⁶ In this regard, see the comments of Ivor Davidson in the introduction to his edition of the *De Officiis*, 94-5. Ambrose is complex; his thought cannot be systematized and made wholly consistent. He is engaged in a fascinating and, in some ways uncharted, effort of assimilation: "To judge from his ministry as a whole, it was this particular combination of classical patterns of social respectability with other, very different, ideas – the convergence of, say, *gravitas* with *humilitas*; the fusion of the Roman man of action with the priest and the Levite; the transformation of the political leader into the one who denies himself, beats his body into submission, blesses his enemy, and is prepared to lay down his life for his friend – that made such a striking impact in the context of late fourth-century Italy" (Davidson, 95).

And so, bent much more in soul and mind than in body, David begins, saying “My soul has languished for your salvation; and I have hoped in your word.” The everyday meaning should not preoccupy us, causing us to judge this sort of languishing as like that due to physical fatigue. For he did not say only, “My soul has languished” but “it has languished for your salvation.” So let us take an example from customary use. If, for example, we say, “He is languishing for her,” what seems to be signified by this expression is that, by the agency of passion, the whole man has gone over into a desire for the woman.¹⁷

Comparing this passage to what Ambrose said above about the driver holding the reins of reason, we see that the horse and charioteer are one. Reason does not hold down passion with an absolute control, instead the two work together in an ideally harmonious whole. In the passage above, by contrast, passion has suffused the whole man so that he may still look fine, but Ambrose might expect at any moment to see tell-tale signs of perturbation in his countenance.

There is an interesting play on the word *usus* here: 1) *usitatus sermo* means the usual sense of the word; 2) it is opposed to *de usu*, literally “from use,” meaning “a use,” or one normal, customary use of something, among others. Ambrose is signaling that he is moving from day-to-day meaning of *deficere* to a certain common use or the meaning of this term. The new use is passionate love for a woman.¹⁸ This shift opened vistas for his audience slightly different from our own. We see the implications more clearly in the next paragraph where he will mention the *meretriciae portae*, the doors of the “lady-love,” whether she be a prostitute, courtesan, mistress, concubine, or some variation of these, since *meretrix* can have all of these senses. Ambrose creates a series of interesting and entertaining resonances in his audience, all based on the fact

¹⁷ Ideoque, tamquam curuatus multo amplius anima ac mente quam corpore, exorsus est David dicens: *defecit in salutare tuum anima mea; et in uerbum tuum speravi*. nec usitatus sermo nos capiat, ut tamquam corporeae fatigationis defectionem huiusmodi iudicemus. neque enim hoc solum dixit: *defecit anima mea*, sed: *defecit in salutare tuum*. itaque ut de usu capiamus exemplum, si uerbi gratia dicamus: “defecit ille in illam,” uidetur exprimi hoc uerbo, quod totus in mulieris desiderium cupiditate transierit. (*Exp. Ps.118.11.3a*)

¹⁸ Since passionate love is also exhausting, the two uses are connected as cause to effect, at least from the point of view of passionate love. The texts below show that Ambrose plays on this cause and effect relationship as well.

that, in a society where marriages were arranged with little regard for the mutual feelings of the parties, a meaningful distinction may be made between love and marriage. It is important to see that this is as far as he goes. He is not here making any moral judgment about the rightness or wrongness of passionate love and the relationships that ensue. He merely describes the passions of love and desire, which in one form or another are at the heart of the lives, or the consciousness, of his congregation, whether or not they have actually indulged in these desires. The point is that he is setting the stage for his introduction of traditional, cultural notions of love. I think we also see here that he has a deep and sympathetic understanding of human nature. And so he continues:

And if we seek anything whatever with vehemence, if we do not attain the result in a timely manner, it exhausts us by a kind of prolonged concentration. Love (*amor*) is impatient; night and day it assails the doors of the courtesan (*meretrix*). If love's desires for possession are deferred longer still, it languishes out of yearning, while it [still] hopes; in this [delay] indeed there is not an end of love, but rather an increase. And whatever it may be that is desirable, if it does not come to the one desiring, the lover languishes in it; and he, as it were, lays down his very soul before it. If, however, hope rises up and comes nearer, it gives vigor and resolution, as if [the beloved] were already close at hand. Yet if there should be an absence of the beloved, by the very fact that the lover longs passionately for the absent one, he suffers languishing of soul. So the farther away the beloved desired, the more the lover languishes. This, therefore, is the meaning of *deficere*: that someone migrates with all his intentions and desires into the thing he loves: he thinks it, adheres to it, he shouts out [the name] of what he would possess in order to love.¹⁹

Though there is no direct quotation, this passage echoes Plautus, Terence, Catullus, and the elegiac poets. The doors of the courtesan are a standard theme, and they link this passage to the

¹⁹ et quicquid est quod uehementer expetimus, nisi eius maturiorem habeamus effectum, id nos uidetur longa quadam intentione lassare. amor inpatiens die noctuque meretricias fores pulsans, si diutius potiendi desideria differantur, ipsa deficit expectatione, dum sperat; in quo utique non finis amoris, sed incrementum est. et quicquid est desiderabile, si non contingat desideranti, deficit in illud et quasi ipsam deponit animam qui desiderat. si tamen spes propior adsurgat, dat uires spes proxima, si autem absentia sit dilecti, eo ipso quod absentem desiderat qui concupiuit animae suae patitur defectionem. itaque quanto longius est illud quod desideretur, tanto magis deficit qui desiderat. id est ergo deficere, in id unumquemque totis studiis migrare quod diligat. illud cogitat, illud adhaeret, illud personat quod receperit diligendum (*Exp. Ps. 118.11.3b*),

comedies, where doors are essential to the scenic development of the play. I wonder if we could think of what Ambrose is trying to accomplish here in terms of Shakespeare's characters.²⁰

Think of the love of Romeo for Juliet, without the plot, or that of Orlando for Rosalind. *As You Like It* is a comic spoof, but one must have some knowledge of the real thing in order fully to enjoy it. The examples Ambrose will bring in include also other kinds of love, mainly that of parents for their children. Think of the sorrow and betrayal of love in *King Lear*. Shakespeare himself drew inspiration for his plays and characters from the early comedians, Ovid, the Roman love poetry, and classical drama in general. Ambrose is trying to evoke a remembered emotion of starry-eyed and anxious love in his audience. This is why he is so redundant. In the next section he enlarges the field somewhat and gives the example of Anna, the mother of the young Tobias (Tob.11:5-9):

[The lover] is poured into the beloved by a certain fainting of the soul, as when a mother awaits the arrival of her son, just as the wife of Tobias waited for her son wandering far from home; she was languishing out of desire, in a state of anxiety, her strength exhausted, what else do her words express, if not a certain languishing or *defectus*? To the degree that her emotions grow weary, so much does her love increase, and the longer the desired one is absent, the more ardent, by some power of love, the desires of the one who waits. The flesh languishes, but passion is fed and grows.²¹

This is no ordinary passion. It feeds off of everything, the flesh, even delay itself. It holds in check all the normal course of human life.

In paragraph 4 Ambrose will begin to apply this love imagery to the Christian life, though he maintains the intensity of it by alluding to Dido falling hopelessly in love with Aeneas:

²⁰ Shakespeare's comedic lovers often find themselves at odds with convention, a species of *decorum* (Philip Rousseau)

²¹ in id quadam animae defectione transfunditur, ut si mater filii expectet praesentiam, quemadmodum expectabat Tobiae uxor filium peregrinantem deficiens a desiderio et in angustiis constituta et tamquam resoluta uiribus, quid enim aliud nisi defectum quendam eius uerba significant? sed quo magis lassatur affectus, eo amplius amor crescit et, quo diutius abest qui desideratur, eo expectantis desideria maiore quadam ui amoris ignescunt. caro deficit, sed cupiditas allitur et augetur (*Exp. Ps.118.11.3c*).

From this we may gather the meaning of “My soul has languished in your salvation.” Indeed when the soul adheres to the Spirit, it ceases to be soul and becomes one spirit, since *he who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit [with him]* (1Co.6:17). And so one who is holy and who fears the Lord knows no other desire than the salvation of God, which is Christ Jesus. He passionately loves him, he desires him, with all his strength he reaches out towards him, he cherishes him in his breast (*gremio fovet*), he opens himself to him, and pours himself out to him, he reveres him alone, lest he should lose him. And so the more his soul is preoccupied with an increasing desire, passionately longing to cleave to his salvation, the more he languishes.²²

Ambrose’s statement that the soul ceases to be soul is reminiscent of Didymus’s comments from the Palestinian *Catena*, mentioned above, though without the metaphysical implications. The main point in this paragraph is that one should be as much in love with Christ as any lover is with his beloved. His reference to the Aeneid is highly suggestive. It pinpoints one of the most agonizing moments of the story of Dido and Aeneas, since Dido is fondling in her arms and on her bosom the boy she believes to be Iulus, though in reality he is Cupid, the god of love. Secretly sent by his mother in place of Iulus in order to protect Aeneas, he beguiles Dido and deceives her beyond hope, secretly consuming her heart with the ardor of love.

When with an embrace he [Cupid] had hung on Aeneas’ neck and satisfied the great love of his pseudo father, he sought the queen. She with her eyes, with her whole heart, clung to him and repeatedly fondled him in her lap and on her breast: Dido is unaware of how great a god settles down upon her, the miserable.²³

This is such a deft and delightful use of Dido; one cannot but admire Ambrose’s finesse: the god of love here is, of course, *the* God of love, Jesus Christ. Ambrose’s message is that Christians should cling to Christ and cherish *him*. They should compromise themselves totally and love him

²² Hinc ergo colligere possumus quid sit: *defecit in salutare tuum anima mea*. etenim spiritui adhaerens anima deficit ab eo quod est anima et fit unus spiritus, quoniam *qui adhaeret domino unus spiritus est* (1Co.6:17). itaque sanctus et timens dominum nescit aliud desiderare nisi salutare dei, quod est Christus Iesus. illum concupiscit, illum desiderat, in illum totis intendit uiribus, illum *gremio mentis fouet* (Aen.1.718), illi se aperit et effundit et hoc solum ueretur, ne illum possit amittere. itaque quanto maiore desiderio exercitata fuerit anima cupiens adhaerere salutari suo, tanto magis deficit (*Exp. Ps. 118.11.4a*).

²³ Ille ubi complexu Aeneae colloque pependit / et magnum falsi implevit genitoris amorem, / reginam petit haec oculis, haec pectore toto / haeret et interdum gremio fovet, inscia Dido, / insidat quantus miserae deus (715-9)

as passionately as the greatest of lovers. Note that the whole section around the *gremio fovet* is like a mini-commentary on what was happening inside Dido's breast. So though Ambrose cites only one two-word phrase, the allusion is unmistakable. We find here, therefore, that Ambrose has deliberately appealed to passions his congregation knows and recognizes both from their personal lives and from their vicarious experience through classical literature. He seems to be inviting them to transfer this same passion to the person of Christ. Again, this implies an interesting shift in, or extension of, the Stoic doctrine of *decorum*. It is the Christian reconfiguration of Stoic virtue. Where total, consuming love brought misery and death to Dido, it will bring strength and life to the Christian. Ambrose will make this point throughout the rest of this section and give examples from Scripture. Before we continue though, I would like to pose a question.

Augustine wept over Dido as a child, and at the beginning of the *De civitate dei* he says:

Virgil, whom little children read – since clearly he is a great poet, the most illustrious of them all, and the best to be imbibed by tender minds – cannot easily be forgotten and consigned to oblivion, as Horace says, “A new vessel long witnesses to the smell with which it is first imbued”²⁴

Would Ambrose's use of this passage from the *Aeneid* have been perceived by some in his audience – who may also have wept over Dido as children – as a kind of redeeming of the story, not in a formal way, as if it could be read as an allegory of Christian love, but in an informal way, so that without changing the story Ambrose has brought it into a new, larger picture of love and life? In a sense he has left the beauty but removed the sting.

The rest of paragraph 4 is devoted to examples of languishing for the salvation of God taken from Scripture. God is now the object loved and desired:

²⁴ nempe apud uergilium, quem propterea paruuli legunt, ut uidelicet poeta magnus omniumque praeclarissimus atque optimus teneris ebibitus animis non facile obliuione possit aboleri, secundum illud horatii: quo semel est inbuta recens seruabit odorem / testa diu - / apud hunc ergo uergilium nempe iuno inducitur infesta troianis...(Augustine, *De civ. dei* 1.3).

Learn also by this example that this languishing comes from an excess of passionate desire: “My soul yearns,” he [David] says, “and has languished for the courts of the Lord” (Ps.83:3). He says that he yearned beforehand and poured himself into a total passionate desire (*tota concupiscentia*), but languishing in suspense over an outcome long delayed, he is fainting away. Finally, Jeremiah teaches the way in which a soul languishes for the salvation of God: “And there came into my heart as a burning fire, flaming in my bones; I was utterly undone and I could not bear it” (Jer.20.9). Enflamed by this desire, David says, “My soul has languished for your salvation and I have hoped in your word.”²⁵

Though the object is divine, Ambrose seems to imply that there is no essential difference between the languishing of a lover and the languishing of David, Jeremiah, and others.

In paragraphs five and six Ambrose moves to the second half of verse one: “and in your word I have hoped.” He begins in five by recapitulating the idea of languishing, as he has developed it thus far, applying it to moral attachment to Christ. This sets the stage for a vigorous plea for reform, in paragraph six. In five, Ambrose says that the prophet’s languishing is caused not only by hope but also by the fact that he sees that he is living in a body (*adesse corpori*) and tied down by certain chains of this life. He is far from (*abesse*) the salvation of God. He yearns, desires, languishes, and is dissolved by total longing (*totus*) that his whole self (*totus*) might belong to that which he desires. He sounds like the philosopher of the *De Bono Mortis*, standing on the threshold between this earthly life of effort (*hic*) and that heavenly life (*ille*) of the

²⁵ ergo ista defectio inminutionem quidem fragilitatis sed adsumptionem uirtutis operatur. denique ipse alibi dicens: *sitiuit in te anima mea*, subiecit infra: *adhaesit post te anima mea, me suscepit dextera tua* (Ps.62:2,9). qui enim sitit, cupit semper adhaerere fonti nec aliud nisi aquam sibi expetere et contingere uidetur, ut ipso pascatur affectu. suscipiens ergo dextera (tua) animam meam et de sua uirtute mihi inperitens, facit eam esse quod non erat, ut dicat: *uiuio autem iam non ego, uiuit autem in me Christus* (Gal.2:20). disce autem etiam exemplo defectionem istam nimiae esse cupiditatis: *concupiscit*, inquit, *et deficit anima mea in atria domini* (Ps.83:3). ante concupiscens, inquit, et quasi totam se effundens in concupiscentiam longo fine suspensa defectione dissoluitur. denique quomodo deficiat anima in salutare dei, Hieremias docet: *et factum est*, inquit, *in corde meo ut ignis ardens flammans in ossibus meis, et dissolutus sum undique et ferre non possum* (Jer.20.9). hoc igitur inflammatus desiderio ait Dauid: *defecit in salutare tuum anima mea et in uerbum tuum speraui*. (Exp. Ps.118.11.4b)

fullness of salvation and union with God. Ambrose's vocabulary is intense.²⁶ He continues in the same philosophical vein. The way out of a languishing due to an attachment to the flesh lies in another kind of languishing: the denial of self, in order to cling to Christ. Since the way of those who seek God is Christ himself, let us, says Ambrose, passionately desire this eternal salvation of God. In six short phrases, each beginning with "non," he lists the classic obstacles to a true desire for the salvation of God: money, women, ambition, glory, fraud, deceit, pleasure. He concludes paragraph 6: "And so, he who fails to himself (*deficere*), so that he may adhere to virtue, loses what is his own but receives what is eternal."²⁷

VERSE 82 – MY EYES HAVE LANGUISHED

In paragraphs 7-9 Ambrose comments on the second verse of stanza 11 (verse 82 of the psalm): "My eyes have languished with longing for your declaration (*eloquium*), saying, 'When will you comfort me?'" As we saw above, this verse is centered around the eyes, as opposed to the soul in verse 81, and the object for which the psalmist longs is something said. In verse 81b the psalmist said that he hoped in God's word (*uerbum*); here he longs for an *eloquium*. The two terms are synonyms and may be used interchangeably, but *eloquium* comes from the verb *loquor*, "to say, speak, utter." Derivatives such as *loquacious*, *eloquent*, *elocution* all carry the nuances of sound, speech, and utterance. *Verbum*, on the other hand, signifies a word that expresses an idea. It has a wider application and may signify speech, the written word, or a grammatical term; and it has, of course, a wide philosophical and theological use. In his comments of paragraphs 9-

²⁶ ergo propheta considerans quae legerat et cernens quod, cum adesset corpori uelut quibusdam ligatus huius uinculis uitae, aberat a salutare dei, concupiscebatur, desiderabat, deficiebat, et toto dissoluebatur affectu, ut totus illius fieret quod desiderabat (*Exp. Ps. 118.11.5*).

²⁷ qui igitur deficit sibi, ut uirtuti adhaerere, amittit quod suum est, accipit quod aeternum est (*Exp. Ps. 118.11.6*).

11, however, Ambrose seems to make no distinction between the two; after quoting the verse with *eloquium*, he comments using *uerbum*. *Verbum* applies to Christ himself. Yet, there is more going on here. Ambrose says that the earlier section was the *praktikon*, his transliteration of the Greek, since there the soul was longing for him by whose passion she was saved. Here we are concerned with the *theoretikon*, again his transliteration, since here the *eyes* of the prophet long to *see* the Word of God. Ambrose continues: just as there the soul desired to become one spirit with God, here the eyes desire to become one *mind* with him. If this is Ambrose's thought, he really cannot use *eloquium* here. *Verbum* captures the philosophical, theoretical, that is, the contemplative/mystical vision of God that is the goal of the interior life (the interior man, as Ambrose calls him). We have here a marvelous joining of the philosophical life we saw so much of in the *De Bono Mortis* and the theological/mystical life of the committed Christian.²⁸

After quoting verse 82, Ambrose begins:

Above [in verse 81] the teaching was practical (*praktikon*), here it is theoretical (*theoretikon*). There the soul was languishing for salvation, inasmuch as she desired passionately him by whose passion she is saved; here the eyes of the prophet yearn for the word of God. And let us consider whether, just as there the prophet, adhering to Christ, languished in his soul, longing to become one spirit [with him] – and he does become one spirit – so here his eyes languish, that they may become one mind [with him]. These are the eyes of the mind, that is the eyes of the interior man, not the eyes that perform the function of seeing. For there is an eye and a mind of the flesh, but that eye is blind, it does not see things that are divine, it is swollen, to no purpose, with the flesh. There is another, however: the *sensus Christi*, the knowledge of Christ, by which the Church sees Christ; he himself says to his bride, “You have ravished my heart with one of your eyes” (Sg.4:9). With good reason Christ is seen “with one eye,” since he is not seen with a carnal eye; or rather, the Church has two eyes, one moral and one mystical: the eye of faith sees Christ better, for the mystical eye is keener, the moral is sweeter.²⁹

²⁸ The distinction between *uerbum* and *eloquium* is corroborated by the topic Ambrose addresses in paragraphs 11-12. We will consider this question later at the end of the chapter.

²⁹ Sequitur uersus secundus: *defecerunt oculi mei in eloquium tuum dicentes: quando consolaberis me?* supra *praktikon*, hic *theoretikon*. ibi in salutare defecit anima, eo quod concupiscit eum cuius passione seruata est, hic in uerbum dei prophetae oculi defecerunt. et uideamus ne, quemadmodum illic adhaerens Christo animo deficit in unum spiritum et fit unus spiritus, ita et deficiant oculi, ut fiat una mens. oculi enim mentis isti sunt, oculi scilicet

Ambrose distinguishes here between “spirit” and “mind”; spirit is identified with the soul of verse 81 and mind with the eyes of 82. It is the eye of the mind, free of mixture with flesh, free from an attachment to carnal life, that sees Christ. It is not too much of a stretch to say that the eye of the mind within each Christian is the eye of the Church that ravishes the heart of the bridegroom. To me, this is where a habit of looking at the universe as Plotinus saw it and Christianity meet in the mind of Ambrose.³⁰

This reference to the *Song of Songs* is the only one in this section of the stanza.³¹ We have already mentioned Ambrose’s distinction between the two eyes of the Church in the discussion of his exegetical principle of the complementary relationship of the moral to the mystical senses of Scripture. Here the eye that captivates the heart of Christ is the mystical eye of faith. It is the mental vision by which the Christian associated with the Church sees Christ. Ambrose could have found verses in the *Song of Songs* that would represent the Church’s act of seeing Christ (Sg.5:16, for example). He chose instead a verse that represents the response of the bridegroom to the vision of the bride. The bridegroom is captivated and ravished by the eye that sees him in purity and truth. For the Christian, therefore, the intense, passionate desire that Ambrose has evoked throughout this stanza with such insistence is reciprocal. It is not, as it was for the Neoplatonists or for Dido, and for Phyllis below, a one-way street. The bridegroom

interioris hominis, non hi oculi qui ministerio funguntur obtutus. est enim oculus et mens carnis, sed ille caecus est oculus, qui non uidet quae diuina sunt, qui frustra mente carnis inflatus est. est et alius, sensus Christi, quo ecclesia uidet Christum, sicut ipse dicit ad sponsam: *corde nos cepisti uno ab oculis tuis* (Sg.4:9). merito uno oculo Christus uidetur, quia non uidetur oculo carnali aut quia duos oculos habens ecclesia, moralem et mysticum, fidei oculo plus uidet Christum; mysticus enim oculus acutior est, moralis dulcior (*Exp. Ps.118.11.7*).

³⁰ I think there may be a connection between what Ambrose received from Plotinus and his idea of the Church as a mystical entity. I do not mean to imply that Ambrose identifies the Church with Soul or anything remotely close to that, but only that that habit of thinking about reality in Plotinian terms added a dimension to Ambrose’s sense of the Church, perhaps gave him a facility in grasping a reality that is interior and, in one sense at least, only to be found in the mind of man.

³¹ There is another reference (to the little foxes in the vineyard, Sg.2:15) at the end of the stanza, but this is an incidental association of the psalm verse with the *Song* in a different context.

responds with a like love, and this is the one verse Ambrose chose to use in this stanza devoted to passionate love. What does he intend that we conclude? The *Song of Songs* is the Biblical equivalent to the classical myths and stories of love. It is just as much a love story as that of Dido and Aeneas. In the *Song*, however, love is reciprocated and it has a happy ending. On a deep emotional level, Ambrose intends that it supersede, without destroying, the old stories.

In paragraph eight Ambrose continues his explanation of the mystical eyes of faith. He cites Paul as an example of one who by losing his corporeal sight gained the ability to see Christ: “These eyes are those by which Paul saw what was eternal.... He who did not see Christ before he lost his eyes, saw him after he lost the sight of his eyes” (cf. Acts 9:1-9). These are the eyes that languish for the Word of God. On account of these eyes the prophets were called “seers,” since with the mind they discerned by revelation things that were hidden.³²

Paragraph nine gives interesting glimpses of Ambrose’s way of handling texts. First, if one thinks that, as he composed his written treatises, he incorporated prior homiletic material, one might consider paragraph nine to be an insert from a homily different from paragraphs seven and eight. These two form a coherent unit. Paragraph nine, on the other hand, looks like a separate unit and introduces some repetition as it takes up again the same question of languishing eyes. We are dealing with ideas and with psalm verses of major significance to Ambrose, and so one may easily imagine that he commented on them multiple times. Another complication comes

³² Et fortasse isti oculi sunt quibus Paulus uidebat aeterna, ubi coepit corporalia non uidere. denique qui Christum non uidebat, priusquam oculos amitteret, uidit eum, posteaquam uisum amisit oculorum. uidit enim qui dixit: *quis es, domine?* (Acts 9:5) – uidebat utique Christum quem etiam dominum fatebatur – et infra: *domine*, inquit, *quid me uis facere?* (Acts 9:6) non ergo uidebat eum cuius expectabat imperium? quibus igitur oculis uidere Paulus plus coepit nisi his, quos nobis ipse monstrauit dicens: *orabo spiritu, orabo et mente* (1Cor.14:15)? denique ut scias quia uidit orando, *factum est*, inquit, *reuertenti mihi in Hierusalem, cum orarem in templo, pauorem habui, uidi illum dicentem mihi: festina et exi citius de Hierusalem; non enim recipiunt testimonium tuum de me* (Acts 22:17-8). isti ergo oculi in uerbum dei deficiunt et dicunt: *quando consolaberis me?* istis oculis prophetae dicebantur ‘uidentes’, quia per reuelationem ea, quae erant abscondita, mente cernebant (*Exp. Ps. 118.11.8*).

from a resemblance between paragraph nine and paragraphs three-four in the density of allusion and the associations with classical literature. Since three describes languishing of the soul and nine languishing of the eyes, these two (3 and 9) might have been an original homily, with the intervening paragraphs added. We well understand why Ambrose included nine, in any case, because it contains Phyllis, the Ovidian counterpart to Dido, who did indeed languish through her eyes, with constant searching of the sea. One final point before we begin: in paragraph nine Ambrose clearly follows both Hilary and Origen in their exegeses of verse 82 (found in the excerpts given above), though he never mentions them and his text ends by having a different color brought to it from the examples and the allusions that are his own. The following is a presentation of the whole of paragraph nine divided into three sections:

What does languishing of the eyes mean? Let us speak of corporeal [eyes], so that we may arrive at an understanding of spiritual [eyes]. Is it not the case that when we long for someone and hope that he will arrive, we direct our eyes in the direction from which we expect him to come? And so [gazing] long and hard, we languish with daily waiting. Thus Anna searching the road with anxious vigil, sought the arrival of her son (Tob.10.7). Thus David the prophet, when the look-out was in the tower, inquired eagerly of the one running from the battle about the safety of his son. (2Kings 18:24-33)³³

The procedure and the vocabulary are those of Hilary; but where Hilary gives two generic examples of a wife awaiting the return of her husband and of a father awaiting the return of his son, Ambrose gives two well known Biblical examples of parents longing for news of their sons, Anna and David. Here and in the next paragraph he will fill in circumstantial details. For an example of a young wife, Hilary's first and Ambrose's third example, Ambrose turns to Ovid.

³³ Quid est oculos deficere? de corporalibus dicamus, ut intellegamus de spiritalibus. nonne, quando aliquem desideramus et speramus adfore, eo dirigimus oculos, unde speramus esse uenturum? itaque intenti diu cotidiana expectatione deficimus. sic Anna circumspiciens in uiam sollicitis aduentum filii explorabat excubiis. sic Dauid propheta currentem de proelio positus in turre exploratoribus interrogare de salute filii pater sedulus gestiebat (*Exp. Ps. 118.11.9a*).

Thus, a wife of tender age with tireless anticipation awaits the arrival of her husband, so that whatever ship she sees, there, she thinks, her husband sails and she is afraid lest another should outstrip her and receive first the favor of seeing her beloved, so that she herself cannot be the first to say, "I see you, my Husband"(cf. Ovid, *Heroides* 2.121-9), just as Anna said to her son, "I see you, Son, now I am willing to die" (Tob.11:9 LXX). In the sweetness of the vision of the one she loves, she feels no pain [at the thought] of death. And so just as she, who wishes to give herself to her husband on his arrival, follows the footpaths and byways (cf. Ovid, *Met.*3.17), abandoning all domestic occupations, so also the prophet divested of worldly cares, at his post, with night-long vigil, directs the gaze of his interior eyes to the word of God until his sight fails him; he reduces his body into subjection (1Cor.9:27) and trains his soul to the patience of humility, like the spider web wasting away (Ps.38:12). Like a deer he longs for springs of water and thirsts for the Lord his God, desiring to see his presence and to appear before the face of God (cf.Ps.41:2-3). With excessive desire and vehement passion he languishes and then [only] does he assume that he is fit enough to receive the things he ardently requests of the Lord by the prophetic grace.³⁴

Like paragraph three above, this section of paragraph nine is densely allusive. There is only one direct quotation from Scripture; other references are transparent: at 1 Cor.9:27, for example, Paul says (from the Vulgate): *sed castigo corpus meum et in servitutem redigo*; Ambrose has *corpus suum redigens seruituti*. The allusion to Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* are indirect.

Michael Petchenig gives references to the *Heroides* and the *Metamorphoses* in the notes to his 1913 edition.³⁵ Michaela Zelter leaves them unchanged in her 1999 re-edition.³⁶ I think that the allusion to the *Heroides* is certain and intentional. The *Metamorphoses* presents a difficulty,

³⁴ sic tenerae uxor aetatis de specula litorali indefessa expectatione uiri praestolatur aduentum, ut, quamcumque nauem uiderit, illic putet coniugem nauigare metuatque, ne uidendi gratiam dilecti alius anteuertat nec ipsa possit prima dicere: 'uideo te, marite' (cf. Ovid, *Heroides* 2.121-9), sicut Anna dicebat ad filium: *uideo te, fili, amodo libenter moriar* (Tob.11:9 LXX), mortis uidelicet dolorem exoptati conspectus suauitate non sentiens. ergo ut illa, quae aduenienti uiro se optat offerre, ablegatis omnibus domesticis occupationibus (cf. Homer, *Iliad* 6.) semitas uiantis aut pedum uestigia legit (cf. Ovid, *Met.*3.17), sic propheta curis exutus saecularibus interiorum oculorum in uerbum dei peruigil custos usque ad defectionem sui intendebat obtutus, corpus suum redigens seruituti (cf.1Cor.9:27) et animam suam ad humilitatis patientiam araneae modo tabescentis erudiens (cf.Ps.38:12). desiderabat enim sicut ceruus fontes aquarum (cf.Ps.41:2-3) et sitiebat in dominum deum suum, cupiens eius uidere praesentiam et apparere ante faciem dei nimioque desiderio et uehementi cupiditate deficiens tunc se habiliorem his quae de domino poposcerit inpetrandis prophetica gratia praesumebat (*Exp. Ps.118.11.9b*).

³⁵ CSEL 62: Virgil, *Aen.*1.718 at 11.4 (234, 23); Ovid, *Her.*2.121 ff. at 11.9 (238,10); Ovid, *Met.*3.17 at 11.9 (238,18).

³⁶ In his 1987 SAEMO Latin-Italian edition of Ambrose's *Expositio Psalmi 118*, Pizzolato also retains the reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* but he removes the reference to the *Heroides* (SAEMO 8.1, 459). This would not be the reference I would remove.

because *uestigia legit* – in Ovid’s text it is *legit uestigia* – is not unique to Ovid. Followed by a two syllable word, it makes meter for the fifth foot of a hexameter. Lucan and Statius both use it for this purpose. It also appears elsewhere in various forms and can mean simply to follow the tracks of someone or something. Even supposing it is unintentional on the part of Ambrose, the point is that Ambrose and his audience were steeped in Ovid and the poets; whether Ambrose thought about it or not, *uestigia legit* was the right phrase for the context.

So though an element of uncertainty is inevitable, I think Ambrose intended both allusions to Ovid and, once he introduced these possibilities of association, the audience might continue to draw from them an open stream of allusion according to their education and taste. I would like to look briefly at these two examples from Ovid and then suggest other possibilities that might arise. *Heroides* 2 is a letter from Phyllis to Demophoon. He has married her and promised to return, but he delays. She writes to him:

In gloomy sorrow I tread the crags and shore thick with undergrowth, by every vista the wide shore opens to my eyes. Whether the earth loosens in the [heat of] the day or the stars shine cold, I look out to see what wind moves the sea; and whatever sails I see coming from afar, straightaway I take them as an omen from my gods. I run forward into the surf – the waves scarcely hold me back – where the rippling sea sends forth a first line of waves. The more the sails advance, the less and less useful my standing. I faint and fall, caught up by my maids.³⁷

This poignant scene so beautifully described would easily come to the minds of his audience as Ambrose described the young wife searching and longing for the ship of her husband, afraid that someone else might greet him first, that another woman had stolen his heart.³⁸ All knew how the story ended and grieved, or remembered having grieved, for poor Phyllis. On another level, Ovid

³⁷ Maesta tamen scopulos fruticosaque litora calco / quaque patent oculis litora lata meis. / sive die laxatur humus, seu frigida lucent / sidera, prospicio, quis freta ventus agat; / et quaecumque procul venientia lintea vidi, / protinus illa meos auguror esse deos. / in freta procuro, vix me retinentibus undis, / mobile qua primas porrigit aequor aquas. / quo magis accedunt, minus et minus utilis adsto; / linquor et ancillis excipienda cado (*Her.* 2.121-30).

³⁸ Phyllis thinks of this at 103 ff.

left his mark on the myth by having Phyllis faint into the surf; the *excipio* he used here has as a first and basic meaning “to pull out of the water” as well as “to catch in the act of falling.” Ovid takes the edge off of the tragedy with a touch of humor. Also, this is a letter Ovid has created for Phyllis; it is one step removed from the myth, and the description of her mental and emotional state is more significant than the myth itself. Both of these aspects distance the audience from the tragedy of the story. Keeping the right distance from the classical text was also important for Ambrose; he presents it only as a passing allusion, to move and delight, and so prepare the audience for the transfer over to the Christian ideals both of longing and love and of literary exempla.

The brief allusion to the *Metamorphoses* comes from the story of Cadmus, exiled by his father after the abduction of Europa. He has no hope either of finding her or of returning home and so goes to consult Apollo about a future home. He learns from the oracle that he should follow a white heifer until she finds a place to lie down and rest and there he should build his city (of Thebes).

Hardly had Cadmus gone down from the Castalian cavern than he sees an unguarded heifer going slowly, bearing on her neck no sign of service. He follows behind her, and with deliberate step treads in her tracks and silently adores Phoebus, the author of his journey.³⁹

The image here fits perfectly the context of Ambrose’s commentary. It is of one keeping his eyes fixed on the object of desire and of pursuing with total concentration the one thing upon which everything depends.

³⁹ vix bene Castalio Cadmus descenderat antro, / incustoditam lente videt ire iuvencam / nullum servitii signum cervice gerentem. / subsequitur pressoque legit vestigia gressu / auctoremque viae Phoebum taciturnus adorat (Ovid, *Met.* 3.14-8).

Finally, though the editors do not give citations, Ambrose makes two other allusions, which I think his audience would have understood. The first is the isolation and separation of the young wife from the normal duties of a woman; she “abandons all domestic occupations.” This parallels the isolation of the prophet who also abandons all worldly concerns and closes himself off from the course of normal life, beating his body into subjection and humbling his soul. The alienation of the young wife easily leads to a reflection on classical texts in which women are defined by their domestic work. Think of Penelope weaving or of Andromache in book six of the *Iliad*, who has left the house and rushed to the city wall to look for Hector. After their meeting, he asks her to return to her work, the loom and the distaff; and she as well as Hector sees herself and her happiness in terms of her weaving. That is why, in her lament when the object of her love is dead, she says she will burn all his clothes (which she has woven). The second allusion arises from the description of the prophet: Ambrose seems to imply that he cultivates a state of languishing within himself, in order to be fit for the grace of prophecy. Think of the Pythia at Delphi, the Cumaean Sybil in book six of the *Aeneid*, and perhaps some of the theurgic practices of the Neoplatonists. The length of time it takes to describe these allusions makes them seem, perhaps, more impressive than they were in the speech of Ambrose. He brings them in like flashes of remembered images, so that his audience will have an emotional and literary context from which to approach parallel images found in the Scriptures and, in general, the study of Scripture as an equivalent to, and a richer alternative to, the old literary culture.

These allusions and examples lead, in the final section of paragraph nine, to a direct application to his audience and to their reading of the Scriptures – though here also Phyllis is not forgotten:

And we, therefore, let us direct our heart that we may comprehend the ordered books of the Scriptures and let us ask that the Word come to us from the Lord and that understanding be given us. If someone gazes from afar with the sight of the mind on the Word of God, not yet plain and distinct, he discerns with certain, as it were, interior eyes, the ship of the Word approaching his soul. To the degree that he sees it more distinctly, to the same degree he hastens to arrive, as it were, at the harbor of truth, so that he may be as near as possible to the ship as it is brought in.⁴⁰

Ambrose tells his audience that they should direct their hearts, not just their minds, towards the Scriptures. In the reading of the Scriptures, *intellectus* comes from the heart, as well as the mind. The mind seeks the truth but the heart must run down to the shore, like Phyllis, hopelessly in love, yearning for the Word as for a lover arriving by sea. In this section Ambrose follows Origen's image and (in the *Catena* above) idea but he reinterprets it in the language of Ovid's *Heroides* 2. He says that, like Phyllis we must run to the Scriptures with passionate love, so that we may be as near as possible to the Word as his ship arrives. Ambrose is not encouraging his congregation to *read* the Scriptures, he is encouraging them to *love* them, to cultivate the eye of the mind so that they may arrive at the mystical *θεωρία*. With considerable finesse, Ambrose tries to make them summon the love they have for their classical heritage and literature in order to bring that same love to the new heritage and literature of the Scriptures, the *series scripturarum*, the ordered books and the ordered knowledge that comes from them. Ambrose often uses this phrase to signify the Scriptures as an ordered whole, capable of bringing those who devote themselves to the sacred books, as they had to the classical literature, to the fullness of knowledge. For those who do, the Scriptures are capable of inspiring an intellectual culture with the same depth and passion as the old classical culture.

⁴⁰ et nos igitur intendamus cor nostrum, ut possimus intellegere series scripturarum, et uerbum nobis uenire a domino postulemus atque intellectum dari. si quis de longinquo uerbum dei obtutu mentis aspexerit nondum planum atque distinctum, is uelut quibusdam oculis interioribus uerbi nauigium adpropinquare animae suae cernit. quo autem expressius uidere coeperit, eo magis quasi ad portum ueritatis festinat accedere, ut sit proximus inuehendae (Exp. Ps.118.11.9c).

In paragraph ten, Ambrose addresses an ambiguity in the psalm verse: the eyes speak (*dicentes*) and say, “When will you console *me*?” The change from the plural to the singular signifies the unity of life in the psalmist; the eye of his mind and the eye of his body have become one. Then, in paragraphs 11-12 he resolves a pastoral difficulty to which we alluded earlier.⁴¹ It has been in the back of his mind since the beginning of the stanza. In paragraphs 11-12 *sententia* and *sermo* come into the discussion. We saw in part two that Ambrose avoids the term *uerbum* and uses *sermo* instead, when speaking of the actual texts and words of the Scriptures. So here also, he switches from *uerbum* to *sermo* and addresses a difficulty that some in his congregation appear to have with the Scriptures. One senses a tension here between a traditional approach, in which devotion to and study of the sacred texts is the transformative heart of the Christian life, and another approach, which attributes to the study of the Scriptures a preparatory, but secondary role. The question Ambrose needs to answer seems to be: does the proof of a Christian life lie in the study of the Scriptures (a form of *otium* and θεωρία) or in virtuous action (πρᾶξις)? This is a fascinating question, leading to significant social implications. This tension, just under the surface of Ambrose’s text, represented perhaps a new approach that might challenge, even for those who had leisure, the longstanding tradition of *otium*, joined now to the Christian use of leisure in the reading of the Scriptures. The challenge received a vigorous response from the bishop.

He argues that attaining knowledge of God through a reading of the Scriptures is work, and a greater work than all the others.

⁴¹ It is the distinction between the practical and contemplative life, as expressed by the Greek terms that Ambrose transliterates as *praktikon* and *theoretikon*. See note 28 above and the discussion there.

And so, the prophet was languishing for the word. Yet we think we are idle (*otiosus*) if we appear only to devote ourselves to a study of the word and we esteem those who work to be of greater worth than those who engage in a pursuit of a knowledge of the Divinity. Indeed, many say “Behold the man and his work,” implying that he who studies the word does not work, even though this is a greater work than the others. If justice is work, if temperance is work, if fortitude is work, then, for sure, wisdom is also work; for these four are held to be the four principle virtues. If Christ works inasmuch as he is justice, he surely works according as he is the Word and he was working in the beginning with the Father; indeed *by him all things were made* (Jn.1:3), that you may know that he is the maker of all things and our work is to become Christ Jesus (cf. Phil.1:21; Gal.2:20). And so, inasmuch as he is the Word, for those who seek the word, the word is a great work.⁴²

Towards the end of the paragraph, Ambrose brings up the example of the Lord’s response to Martha when she complains that Mary is not helping to prepare the meal and then he concludes, “Thus the authority of a divine statement determines that knowledge of the word is a greater work than ministry.”⁴³

In paragraph 12 he goes on to answer an objection one might raise on the basis of a statement made by the apostle Paul, “For the kingdom of God does not consist in speech but in power” (1Cor.4:20). Ambrose replies that he does not deny the statement of Paul, but that one should look at the context; Paul refers to the speech that is ostentatious and unprofitable for the

⁴² Deficiebat ergo in uerbum propheta. nos autem otiosos nos putamus, si uerbo tantummodo studere uideamur, et pluri aestimamus eos, qui operantur, quam eos, qui studium cognoscendae diuinitatis exercent. dicunt enim plerique: ‘ecce homo et opera eius’, quasi qui uerbo studeat non operetur, cum magis opus istud quam cetera sint. si enim opus iustitia est, si opus temperantia, si opus fortitudo, utique opus est etiam sapientia; istae enim quattuor principales uirtutes habentur. nam si operatur Christus secundum quod iustitia est, utique operatur secundum quod uerbum est et operabatur, cum esset in principio apud patrem. denique per ipsum omnia facta sunt, ut scias operatorem omnium esse et opus nostrum esse Christum Iesum. etenim secundum quod uerbum est, uerbum inquiringibus, grande opus uerbum est. unde cum Martha festinaret circa ministerium, Maria autem uerbum domini audiret, ea quae audiebat ei quae ministrabat meruit anteferri. dicenti enim Marthae: *domine, non est tibi curae quod soror mea reliquit me solam ministrare? dic ergo illi ut me adiuuet*, respondens dixit dominus: *Martha, Martha, Maria bona partem elegit, quae non auferetur illi* (Jn.10.40-42). ita uerbum cognoscere maius opus esse quam ministrare diuinae auctoritatis sententiae definitur. (*Exp. Ps. 118* 11.11). The reference to the cardinal virtues comes from Cicero, *De Off.* 1.15-7. See also Ambrose *In Luc.* 5.62.

⁴³ ita uerbum cognoscere maius opus esse quam ministrare diuinae auctoritatis sententiae definitur. (*Exp. Ps. 118* 11.11).

listener and opposes it to another type of speech (of the Scriptures) that has great power. He says to the Corinthians:

My speech and my preaching have not been in persuasion from the wisdom of words but in manifestation of the Spirit and of power (1Cor.2:4). Faith does not stand on public and forensic words (*sermo*) of wisdom but on the power of God. Power, therefore, is in the speech of the saints. Even this prophet [David] teaches you this who says, “The Lord shall give the word to them that preach good tidings with great power” (Ps.67:12). This means that they are able to preach the Gospel with great power. It has been shown, therefore, that power is in the preaching of the Gospel, but the preaching of the Gospel is the word of the saints. Therefore, no doubt remains that in holy speech there is power.⁴⁴

This paragraph is all about words (*sermones*): some form of this word occurs fourteen times in this relatively short paragraph (note 43 below). Ambrose sets up a confrontation between holy speech and the public and forensic speech of the secular culture. A corollary to this opposition seems to be that the Scriptures can play the same role in the life of a Christian as other forms of speech for the non-believer. The words of Scripture, however, have power, since they are the words of the saints and backed by divine authority. Ambrose seems to be concluding a section of stanza 11 filled with allusions to classical culture with a reminder that real power belongs now to the Christian culture based on the Scriptures,

⁴⁴ Sed fortasse dicat aliquis dictum esse ab apostolo, quia non in sermone regnum est dei sed in uirtute. scriptum non nego, sed in quo sermone, cognosce: nempe quem inflatus effuderit, qui audientibus sermo prodesse non possit, qui sine ostensione sit spiritus atque uirtutis, hunc sermonem Paulus non dignatur cognoscere; uult enim magis uirtutem sermonis agnoscere. denique nolebat talem suum apostolus esse sermonem, qui in infirmitate ueniebat, ut alios faceret fortiores, in timore et tremore, ut timentes nihil metuerent nisi dominum Iesum, trementes pacem eius tranquillitatemque seruarent. audi ergo, qualem apostolus sermonem habebat: *et sermo*, inquit, *meus et praedicatio mea non in persuasione sapientiae uerborum, sed in ostensione spiritus et uirtutis* (1Cor.2:4), quia fides non forensi sermone sapientiae, sed dei uirtute firmatur. ergo in sermone sanctorum uirtus est, in sermone autem forensi isto ac philosophico uanitas mundi. uirtutem autem esse in sermone sanctorum etiam iste propheta te doceat, qui ait: *dominus dabit uerbum euangelizantibus uirtute multa* (Ps.67:12), hoc est ut multa possint uirtute euangelium praedicare. probatum est ergo, quod in euangelii praedicatione sit uirtus; praedicatio autem euangelii sermo sanctorum est. ita dubium non residet, quia in sancto sermone sit uirtus (*Exp. Ps. 118 11.12*).

CONCLUSION

Ambrose has made a large appeal to the classical literary tradition in this whole section of stanza eleven. By bringing into his discourse the examples of favorite heroines of old and by appealing to the large tradition of comic and tragic love literature, he has both preserved the treasures he and his audience loved well and relegated them to a second tier behind the Scriptures. But, then in paragraphs 11 and 12, he is forced to drive a wedge between that tradition and the *sermones* of Scripture; and he does this to defend the tradition of *otium*, in the richest sense that best serves his new Christian purpose. It is an interesting dilemma. In paragraphs 11 and 12 we are witnessing a certain unease on Ambrose's part. Some form of quiet study is necessary for the acquisition of mystical insight into the Scriptures, into the knowledge that comes from the power of the divine *sermones*; but the classical ideal behind *otium* represented a way of life, in which one took for granted the superior role of literary culture. It was something larger than and different from the reading of Scripture, and in the end the two would part company, though Ambrose may not have seen this very clearly yet. We sense, and he certainly sensed, that the ground was shifting under his feet. Yet, he himself is part of that shift. He is forging new connections – new ideas of *otium* – deciding what to keep and what to abandon.

Clearly, though, he thought that one should preserve the myths and stories, told and retold by the literary tradition. His understanding of the *Song of Songs* fits perfectly this tradition. Though he cites it only once in this section, it is a love story as intense, beautiful, and passionate as that of Phyllis or Dido. Yet where Phyllis and Dido suffer from unrequited love, and the literary representation of them derives all its beauty and poignancy from this tragedy, the *Song of Songs* is a story of requited love. This idea of requited love and the happy ending is

capital; it belongs to the base of the cultural shift from a pagan literary tradition to a Christian tradition based on the story of Christ's intervention and salvation, mediated through the Scriptures. It is no accident, therefore, that the one verse Ambrose gives is from the bridegroom, who is enchanted, overcome, by one glance of the bride's eye: "You have ravished my heart with one of your eyes" (Sg.4:9). He is a faithful lover and she a happy bride indeed. Ambrose has subtly turned the tables on Phyllis and Dido. I would like to return to the comments of Ivor Davidson with which we began this chapter and to reread his conclusion: " If it is natural to echo Vergil; it is natural also to insist that Vergil's realm has now become the kingdom of the one God and of his Christ." For Ambrose the *Song of Songs* is a perfect vehicle of change.

CHAPTER FOUR

STANZAS 16 *AIN* & 17 *PHE* – PRAISES OF THE BRIDE

INTRODUCTION

In the *De Isaac* Ambrose leaves out certain verses from the *Song of Songs*. An inventory of them reveals that the primary lacunae are the passages in the *Song* that express extravagant praise for the bodies of the bride and bridegroom.¹ These are 4:1-7 with 9-11, 6:5b-8, and 7:1-6 (praise of the bride) and 5:9-15 (praise of the bridegroom).² Since the *De Isaac* focuses on the spiritual progress of the soul, it may be that Ambrose thought such lavish compliments would not fit the picture of a bride in progress. In the funeral oration for Valentinian II, however, his approach is different. He lavishes the praises of the bridegroom upon the dead body of the prince and then offers praises of the bride to his living soul. This is a stroke of genius on the part of Ambrose, since the primary mourners for Valentinian were his sisters, who were consecrated virgins, and Valentinian himself was in great need of rehabilitation. Both sets of praises could be offered safely to the dead and they accomplished something like a Christian version of an imperial apotheosis.

¹ See Sagot, *Cantique*, 41-57, for a list of references to the *Song of Songs* contained in the *De Isaac*. Sagot bases her numbering on the LXX. Depending on the version of the Bible one uses, numbers may be off by one verse in either direction. For example, verse 7:1 in the LXX is 6:12 in the VUL. Presumably Ambrose consulted the LXX but also used Vetus Latina editions. Sagot discusses at length in this article questions related to the text Ambrose would have used for the *De Isaac* and the implications this might have for the dating of the treatise.

² The verse numbers given here are approximate. In chapters 6 and 7 of the *Song of Songs* the versions differ by 1 and sometimes by 2 verse numbers. Also as we saw in part two the final verses of the *Song of Songs* are also missing from the *De Isaac*. Ambrose comments on them in the sequel to that work, the *De Bono Mortis*. He also includes them in his commentary on the last stanza of Ps.118. See the next chapter.

Similarly, in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*, Ambrose provides commentary on the praises of the bride. As he said in the *De Isaac*, his focus in the *Expositio* is on an interpretation of the bride as representative of the Church rather than of the individual soul; and since the Church is a perfect, mystical bride, praises of her fit well the context of Ambrose's *Expositio*.³ Ambrose gives a metaphorical commentary on different parts of the bride's body, primarily the teeth and hair in 16 and the thighs and belly in 17.

In part three, section one, chapter three, however, we saw that Ambrose makes a close connection between the beautiful and pure Church and the sacraments by which Christians are incorporated into her. One result of this connection is a blurring of the distinction between the soul as bride and the Church as bride: Christians who are baptized and nourished by the Eucharist *are* the Church. Or conversely, the beauty of the Church is not a reality apart from the lives of her members. As a result, the images we will see in this chapter have an intensity they would not have if one were simply listening to a metaphorical description of an abstract entity thought of as the "Church." One is invited to enter into the imagery on a personal, spiritual level.

Before we begin the analysis, I would like to review two questions that belong to the dissertation as a whole but have particular significance for this chapter. (1) How are we to handle poetic allusion, especially in a context of intense sensual imagery? (2) In light of what we have already seen of Ambrose's teaching on the sacraments, what does he accomplish by describing them in terms of poetic image? After discussing these questions, I would like to present reflections, one by Augustine and the other by Ambrose, that shed light on the process of decoding body imagery from the *Song of Songs*.

³ See the passage from the *De Isaac* discussed in part 3, sect.1, ch.1.

1. SENSUAL IMAGERY IN AMBROSE'S *EXPOSITIO*

“Your navel is a mixing bowl, well turned, that never lacks blended wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled by lilies.... How beautiful you are and how charming, my Love, in your delights” (7:2,6). The *Song of Songs* is filled with statements as sensual – one may prefer “romantic” – as these, and Ambrose commented on nearly every one. The age-old question, of course, for all readers and exegetes is: how should we react to this Biblical imagery, how are we to interpret it? Our question here refers to Ambrose in particular: how did he react? We have had insights leading to an answer at various places in this dissertation. I would like to add here two further considerations. The first is simply that most normal human beings – unless they have been deeply hurt – listen to the praises of lovers and their conversation with a measure of delight. Regardless of the *caveats* with which Rabbis and early exegetes surrounded the *Song of Songs*, even for them the imagery had an appeal.⁴ We enjoy the fact that bride is most beautiful and that she and the bridegroom are deeply in love. As far as I know, there is no place in the corpus of Ambrose's writings where he warns us against this pleasure.

Second, as we have said, Ambrose is a master of literary and Scriptural allusion. This is perhaps one of the most deeply rooted aspects of his personal intellectual culture. It is much in evidence in this chapter, and it is in some sense the crux of our understanding of his purpose here. So though we have already examined aspects of this question in the Introduction to the dissertation, I would like to review the essential points here, from a slightly different angle.

⁴ Part 3, sect.1, ch.4. In the case of Origen, these caveats should be considered in the context of his identification of *amor* and *caritas*, as the same reality in different subjects, the interior and exterior man (Baehrens 66,29-69,17). See also the perceptive analysis of King, 170-73. The question is not one of avoiding passion (*eros*) but of directing it (still *eros*) to the proper object.

What is the essential quality of metaphor, and of allusion more generally? It is the juxtaposition and the joining, without confusion, of two or more known and remembered disparate verbal elements – words, phrases, or some combination of these – in order to forge one deeply felt, though not necessarily articulate, poetic image or idea.⁵ In the discussion of metaphor in the Introduction, we saw that this process of joining two ideas, by attributing one to another (Achilles is a lion), is the foundation of metaphor. By extending the process we make an allegory. Much Biblical allusion operates in a similar manner by means of textual cross-referencing and allusion. The one who receives the metaphor or allusion must decode it. We perform this operation all the time in ordinary speech (I see what you mean; time is money; he fell ill). In the case of literary or exegetical metaphor, however, the *process* of the decoding and the re-assembling of metaphor and allusion is more deliberate and complex. It takes time and often gives pleasure. It requires experience and a certain level of education; it is by nature unfinished, but it yields a kind of understanding at a deep, poetic or spiritual level. It creates poetic or Biblical memory. In the Introduction, we looked at Aristotle's example of the "cup of Ares." Gian Biagio Conte refers to another example from Aristotle: "Evening is the old age of the day." The process of decoding yields: evening is to day as old age is to life. How one understands the statement as it stands, with both elements together, depends on the individual and collective associations one brings to the ideas of "evening" and "old age." Together these terms form a subjective, poetic whole greater than the decoded parts. The role of the poet or exegete – and Ambrose was both – is to make suggestive connections and guide according to his purpose the decoding. Conte says:

⁵ This discussion is based on Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, ed. Charles Segal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

In the art of allusion, as in every rhetorical figure, the poetry lies in the simultaneous presence of two different realities that try to indicate a single reality. The single reality can perhaps never be defined directly, but it is specific and is known to the poet. The poetry lies in the area carved out between the letter and the sense. It exists by refusing to be only one or the other. This still unknown area, this tension between meanings; can be described only by referring to the two known limits that demarcate it.⁶

Conte is discussing the transmission of the Classical tradition through poetic memory on the part of the poets and their readers. A similar process takes place among the early Christian interpreters both of Scripture and of the classical tradition as it relates to the new Christian literary tradition they were developing. The *Song of Songs* is the perfect bridge between traditions. As Scripture, it points to the deepest and most sublime divine truths of the Christian life. As poetic metaphor it expresses these truths in ways that reach into the depths of human experience, the expression of which is the proper work of poetry.

2. WHY USE IMAGES TO DESCRIBE THE SACRAMENTS?:

In part two, we saw in the analysis of the *De Bono Mortis* that Ambrose introduces imagery from the final scene of the *Song of Songs* into the middle of his discourse on death as a good. On the face of it, this looks like a rather inconsequential intrusion of Ambrose's favorite Scripture into a largely Platonic exhortation. The food and garden imagery of the *Song of Songs*, which he brings into the *De Bono Mortis*, however, is the same imagery he used when describing the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Those who knew his catechetical instructions would have no difficulty making the connection. This was a form of allusion that created an association between the individual perfection of the soul, the sacramental life of the Church, and the philosophical life as Ambrose develops it in the *De Bono Mortis*. At the end of the *De Bono Mortis*, as

⁶ Conte, 38-9.

we witness Ambrose's critique of the Socratic ideal, we realize that the sacramental life of the Church, as a principle of spiritual perfection in the lives of individual Christians, is in fact, Ambrose's answer to the Platonic vision of the good and perfect life.

Then, in part three, section one, chapter three, we looked at passages from the *De Mysteriis* where Ambrose describes the clothing of the neophytes after baptism. We saw him close the gap, so to speak, between the soul seeking perfection and the institutional Church. Baptized Christians, their virtues and their lives, are what make the Church the beautiful bride. Ambrose forges this identity through the imagery of the *Song of Songs*: the baptized see themselves mirrored in the bride with a simplicity and immediacy difficult to attain in a theoretical treatise. The right image moves the heart more directly, if not more certainly, than rational argument. We have seen Ambrose make use of this appeal of the right image in all three treatises analyzed in this dissertation, each of which was intended for a large and diverse audience. It is one of Ambrose's great pastoral insights, and as we will see again in the present chapter, he had the poetic skill and sensitivity not only to make the images speak but to guide his audience in the process of decoding them. This question of the right image leads us to an interesting observation made by Augustine in the *De doctrina christiana*.

THE TEETH OF THE BRIDE: REFLECTIONS OF AUGUSTINE AND AMBROSE

AUGUSTINE

As we saw in part two, Pierre Courcelle proposed that Ambrose's Neoplatonic treatises, the *De Isaac* in particular, were an immediate and definitive source for the conversion of Augustine. He was criticized for insisting on influences in those texts which appear to have come

from a much more diffuse network; but, without subscribing to Courcelle's detailed account, much is to be gained from looking at the traces of influence Ambrose may have had on Augustine. They are not easy to pinpoint, but they are there – and still in need of exploration.⁷ A case in point is the passage from the *De doctrina christiana* in which Augustine asks a question of great significance for Ambrose's use of the *Song of Songs*. It clearly echoes the references to the teeth of the bride from the *De Mysteriis*, which we saw in part three, section one, chapter five, fourth aspect.⁸ Augustine is remembering Ambrose's mystagogical catechesis.

Why is it, I ask, that if someone says that there are people who are holy and perfect, and that through their life and character the Church of Christ separates those who come to her from all kinds of superstition; that she incorporates them in some way into herself by their imitation of [these] good [people]; and that the good and faithful, the true servants of God, who have laid down the burdens of the world and come to holy baptism, and rising up from [the font] and conceiving by the Holy Spirit, they bring forth the fruit of a twin charity, that is [love] of God and their neighbor: why is it that if someone says these things, he pleases the listener less than he would if he had drawn the same meaning from an explanation of that passage from the *Song of Songs* where it is said of the Church, when she is praised like a beautiful woman, "Your teeth are like shorn ewes coming up from the washing, all of them bearing twins, and there is not a barren one among them" (Sg.4:2). Does anyone learn something different than if he heard it in plain words without the help of this simile? And yet, in a way I don't understand, I contemplate the saints with greater delight when I see them as the teeth of the Church, which cut men off from their errors and transfer them into her body, after their hardness has been softened, as if bitten off [by the teeth] and chewed up. The sheep also I recognize with the greatest pleasure: sheared of all worldly burdens, and abandoning their fleeces, they come up from the washing, that is from baptism, and all of them bear twins, the two precepts of love, and I see that none of them is barren of this holy fruit. Yet it is difficult to tell why I should see this with greater delight than I would if no simile such as this were brought

⁷ "It is relatively easy, and not unimportant, to assess the influence of one man on another by pointing to quotation or allusion in the works of the younger or dependent writer. No less important, but much harder to discover, are the ways in which one man can affect the habits of mind in another, and influence the course of his career." Philip Rousseau, "Augustine and Ambrose: the Loyalty and Singlemindedness of a Disciple," *Augustiniana*, 27 (1977), 151.

⁸ See also Jean Daniélou, "Eucharistie et Cantique des Cantiques" *Irénikon*, t.23 (1950), 263-5; Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris: Boccard, 1958), 489-91.

forth from the Scriptures, since the reality is the same and the knowledge is the same, yet this is another question [from the one at hand].⁹

This passage belongs to Augustine's discussion of the role of obscure passages in the Scriptures. He presents the simile of the teeth as an example of a figurative, and therefore an obscure, passage.¹⁰ He says, following Origen, that the obscure and ambiguous passages in the Scriptures are allowed by Providence in order to exercise our intellect and will: pride is subdued by labor, and interest is aroused and engaged by the need to search out the meaning of the texts. Even if it is difficult to know why metaphors and similes are so delightful, no one doubts the facts (1) that figurative language is sometimes more delightful and (2) that the greater the effort needed for the inquiry, the greater the satisfaction in finding the right solution. If a passage is too obscure, one becomes discouraged, if it is too easy, one pays no attention. So the Holy Spirit has arranged the whole in such a way that almost nothing is dug out of the obscure passages that cannot be found somewhere else rendered into the plainest speech.¹¹ The simile of the teeth,

⁹ Quid enim est, quaeso, quod si quisquam dicat sanctos esse homines atque perfectos, quorum uita et moribus Christi ecclesia de quibuslibet superstitionibus praecidit eos, qui ad se ueniunt et imitatione bonorum sibimet quodammodo incorporat; qui boni fideles et ueri Dei serui deponentes onera saeculi ad sanctum baptismi lauacrum uenerunt atque inde ascendentes conceptione Sancti Spiritus fructum dant geminae caritatis, id est Dei et proximi. Quid est ergo, quod, si haec quisquam dicat, minus delectat audientem, quam si ad eundem sensum locum illum exponat de Canticis Canticorum, ubi dictum est Ecclesiae, cum tamquam pulchra quaedam femina laudaretur: *dentes tui sicut grex detonsarum ascendens de lauacro, quae omnes geminos creant, et sterilis non est in illis*? Num aliud homo discit, quam cum illud planissimis uerbis sine similitudinis huius adminiculo audiret? Et tamen nescio quomodo suauius intueor sanctos, cum eos quasi dentes Ecclesiae uideo praecidere ab erroribus homines atque in eius corpus emollita duritia quasi demorsos mansosque transferre. Oues etiam iucundissime agnosco detonsas oneribus saecularibus tamquam uelleribus positae et ascendentes de lauacro, id est de baptismo, creare omnes geminos, duo praecepta dilectionis, et nullam esse ab isto sancto fructu sterilem uideo. Sed quare suauius uideam, quam si nulla de diuinis libris talis similitudo promeretur, cum res eadem sit eademque cognitio, difficile est dicere et alia quaestio est. (Augustine, *De doct. chr.* 2.6.7).

¹⁰ For the entire discussion see Augustine, *De doct. chr.* 2.6.7-2.17.27.

¹¹ nunc tamen nemo ambigit et per similitudines libentius quaeque cognosci et cum aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inueniri. qui enim prorsus non inueniunt, quod quaerunt, fame laborant; qui autem non quaerunt, quia in promptu habent, fastidio saepe marcescunt; in utroque autem languor cauendus est. magnifice igitur et salubriter Spiritus Sanctus ita Scripturas sanctas modificauit, ut locis apertioribus fami occurreret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergeret. nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non planissime dictum alibi reperiatur (*De doct. chr.* 2.6.8). Though Augustine is not directly addressing this issue here, the reading of obscure passages in connections with plain and obvious ones was one way in which the early Christians saw the underlying consistency in Scripture

therefore, requires inquiry and deciphering; it engages the imagination and intellect and this process, if it is not too difficult, is a pleasure. This is Augustine's explanation, but it does not seem to be the whole story. After giving the explanation, Augustine reflects that he really cannot understand why he likes the image so much. He dismisses his unease as beside the point of the present investigation, but the implication is that the imagery itself used as a vehicle of meaning is a source of delight. This fits our conclusions about the role of allusion in the poetic representation of reality. We see in Augustine's musing the joining of the poetic and exegetical traditions, a mind sensitive to poetic expression searching for the right exegesis of the Scriptures. In his writings, Augustine's use of the *Song of Songs* usually focuses on the straightforward allegory of the Church, without the affective interior element found in Ambrose and Origen.¹² Nevertheless, in this passage and in another, from the *De civitate dei*, we glimpse the interior delight he derives from the images of the *Song* as such and from the fullness of Christian love they represent:

Then, indeed, the *Song of Songs* expresses a certain spiritual joy and delight (*uoluptas*) of the mind of the saints in the marriage of the king and queen of that city, which is [that of] Christ and the Church. But this delight is wrapped in allegorical coverings, that it may be desired with greater ardor and unveiled with greater pleasure, that the bridegroom may appear, to whom it is said in the same *Song*, "Righteousness has loved you" (Sg.1:4) and the bride may appear, who hears there, "Love is in your delights" (Sg.7:7)¹³

Note that it is delight (*uoluptas*) that is covered in allegorical wrappings, so that *it* may be increased by the process of deciphering. It is an indefinable something beyond the wrappings of the allegory and *this* is what delights Augustine.

that was of such great importance. Ambrose was obliged to show how all passages fit into the whole, in order to satisfy those he calls the *infirmi* in his audience (Savon, "Le temps," 346; in reference to Ambrose, *In Luc.*8.63).

¹² E. Ann Matter, 87-9.

¹³ *Iam uero canticum canticorum spiritalis quaedam sanctarum est uoluptas mentium in coniugio illius regis et reginae ciuitatis, quod est Christus et ecclesia. sed haec uoluptas allegoricis tegminibus inuoluta est, ut desideretur ardentius nudeturque iucundius, et appareat sponsus, cui dicitur in eodem cantico: aequitas dilexit te (Sg.1:4 LXX), et sponsa, quae ibi audit: caritas in deliciis tuis (Sg.7:7 LXX) (Augustine, *De civ.dei* 17.20).*

If we take a moment to perform a little exercise and try to decode *uoluptas* in the passage above, we will have an example of the poetic process and of poetic memory, of which Ambrose makes such effective use. We cannot decode it with a short discourse on *spiritual joy* and *delight*. The process is more complex and takes us inevitably into our personal experience of what it means to be delighted; and then we need to bring in the auxiliary ideas also present in this passage of *marriage, king and queen, Christ and the Church*. After the process, we return to the image, and it has somehow become part of our interior experience. Decoding was not necessarily a profound spiritual event. This is not the point. It does, however, make the image belong to us, as an image. This is the process of which Conte speaks as central to the transmission of the poetic tradition in classical antiquity.¹⁴ A similar process takes place in the transmission of the Christian exegetical tradition of the Scriptures.¹⁵

AMBROSE

It seems to me that Ambrose, though serious and earnest in his preaching, also had a subtle and keen sense of humor. We have already seen some examples. Here I think he must have intended that his audience be amused as well as stimulated:

We have spoken of the fecundity [of the bride], now let us speak about her teeth. Most people journeying by sea or land, when they see a beautiful landscape, linger for the sake of pleasure, they feast their eyes and lift up their spirit, nor do they look upon this as a delay in their traveling, but rather as an attraction. In the same way, we have a heartfelt desire to consider the exquisitely beautiful teeth of righteous souls. For Scripture has taught that the teeth of the just are most beautiful, when it says, according to the letter, of the Patriarch Judah, but spiritually of Christ: "His eyes are merry from wine and his teeth are white as milk" (Gen.49:12); in this it is not human characteristics but the gifts of

¹⁴ Virgil looking back through Catullus to Homer: Conte, 32-7; Vergil taking Catullus into a totally new context: Conte, 88-92.

¹⁵ Hilary's *De Mysteriis* is an example of the process of transmission and the memory of typological images. (Hilaire de Poitiers, *Traité des Mystères*, ed. Jean-Paul Brisson (Paris: Cerf, 1947)).

divine grace that are proclaimed. It [Scripture] teaches that the example of teeth are not to be passed by, after we have spoken about the eyes.¹⁶

This passage comes in the middle of stanza 16, where he is describing the head of the bride, her eyes, hair and now teeth. I excerpt it here because it contains some useful indicators about Ambrose's approach to Scriptural metaphors. First, they are not the main event but a delightful attraction, though Ambrose personally takes these metaphors to heart (*nobis... cordi est*); that is, he thinks that spiritual insight comes out of the decoding of material images, such as eyes and teeth. Second, he suggests that we stop just to look at the view and not pass over the teeth; that is, we should approach Scripture with an attitude of leisure. By the use of metaphor, Scripture itself seems to indicate that we should. All of this is of course a metaphorical exposition of the right use of metaphor. Third, I wonder if Ambrose is also addressing a difficulty here. It is the tension readers may feel, some more than others, between the image and the plain truth. This is especially acute when one senses that too much weight is given to the image, so that it becomes difficult to decode the hidden truth. In the passage on the bride's teeth from the *De doctrina christiana*, for example, Augustine decodes the imagery into a small theological discourse – this is part of his point here – though how many would have figured all of that out on their own just from hearing the image of the bride's teeth? By presenting the process of viewing the metaphor as an excursion and not the goal, Ambrose may be signaling that he understands the limits of metaphor as well as its utility.

¹⁶ Diximus de fecunditate, dicamus de dentibus. nauigantes plerique et properantes itinere terreno ubi uiderint speciosum aliquem locum, delectationis gratia demorantur, pascunt oculos animumque ableuant nec mora ulla commeandi putatur, sed gratia; ita et nobis pulcherrimos dentes iustarum animarum considerare cordi est. docuit enim Scriptura pulcherrimos dentes esse iustorum, dicens secundum litteram quidem de patriarcha Iuda, spiritualiter autem de Christo: *hilaris oculi eius a uino et dentes sicut lac* (Gen.49:12). in quo non utique humanae officia, sed diuinae gratiae munera praedicauit, docet igitur exemplum dentes non esse praetereundos, ubi de oculis dixerimus (*Exp. Ps. 118, 16.27*).

STANZA 16, *AIN*

Ambrose begins, as he always does, by explaining the meaning of *Ain*. In Latin, he says, it may mean either “eye” or “fountain/source.” Both senses are developed in stanza 16 in terms of baptism, though he focuses primarily on “eye.” He takes the first nine paragraphs to explore different Latin expressions containing that word. The last line of the excerpt above refers back to this development of the theme of the eye. At paragraph 10, he begins the commentary proper, devoting 2-4 paragraphs to each verse. The only exception is 17-30 on the third verse, the one of interest to us here: “My eyes have fainted with watching for your salvation and for the word [promise] of your justice” (Ps.118:123).

This third verse is similar to those we saw in stanza 11, and Ambrose begins his analysis of it in the same vein as in stanza 11: what are these eyes that languish and faint after Christ, as they await his coming? They are the eyes of the soul, not the body, wholly fixed on the one they love and turned away from secular cares and pleasures (17). Then the commentary turns to a consideration of baptism. The transition is based in part on the meaning of *ain* as “fountain” but primarily on the association of names based on a combination of two texts from the Scriptures. The first indicates the oasis (*Elim*) where Moses and the Israelites camped after crossing the Red Sea, and where there were twelve fountains; the second locates the place on the banks of the Jordan where John baptized (*Aenon* near the town of *Salim* or in some versions *Elim*).¹⁷ *Ain*, the letter of the stanza, *Elim*, the place where Moses camped, *Aenon*, the name of the place where John baptized, and finally *Salim* or *Elim*, the town near *Aenon*, are similar enough to furnish

¹⁷ Then they [Moses and the Israelites] came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there by the water (Ex.15:27).

Ambrose considerable matter for allusion. On the basis of John 3:22-23,¹⁸ Ambrose seems to associate *Aenon* with the baptism administered by John and *Ain/Elim* with the baptism administered by Christ.

Ambrose's reflection on baptism in terms of the *Song of Songs* runs from paragraph 19 through 29. I will summarize the text and translate highlights, in order to present what I consider to be the most significant aspects of his presentation. Since the imagery is complex, it may be helpful to summarize the ideas behind the imagery here. There are two aspects, the theological and the poetic. From a theological point of view, Ambrose thinks that the identity of the individual baptized soul with the Church, as bride, is complete from the moment of Baptism. Though the Christian must diligently maintain and perfect the graces of the sacrament, the identity of the bride is not something one spends a life time growing into; the baptized *are* the Church.¹⁹ This is not a new idea, but Ambrose does seem to give it new emphasis (perhaps because some in his audience need a reminder). Second, one of the primary fruits of Baptism is the ability to read and understand the Scriptures. Third, the grace of Baptism is maintained by the Eucharist. From the poetic point of view, one may have the impression that the imagery in this stanza takes on a life of its own. The praises of the bride are more than just allegorical clothing for theological truth. The question here is this: Is Ambrose rambling along, enjoying the view? Did he make those comments about stopping by the wayside to enjoy the sights in part to justify his rather chaotic

¹⁸ After this Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people came and were baptized (Jn.3:22-3).

¹⁹ One may, of course, hang back on the threshold indefinitely, in which case the identity is not complete. One may also receive baptism without a sincere and total conversion, another more subtle form of incomplete identity. These two groups are on Ambrose's mind throughout this stanza.

associations of images or is he implanting in the hearts of his audience something like the poetic truth to which Conte refers, the interior joy hinted at by Augustine?

Ambrose begins in 19 by contrasting the baptism of John with that of Christ. John's baptism at *Aenon* was for those who saw the dire consequences of their sins and wished to be cleansed. These are the "eye of expiations" (*oculus suppliciorum*).²⁰ Christ's baptism is offered to those, on the other hand, who see grace; their baptism is signified by *Ain*. They are purer and more sincere than the others, since the shadow of the passion of Christ guards and protects them; they are the "eye of graces" (*oculus gratiarum*). One and the same soul has both eyes; the left is the eye of expiation, the right the eye of grace (19), since the Christian comes to perfection only through a process and by an ascent. There is a tension here between the two baptisms, applied to one and the same person. The passage below may indicate that Ambrose has a problem in his audience caused by those who have received Christian baptism more or less as if it were the baptism of John. He does not actually say this, but the implication seems to be there. Also, though the identity between the baptized soul and the Church as bride is sealed, as it were, by baptism, this is no guarantee that an individual Christian will live up to the identity.

At an earlier stage, therefore, each and every soul, comes as it were to the baptism of John, in order to do penance for their sins as a first step, and little by little, they progress and having wept for their sins, they receive the sacrament of Christ, washed by the spiritual baptism [as opposed to the non-spiritual baptism of John]. Whence, it appears in the *Song of Songs* that the Church is praised to whom it is said, "You have ravished my heart, my Sister, my bride, you have ravished my heart with one of your eyes" (Sg.4:9). This is the eye of grace, which obtains for itself a more abundant love of Christ.²¹

²⁰ *Supplicium* usually means punishment, or the torments and sufferings associated with punishment or persecution, but the root of it is *supplex* (*sub* + *placeo*): the fundamental idea is that of bringing peace offerings, placating; from this comes the idea of asking for a favor, being a suppliant, Eng.: supplication. I translated *oculus suppliciorum* here as "eye of expiations" because one who foresees punishments begs beforehand to avoid them and offers to do what he or she can to expiate whatever may require punishment.

²¹ ante igitur unaquaeque anima quasi ad baptismum Iohannis uenit, ut praemittat paenitentiam delictorum, et in processu paulatim, ubi sua peccata defleuerit, spiritali abluta baptisate Christi accipit sacramentum. unde uidetur et

Ambrose cannot be referring to an actual baptism of John, since this no longer exists. John's baptism symbolizes instead the first penitential step, of sorrow for sin. Again because John's baptism no longer exists as such, one would infer that Ambrose must be referring to the individual and interior road of the catechumen to sacramental baptism. Still, it seems odd to speak of the catechumenate in terms of the baptism of John. This is why I wonder if the insistence on the baptism of John here as the first step in a process of becoming fully Christian, and in opposition to the *spiritual* baptism of Christ (*spiritali baptisate Christi*), is an effort on Ambrose's part to reach those in his congregation who have in fact been baptized but have come into the fold for reasons less than perfect; they may have received baptism out of fear, sorrow, or expediency, perhaps in order to marry a Christian wife. Those who have received true spiritual baptism are the ones who, identified with the bride, ravish the heart of the bridegroom. After spiritual baptism, therefore, the soul becomes, in the words of the *Song*, the eye of the Church.

Again, we see here that the Church is none other than the Christians who have been incorporated into her at baptism. She has a left and a right eye, though the right, the eye of grace and faith, is the one that ravishes the heart of Christ. I may be laboring the point; but Ambrose inherited two strains of *Song* interpretation, one interpreted the bride as Church, the other as the soul. They were both present in Origen, who kept them, for metaphysical reasons, in separate registers. The Western tradition, if Gregory of Elvira is any indication, reserved *Song* interpretation for Christ and the Church. Ambrose consistently throughout his writings joins the two.

in Canticis canticorum ecclesia praedicari, cui dicitur: *cor nostrum cepisti, soror mea sponsa, cor nostrum cepisti uno abo oculis tuis* (Sg.4:9), ut iste oculus gratiae sit, qui Christi sibi plenior adquisiuerit caritatem (*Exp. Ps. 118, 16.19b*).

In the next paragraph (20) Ambrose turns to the same distinction he made in stanza 11 between the moral and mystical eyes of the Church. The moral eye looks to discipline, the mystical teaches the secrets of the heavenly mysteries. This reminds Ambrose of other verses from the *Song*, one attributed to the Church: “Your eyes are like doves, looking out from your silence” (Sg.4:1),²² the other is attributed by Ambrose here to Christ:

Have, therefore, the eyes of a dove, in the likeness of Christ, since we read of him: “Your eyes are like doves by abundant streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting by an overflowing fountain” (Sg.5:12).²³ The Lord baptizes with milk, that is with sincerity, and those who are truly baptized in milk are those who believe without guile, bring forth a pure faith, and put on immaculate grace. Thus, the pure white bride ascends to Christ, since she is baptized in milk.²⁴

Ambrose’s use of the imperative is significant. His insistence on the baptism of John, which he mentions again shortly, his indications of what a truly baptized soul should look like (sincere, without guile, pure) – are not all baptized souls truly baptized? – all of this would imply a certain laxity on the part of his congregation. His church at Milan in the 380s was no fervent study circle of Christians deeply committed to a life of chastity (stanza one), of fervent desire for perfection in Christ (stanza eleven), or of fidelity to the promises of one’s baptism (stanza sixteen). Perhaps, from an historical point of view, the reality that forced Ambrose to forge a unity between the sacramental life of the Church and the intimate spiritual life of the Christian is the fact that it had become too easy, too much a matter of course, to be a Christian of more or less good standing in the Milanese church.

²² *Oculi tui sicut columbae extra taciturnitatem tuam* (Sg.5:12). This is the LXX. Most modern translations have “behind your veil.” Íde Ní Riain has “veiled in silence.”

²³ Note: Ambrose puts this quotation in the second person, but it belongs to the bride’s praises of the bridegroom, addressed in the third person to the daughters of Jerusalem.

²⁴ *Habe ergo oculos columbae ad similitudinem Christi, quia de ipso lectum est: oculi tui sicut columbae super abundantiam aquarum lotae in lacte, sedentes super plenitudinem* (Sg.5:12). baptizat in lacte Dominus, id est in sinceritate, et isti sunt qui uere baptizantur in lacte, qui sine dolo credunt et puram fidem deferunt, immaculatam induunt gratiam. ideo candida sponsa ascendit ad Christum, quia in lacte baptizata est. (*Exp. Ps. 118*, 16.21a).

Ambrose continues:

And so, the heavenly powers say with admiration, “Who is this who comes up all white?” (Sg.5:8). A little before she was saying, “I am black” (Sg.1:5); now she appears totally whitened and ascends to Heaven; leaning on the Word of God, she penetrates the heights as we watch (*iam*). Nor without cause are there abundant streams of water where Christ is, so that the human mind and heart (*mens*) long to be filled. The deer seeks these waters, for which, after he has drunk, he can no longer thirst. The prophet seeks these waters when he says, “My soul thirsts for you” (Ps.41:2-3). Christ sits, therefore, by abundant streams of water and by an overflowing fountain. And so whoever is baptized in milk says, “And from his fullness we have all received” (Jn.1:16). It follows from this that the “eye of expiations” is not alien to the Church, since even though John baptized at Aenon, he baptized near Salim, where there were abundant streams of water, twelve fountains, and seventy palms (cf.Ex.15:27).²⁵

We see again the same theme as in the *De Mysteriis* (section one, chapter three): through the sacrament of baptism the Church penetrates Heaven, from which Christ presides over the sacraments. The sacrament of John is also brought into the pale of the Church, since in the Gospel account he was baptizing nearby. This web of association, based on similar names, may appear rather whimsical to us, but Ambrose is not trying to construct a logical argument. He is painting a picture thick with allusion: Heaven opening, angels marveling, Christ presiding, the bride, once black but now white and pure as milk, rising up to Christ, streams of water and overflowing fountains, deer, the prophet who thirsts and interprets. All who have drunk in this riot of beauty and life say, “And from his fullness we have all received.” This is the fullness of life in the Church. The baptism of John is not this fullness but it is close enough to be a beginning. The purpose of all this imagery largely inspired by *Song* is not to inform but to engage the hearts of

²⁵ ideo mirantur eam uirtutes dicentes: *quae est haec quae ascendit dealbata?* (Sg.8:5). ante paululum dicebat: *nigra sum* (Sg.1:5), nunc dealbata cernitur et ascendit ad caelum et innixa dei uerbo alta iam penetrat. nec inmerito illic aquarum abundantia, ubi Christus, ut mens humana repleri cupiat. has sitit aquas ceruus, quas cum biberit sitire non possit. has aquas sitit propheta, cum dicit: *sitiuit in te anima mea* (Ps.41:2-3). sedet ergo Christus super abundantiam aquarum et super plenitudinem, et ideo qui baptizatur in lacte dicit: *et nos omnes de plenitudine eius accepimus* (Jn.1:16). unde et oculus suppliciorum non alienus est ab ecclesia, quia, etsi baptizabat Iohannes in Aenon, baptizabat iuxta Salim, ubi erat aquarum abundantia et duodecim fontes et septuaginta palmarum arbores. (*Exp. Ps. 118*, 16.21b).

those who have received the sacrament of baptism, even if their commitment to it has been less than perfect.

In the following paragraph Ambrose works his way from the abundant watercourses and fountains to the teeth of the bride. In the last sentence of the previous paragraph (above) he conflated *Salim*, the place where Christ baptized with *Elim*, Moses's camp where there were twelve fountains:

These fountains belong to the Church, that is in the Old Testament [they are] the patriarchs, in the New the twelve apostles.... Whoever attains to the sacred mysteries is bathed beforehand in these fountains; for these fountains, flowing from the eternal Font, flood the whole world; Wherever they are found, there is an ascension of souls. Indeed *Salim* is interpreted to mean "he is ascending." He ascends truly, who puts off his own sins. By this term the rite of purifying sanctification is expressed. Whence also in the *Song of Songs* Christ says to the Church fittingly: "Your teeth are as flocks of shorn ewes, that have come up from the washing; all of them bearing twins, and there is not a barren one among them" (Sg.4:2). With regard to appearance, this is said of goats, but in the mystical sense it is said of the flock of the Church.²⁶

There are two points of interest here. First, the "sacred mysteries" refer to the Eucharist; the fountains in which one is baptized beforehand refer to baptism. The implication is that in the Old Testament there was a baptism, represented by the twelve fountains of the patriarchs; and this baptism belongs to the Church. It was real, though figurative. This is wholly in keeping with Ambrose's mystagogical catechesis, which is based on an exegesis of Old Testament *figurae*.²⁷

²⁶ Hos fontes habet ecclesia, hoc est in ueteri testamento duodecim patriarchas, in nouo duodecim apostolos. ideoque dictum est: *in ecclesia benedicamus dominum deum de fontibus Israel* (Ps.67:27). his fontibus ante perfunditur quicumque mysteria sacrosancta consequitur; isti enim fontes ex aeterno fonte manantes toto orbe fluxerunt. ubi isti fontes, ibi ascensio animarum. denique Salim interpretati sunt 'ipsum ascendentem'; ille enim uere ascendit qui propria peccata deponit. hoc igitur uerbo purificatoriae sanctificationis usus exprimitur. unde bene etiam in Canticis Christus dicit ad ecclesiam: *dentes tui sicut grex tonsarum que ascenderunt a lauacro, quae omnes geminos creant et infecunda non est in eis* (Sg.4:2). quod specie tenus de capris dicitur, mystice autem de ecclesiae grege. (*Exp. Ps. 118,16.22*).

²⁷ The Old Testament events and symbols are so clearly a divine prefiguring of the sacraments that the mere fact of their existence validates the reality and efficacy of the sacrament. After describing the flood and Noah's ark, Ambrose says, "You see the water; you see the wood; you see the dove; do you doubt the mystery?" (*De Myst.3.10*). Ambrose takes the statement from Gen.1:2: "The Spirit moved over the waters" as Scriptural evidence that the

Second, the shorn ewes here are goats and not sheep. Different versions of the *Song of Songs* have different animals.²⁸ Ambrose was in the habit of consulting various Greek and Latin versions, and perhaps to avoid ambiguity, he uses “shorn ewes” for all verses. It is surprising, since there were alternatives and “shorn ewe” is not a particularly flattering way to describe the falling, black hair of the bride. In any case, for the sake of exegetical and literary allusion, he prefers goats, though he feels a need to justify them.

You should not consider these to be vile animals. Listen, indeed, to what the Holy Spirit has to say about them: “Your hair is like a flock of shorn ewes which appears from Mount Gilead; your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes which comes up from the washing” (Sg.4:1-2). You see that this flock pastures on the heights, on the mountain, as you hear. And so, where there are precipices for others, for the goats there is no danger. Where for others there is danger, there is food for this flock. There the food is sweeter, the fruit more excellent. They are guarded by their shepherds, as they hang from bushy crags, where there can be no incursion of wolves, where the lush trees furnish them with unblemished fruit. One may see the mothers, their udders swollen with milk, hovering over their young, solicitous with motherly love. For this reason the Holy Spirit chose them that he might make a comparison with the flock of the venerable Church.²⁹

Even to those without a particular acquaintance with Virgil, the pastoral embellishment in the second half of the paragraph is evident; but those who knew the *Eclogues* would pick up two allusions, both referring to the shepherding of goats : (1) Ambrose says, “spectantur a *pastoribus*

sacrament of baptism was part of the divine plan from the beginning (*De Myst.*2.9). One could multiply the examples.

²⁸ We are actually considering two sets of two verses each that are nearly identical: Sg. 4:1-2 and Sg. 6:4/5-6. Since the Vulgate adds one extra verse to chapter 5 of the *Song*, chapters 6 and 7 present a difference of one verse between the Vulgate and the LXX. Verse 4:1 (Vulgate and LXX) corresponds to 6:4 (Vulgate) and 6:5 (LXX). 4:2 (Vulgate and LXX) corresponds to 6:5 (Vulgate) and 6:6 (LXX). The verses from chapter 6 are a repeat of those from chapter 4, except that they use different names for the animals in the second verse. So in verse 4:1 (“Your hair is as a flock(s) of goats that appears from Mount Gilead”) both the LXX and the Vulgate have “goats” and in verse 4:2 they both have “shorn ewes.” At 6:4 (Vulgate) and 6:5 (LXX) both have “goats.” In the second verse the Vulgate has “sheep” (at 6:5) and the LXX has “shorn ewes” (at 6:6).

²⁹ Nec uilia tibi ista uideantur animalia. denique audi, quae de his sanctus loquatur spiritus: *capillamentum tuum ut grex tonsarum quae reuelatae sunt a monte Galaad. dentes tui ut grex tonsarum quae ascenderunt de lauacro* (Sg.4:1-2) uides quod in altis grex iste pascitur, audis in monte. itaque ubi aliis praecipitia, ibi capris nullum periculum, ubi aliis periculum, ibi gregis huius alimentum, ibi cibus dulcior, ibi fructus electior. spectantur a pastoribus suis dumosa de rupe pendentes, ubi luporum incursus esse non possunt, ubi fecundae arbores fructum integrum subministrant. cernere licet uberi lacte distentas super teneram subolem materna pietate sollicitas. ideo elegit eas sanctus spiritus quibus coetum uenerabilis ecclesiae compararet. (*Exp. Ps. 118*,16.23).

suis *dumosa de rupe pendentes*”; Virgil has: “non *ego* [Meliboeus, the shepherd] uos posthac uiridi proiectus in antro / *dumosa pendere* procul de *rupe* uidebo” (1.75-6) and (2) Ambrose says, “ubi *luporum* incursus esse non possunt... *uberi* [rich] *lacte distentas* [caprae]”; Virgil has: “*ipsae lacte* domum referent *distenta* capellae / *ubera* [udders] nec magnos metuent armenta *leones* (4.21-2).”

In stanza eleven Ambrose made a highly suggestive allusion to the story of Dido; here, as in many other passages in his writings, he uses Virgil to add metaphorical and verbal color to his text. But do these allusions merely add color and erudition, pleasing to Ambrose and his audience, or is there more to them than that? Certainly, there may be instances where erudite allusions and wordplay add nothing more than personal satisfaction for himself and his addressee(s); one need not look for more under every quote from Virgil. Here, however, Ambrose is adding color to an allegorical text that needs no more color! Also, when one reads through the paragraph, the sentences containing Virgil are extraneous to the immediate content of the text from the *Song of Songs*. They look like a deliberate addition of pastoral nuances; Ambrose inserted them intentionally in order to evoke thoughts of Virgil. The reception of Virgil is part of his lesson, a refined statement of method that should give his audience clues not only about the use of culture but also about his use of the *Song of Songs*. Some might think that he has pushed the metaphors over the brink, so to speak, into a rather precious description of motherly goats. This would be to fall into the classical rhetorical “vice” of *taedium*.³⁰ It is partly a matter of taste though, and late fourth-century audiences had high tolerance for verbal abundance.³¹ Yet

³⁰ Lausberg, 257; 269-71.

³¹ Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 2-4.

if we consider the presence of Virgil in conjunction with a passage of Scriptural poetry and, instead of viewing it as an erudite addition, think of it in Conte's terms as a combination of images to forge new poetic meaning, then new possibilities open. Conte's analysis of poetic allusion among the classical poets may provide us with some useful patterns for rethinking the Christian use of classical poetry. One may therefore ask whether Ambrose's use of Virgil in conjunction with the *Song of Songs* is different from Virgil's use of Catullus, Theocritus, or Homer. Virgil was a mainstay of Ambrose's poetic memory. Through Virgil he recaptured, so to speak, an entire literary culture. When he alluded to that culture, with his "delicate touch" (Davidson) of verbal allusion, he could use it to validate the context in which he inserts the allusion and at the same time adjust the literary culture to a new context. Allusion is a double process, backwards and forwards. It requires work on the part of the poet (here it is Ambrose) and on the part of the reader or listener, who must fit the allusions into the new context. Conte says:

Before the allusion can have the desired effect on the reader, it must first exert that effect on the poet. The more easily the original can be recognized – the more "quotable" (because memorable) it is – the more intense and immediate its effect will be. The reader's collaboration is indispensable to the poet if the active phase of allusion is to take effect. Thus allusion will occur as a literary act if a sympathetic vibration can be set up between the poet's and the reader's memories when these are directed to a source already stored in both. Reference should be made to a poetic *setting* rather than to individual lines. A single word in the new poem will often be enough to condense a whole poetic situation and to revive its mood.³²

This certainly fits what Ambrose accomplished with the *gremio fovet* in Stanza 11. Does it also fit what he has accomplished in the paragraph above? Without realizing it, we are taken up into the world of the *Eclogues* for a few phrases – Ambrose has revived its mood – and then we are

³² Conte, 35.

gently returned back into the world of the *Song of Songs*. In Averil Cameron's terms, we see Ambrose in a process of *creating* a new intellectual and imaginative universe.³³

The process of decoding, therefore, is twofold for Ambrose's audience here. On one level they must unscramble the metaphor of goats grazing on the heights as an image of the Church. On a deeper, less articulate level they must fit their cultural memory, encapsulated in Virgil, into the present cultural experience of hearing or reading the *Song of Songs*, living in the Christian Church, and representing themselves to themselves and each other as members of the Church, as the bride of the *Song of Songs*. Much of this work takes place, I think, on a level where personal experience, cultural experience and education, and finally intellectual reflection meet. One comes out of this process both with the sense of "owning Virgil" in a new context and with a sense of continuity between the experience of being a baptized Christian and the experience of belonging to a classical tradition. From a psychological standpoint, where the classical tradition was still felt to be vigorous, the sense of continuity was crucial; and this was the case for Ambrose and for his audience. This continuity, however, is not something that can be subjected to rational analysis. Allusion can take the poet and his audience into an area of human experience that is deeper and larger, though less articulate.

We have been discussing paragraph 23; we are half way through a trajectory that reaches from sacramental Baptism, passes through a consideration of the reading of Scripture, and ends with the Eucharist. Ambrose begins the next paragraph by announcing that he will now give a mystical interpretation of the same passage (about the bride's teeth as goats). We realize by im-

³³ "A large part of Christianity's effectiveness in the Roman Empire lay in its capacity to create its own intellectual and imaginative universe." (Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: the development of Christian discourse*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 6)

plication that the description of the goats with the Virgilian allusions has been part of a *moral* interpretation of Sg.4:1-2.³⁴ Note that both the bride's hair and her teeth are likened to goats, but in most versions of the *Song*, it is the teeth that are like "shorn ewes."

And that you may hear a mystical interpretation, the hair of the word is a certain height and eminence of righteous souls, since the understanding of the wise is in the head; it is evident that wisdom lies in the loftiness of human thought. And just as goats are sheared that they may take off the superfluous, so also the flock of sheared souls. That is, the holy Church possesses the virtues of many souls, and in this flock you can find nothing senseless, nothing superfluous, because faith makes the wise; and moreover, spiritual grace has cleansed them from all stain of excess. With good reason, therefore, the souls of the righteous appear from Mount Gilead.³⁵

The "hair of the word" (*capillamentu uerbi*) here is ambiguous. I would not think "word" should be capitalized, as if to refer to Christ. Perhaps it refers to the Scriptures, read, assimilated, and leading to wisdom. "Loftiness of human thought" (*altitudo cogitationis humanae*) is also ambiguous. Does it include secular knowledge? In any case, it becomes apparent that faith is the true cause of wisdom and that grace is what keeps the just from excess. Faith and grace, both the fruits of Baptism, are what make Christians wise and righteous.

³⁴ Note that the hair in this paragraph is that of the bride, falling like a herd of goats. I have combined paragraphs 24 and 25 and omitted the first part of 25, which introduces a new set of images, complementary to, but not directly related to Ambrose's interpretation of Sg.4:1-2.

³⁵ Et ut mystice audias, capillamentum uerbi est altitudo et eminentia quaedam iustarum animarum, quoniam sensus sapientis in capite eius; in altitudine enim cogitationis humanae certum est esse sapientiam. et quemadmodum tondentur caprae, ut superflua deponant, ita etiam tonsarum animarum gregem, hoc est multarum animarum uirtutes habet sancta ecclesia, in quo grege nihil possis insensibile repperire, nihil superfluum, quoniam fides sapientes fecit, spiritalis autem gratia ab omni superfluum labe mundauit. (*Exp. Ps. 118, 16.24*). Merito igitur reuelatae sunt animae iustorum et reuelatae a monte Galaad, hoc est a transmigratione testimonii, eo quod a synagoga ad ecclesiam testimonium caeleste migravit. in hoc itaque monte nascitur thymiana, resina et ceteri odores, quos negotiatores illi Ismahelitae, ut habes in primo libro testamenti ueteris, deferebant. hos odores habet ecclesia, quos mercatores ex gentibus congregati fide et deuotione uexerunt. itaque sicut caprae bonis relectae cibis et solis calore uernantes lauantur in flumine et exultantes munda surgunt de flumine, ita animae iustorum ascendunt ab spiritali lauacro. (*Exp. Ps. 118, 16.25*).

In 26, Ambrose moves on from the ewes to a brief consideration of their twin offspring.

To recapitulate, Sg.4:2 reads: “Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is barren.”

These are the ones [the ewes] in truth who bear twins; among them none is barren of virtues, none are sterile in merits. Fittingly do they bear twins, since they have produced a twofold understanding. And so you have it written in Proverbs, “And you write these things in three ways, in counsel and knowledge” (Prov.22:20). First he says “in three ways” and then he adds “counsel and knowledge”; knowledge itself is twin, one is of incorporeal things, the other of corporeal. (26)³⁶

Who or what are the twins? For Augustine they were the twin precepts of charity. For Ambrose they are virtues and merits; they are the senses of Scripture; they are incorporeal and corporeal knowledge. Ambrose does not develop his thought here, but he brings in instead the signature verse from Proverbs, used by Origen in the *Peri Archon* to introduce his threefold division of Scripture into *soma*, *psyche*, and *pneuma* (part three, section one, chapter two). It is the verse to which Origen, Jerome, and Ambrose all refer when they discuss the different senses of Scripture, or the different ways in which to interpret a particular passage. He is clearly thinking here of the interpretation of Scripture, since in the following paragraphs he likens the activity of the bride’s teeth to the process of eating and assimilating the sacred texts.

The next paragraph (27) is the one we analyzed earlier in which Ambrose likens the examination of the metaphor of the bride’s teeth to a halt by the side of the road in order to look at the view. In paragraphs 28-29 he explains the view: that is, what the teeth do and what keeps them in good condition. They eat the Scriptures (28) and they are maintained and purified by the Eucharist (29).

³⁶ Ista sunt uere quae geminos creant, in quibus non est infecunditas aliqua uirtutum, sterilitas ulla meritorum, bene geminos creant, quia congeminant sensus suos. unde habes in Prouerbiis scriptum: *et tu scribe haec tibi tripliciter in consilio et cognitione* (Prov.22:20). triplicem praemisit scriptionem et duo subdidit, consilium et cognitionem; sed cognitio gemina est, una incorporalium, altera corporalium. (*Exp. Ps. 118*,16.26).

What are, therefore, the teeth of righteous souls if not those which receive formless and hard food that is either cold, as is often the case, or too hot to touch? At one time they crush it, at another heat it, at another temper it, according to the quality of the food. The hard [sayings] they crush, lest the harshness of the letter in the Old Testament and the rigor of secular knowledge – unless it is reduced by a spiritual tooth – should block the vital juices by choking up the passage ways for the saving food and suffocating the gullet, as it were, of the soul through careless gluttony. So it is right first of all for you to divide up the food you eat, if it seems to be solid and dense, and to separate it into portions; and once it is softened, you may transfer it without any harm to the soul in all its members according to their natural division, in order that the soul's "body" may feast on the vital juice. Eat nothing cadaverous, nothing dead, lest it be said of you: "their gullet is a gaping sepulcher" (Ps.13:3); but drink in the living Word, that it may work in the viscera of your mind.³⁷

Again, secular knowledge is included in the mix (*saecularis intellectus rigor*). Note also that it is the teeth of the righteous, that is the baptized, that are able to prepare the difficult texts of the Old Testament and of secular knowledge – would Ambrose be thinking of the writings of philosophers? – for assimilation by the soul. Half-way through, he turns from description to direct address. He is not saying, therefore, that it is the role of teachers and bishops to chew the food of Scripture. Rather, he says, his audience, all the baptized, should be chewing it themselves and drinking deeply the living Word.

Finally, in 29 Ambrose explains that the teeth of the righteous are preserved and whitened by spiritual food and drink, by manna and water in the desert under the Old Testament, and by the Eucharist under the New. This paragraph is a beautiful typological summary of the sacraments. Ambrose explains to his audience that although they have been wholly cleansed by the

³⁷ Qui sunt igitur iustarum dentes animarum nisi qui informem ac durum accipientes cibum uel frigidum plerumque uel supra modum calentem nunc comminuunt, nunc fouent, nunc temperant, prout qualitas fuerit alimentorum? dura comminuunt, ne asperitas litterae in ueteri testamento et saecularis intellectus rigor, nisi fuerit spiritali dente resolutus, uitalia ipsa intercluis ciborum salutarium meatibus et gulam quandam animae incuriosa edacitate suffocet. par est igitur ut diuidas primum, si solida tibi uidetur esca quae sumitur, et distinguas eam atque emollitam sine noxa aliqua animae in omnia eius membra naturali diuisione transfundas, ut uitalem sucum omne eius corpus epuletur. nihil cadauerosum, nihil mortuum ore tuo sumas, ne dicatur: *sepulchrum patens est guttur eorum* (Ps.13:3), sed uiuum haurias uerbum, ut in tuae mentis uisceribus possit operari. (*Exp. Ps. 118,16.28*).

sacrament of Baptism, they will only be able to maintain that purity through their participation in the Eucharist.

These teeth are whiter than milk, because they belong to the righteous. Indeed, when all our fathers were baptized in Moses, the cloud and the sea, it was fittingly written that “All ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink” (1Cor.10.3-4) with the result that greater brilliance was acquired by the teeth of the saints. After the crossing of the Red Sea, these, we know, were purified by the wood of grace, which tempered the bitterness of the waters at Mara (Ex.16:23-5), by the drink at the twelve fountains (Ex.16:27), and after that, by the watering from the rock that gushed forth a spiritual stream (Ex.17:6); for “the rock was Christ” (1Cor.10.4). And so they ate manna, that having been washed so many times, they might eat the bread of angels. as it is written (Ps.77:25). Now also in the mysteries of the Gospel you recognize that, though you have been baptized with your whole body, nevertheless afterwards you are purified by a spiritual food and drink.³⁸

Just as in the Old Testament all were united under Moses, so in the New all are united through the sacramental life of the Church. It is in the Church that they are purified by Baptism and in the Church that their purity is maintained by the Spiritual food and drink of the mysteries of the Gospel and the Eucharist.

The final paragraph (30) of this section makes the transition back into the context of Ps.118. Ambrose attributes to David the prophet eyes interiorly purified and teeth bright with spiritual purity, which allow him to say: “I have done what is righteous and just” (Ps.118:121, the first verse of stanza 16). “True brilliance of teeth is where the melodious confession of a good conscience resounds.”³⁹ Then Ambrose proceeds to the next verse of the psalm. After

³⁸ Hi dentes super lac candidiores, quia dentes iustorum sunt. denique cum omnes in Moyse baptizati in nube et in mari patres nostri fuerint, non otiose tamen scriptum est, quia *omnes eandem escam spiritalem manducauerunt et omnes eundem potum spiritalem biberunt* (1Cor.10.3-4) ut istis sanctorum dentibus maior quidam fulgor accederet, quos post transitum Maris Rubri Myrrae fontis amaritudine per ligni gratiam temperata cognoscimus esse mundatos, deinde duodecim fontium potu, postremo petrae spiritalem undam uomentis inriguo; *petra enim erat Christus* (1Cor.10.4). ideo et manna manducauerunt, ut totiens abluti *manducarent panem*, ut scriptum est, *angelorum* (Ps.77:25). nunc quoque in euangelii mysteriis recognoscis, quia baptizatus licet toto corpore postea tamen esca spiritali potuque mundaris. (*Exp. Ps. 118,16.29*).

³⁹ ille est enim uerus dentium fulgor, ubi bene consciae mentis resonat canora confession (*Exp. Ps. 118,16.30*).

fourteen paragraphs devoted to an interpretation of the third verse, largely in terms of teeth and shorn ewes, Ambrose will divide the last fourteen paragraphs of his commentary between the last five verses of the stanza. Returning to his image of a traveler on a journey, this has been a long halt. Thus far, we have covered the eyes, the hair, the twin-bearing fecundity, and the teeth of the bride. In stanza 17 we will consider other parts of her body. After the analysis of stanza 17, I will draw some general conclusions from both stanzas.

STANZA 17, *PHE*

In stanza 17 Ambrose continues his commentary on the praises of the bride. He does so in the context of verse 5 (Ps.118:133), in paragraphs 14-24: “Direct my footsteps according to your Word and let no evil prevail over me.” He begins by pointing out that “footsteps” here means those of the soul, that is, the soul’s progress or advancement. David was a holy man who desired eagerly that God should direct the course of his life. This is clear from another psalm in which he says, “My steps had well nigh slipped; for I was envious of the peace of the wicked” (Ps.72:2-3). The steps of his soul faltered as he marveled at the peace of sinners:

They appear to have tranquility, they seem to enjoy peace and quiet; but there is no repose where the mind is unquiet, no peace of mind where the thoughts are agitated by the stimulus of a bad conscience. How can there be serenity when there is a fight between conflicting passions, the strife of overpowering thoughts? And so the Lord, showing what it is to have true peace, says, “Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, not as the world gives do I give you” (Jn.14:27). He shows that the peace the world gives does not have the grace of true peace.... It is clear, therefore, that [David] spoke of the faltering of his thought; the footsteps of his mind, not his body, staggered.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ uidentur quidem habere tranquillitatem, uidentur quiete frui, sed non est quies ubi animus inquietus est, non est tranquillitas mentis ubi animus exagitur obnoxiae stimulis conscientiae. quomodo securitas, ubi diuersarum pugna est passionum, ubi conflictus grauium cogitationum? unde dominus definiens quid sit pacem habere ait: *pacem relinquo uobis, pacem meam do uobis; non sicut mundus dat, ego do uobis* (Jn.14:27), ostendens pacem quam mundus dat uerae pacis gratiam non habere. ideoque non in homine esse pacem uolens docere addidit: *pacem relinquo uobis*, et iterum: *pacem meam do uobis*. denique propheta dicebat: *pax pax; et ubi est pax?* (Jer.6:14)

Again, Ambrose drives a wedge between appearance and interior reality into the hearts of his audience. This reflection on the interior steps of the soul leads him to other passages from the Scripture where the stepping of feet leads to significant consequences. The themes of stepping, shod and unshod, interior purity, and peace are all present and related in the reflections that follow. He begins with Moses, then turns to the *Song of Songs*, and then to a prophecy from Isaiah (Is.52:7). All are examples of progress of the soul, by feet stepping forth, and this progress is accompanied by beauty:

Moses also said, “I will go over and look at this great sight” (Ex.3:3), indeed in order that he might see God. By a kind of going forward in virtue, he came to higher things; he was a shepherd of sheep and then he was made a leader of the people. And to the bride, in the *Song of Songs*, it is said, “How beautiful are your footsteps in your sandals, Daughter of Aminadab, the joints of your thighs are like necklaces, the work of a master hand” (Sg.7:1). Without a doubt, this footstep also signifies progress, of the Church or of the soul: “How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the Gospel of peace, bringing tidings of good things!” (Is.52:7). Clearly, he [the prophet] says that the advancing footsteps of the preaching and teaching of the Gospel are beautiful....⁴¹

In paragraphs 16-22 Ambrose focuses on the bride of the *Song* in particular, building up a complex mosaic of elements that constitute the Church: her members, their different roles, those who fail and those who remain faithful, her sacraments, and finally, filled though she be with imperfect Christians, her exquisite beauty that captures the heart of the King.

Let us return to the footsteps of the bride: what does it mean when it adds that the steps of the Church are beautiful “in her sandals”? We read indeed that it was said to Moses: “Remove the sandals from your feet” (Ex.3:5). By this he seems to be admonished not to

manifestum est igitur eum de titubatione suae dixisse sententiae, in qua animi, non corporis titubauerat gressus (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.14*).

⁴¹ Et Moyses ait: *transiens uidebo hoc uisum magnum* (Ex.3:3). etenim ut deum uideret, progressionem quadam uirtutis ad altiora processit. pastor erat ouium et dux factus est ciuium. et ad sponsam dicitur in Canticis: *speciosi facti sunt gressus tui in calciamentis, filia Aminadab. moduli femorum tuorum similes torquibus opere artificis* (Sg.7:1). non est dubium gressus hic quoque ecclesiae uel animae profectus significari: *quam speciosi sunt pedes euangelizantium pacem, euangelizantium bona!* (Is.52:7) utique speciosos dicit euangelicae praedicationis et disputationis progressus, ut alibi dicitur: *transgredere flumina* (Is.47:2), hoc est: fluentia et lubrica istius mundi transcurrere stabili mentis incessu. quod de animae gressu dici in posterioribus hic ipse Dauid euidenter ostendit, adserens quod torrentem iniquitatum sua anima transisset (cf. Ps.123:5). (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.15*).

be held bound by corporeal fetters. [“in her sandals”], therefore, signifies in the *Song of Songs* the attractive beauty of the soul, who uses the flesh like a shoe and in that shoe she suffers no impediment; but she excels in the loveliness of her gait. The soul, therefore, by ecclesiastical grace, puts on the flesh as a shoe, in order that she may pass through the course of this life and death with beauty and grace (*decus*). This happens if she neither soils her shoe with fleshly mud nor sinks into the vortex of vice, if she chastises her flesh, lest she tarry on the way and be overwhelmed by the weight of oily fat (Virgil, *Aen.* 7. 627). Modesty is a good shoe for the soul; a good step is [to walk] in the paths of chastity.... Let us use, therefore, the body as a shoe for the works of inferior virtue, for ministry, not for command, for service not for pleasure, for obedience, not for strife and let us place our feet on the path of wisdom, lest our footsteps be engulfed by some violent flood.⁴²

The “ecclesiastical grace” (*ecclesiastica gratia*) has caused difficulties of interpretation in the manuscripts and in modern editions.⁴³ If we translate “ecclesiastical grace” as an ablative of means, Ambrose says that the grace of the Church – ecclesiastical, that is, sacramental grace – is what gives the soul the ability to wear the flesh as a shoe and to use that shoe to walk through life and death with beauty and grace. This leads naturally to the injunction: “Let us, therefore, use the body as a shoe for the works of inferior virtue.” There are echoes of Plato and Plotinus

⁴² Sed reuertamur ad sponsae gressus. quid sibi uult quod addidit in *calciamentis* speciosos gressus esse ecclesiae? legimus itaque dictum ad Moysen: *solue calciamentum pedum tuorum* (Ex.3:5), quo uidetur admonitus, ne corporalibus uinculis teneretur adstrictus. ergo speciosam significat in canticis animae pulchritudinem, quae carne tamquam calciamento utitur et in ipso calciamento inpedimentum non patitur, sed incessus decore praecellit. calciat se ergo carne anima ecclesiastica gratia, ut cursum uitae huius et transitum cum decore praetereat. quod fit, si calciamentum suum non inquinat luto corporali nec in uitiorum mersit uoraginem, si castiget carnem suam, ne moretur ad cursum et *aruinae pinguis* (cf. Virg. *Aen.* 7.627) pondere degrauetur. bonum calciamentum animae pudicitia est, bonus gressus est in uestigio castitatis. sapientia autem amictus est animae, unde scriptum est: *honora eam, et ampletetur te* (Prov.4:8). utamur igitur corpore tamquam calciamento ad inferioris opera uirtutis, ad ministerium, non ad praeceptum, ad obsequium, non ad delectationem, ad oboedientiam, non ad dissensionem et in uia sapientiae uestigium conlocemus, ne gressus nostros uis torrentis aliqua concludat (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.16*).

⁴³ In the CSEL, Petschenig placed it in brackets and Zelzer made no further suggestions; in the SAEMO, Pizzolato left it, but suggested an emendation; to add “uel” to “ecclesia” (*uel ecclesia gratia*) (See SAEMO, 8.2, 225). This combination does not appear in the manuscripts as such, nor does it appear to be either appropriate or necessary. In the preceding sentence and in one of the following sentences Ambrose clearly makes “the soul” the subject; there is no mention of the Church as possible subject. There is no compelling reason, therefore, to add “the Church” as a new subject, though it could be added as an aside. Pizzolato’s emendation gives: “the soul puts on as a shoe the flesh or the Church puts on as a shoe grace”; but what does this mean? Grace cannot stand to the Church as flesh to the soul. In Ambrose’s explanation, the soul treats the flesh as a servant, which it wholly dominates and uses for inferior virtues. The Church cannot use grace in the same way. Grace is something noble that makes the Church beautiful. So the proportion behind the metaphor does not hold or fit Ambrose’s text.

here. Wearing the body as a shoe is the goal of the philosophical life, according to Socrates in the *First Alcibiades* and 2) the “works of inferior virtue” are reminiscent of Plotinus’s division of man into the lower body-soul composite and the true man, or soul without the constraints of the body, to which two degrees of virtue correspond. To the soul with the body correspond the inferior social virtues (*En.* 1.1.7,9-10). This also seems sometimes, not always, to correspond to Ambrose’s moral and mystical levels within the soul, though not in the Scriptures.

The allusion to the *Aeneid* 6.27 (*aruina pinguis*) may have no purpose other than color. *Aruina* is animal fat, tallow or lard. In the *Aeneid*, the Latins used it to shine up and condition their spears. Though the connection between this section of the *Aeneid* and the theme in this paragraph of the right ordering of the flesh may not seem obvious, the last line of Ambrose’s paragraph gives us a clue. First, *aruina* is a heavy, animal fat and it is doubled by the more common word for fat, *pinguis*. Second, the last phrase, *uis torrentis*, signifies the violent force of uncontrolled water and fits perfectly the description of havoc Allecto has created in order to incite the Latins to war against Aeneas and his men. Though the chaos of Book 7 of the *Aeneid* is engineered by the goddesses Juno and Allecto, it is still the quintessential picture of wild unchecked human emotion and the destruction this causes; it is the exact opposite of the control, freedom, and beauty Ambrose intends. So his use of this allusion would fit Conte’s comment that one or two words may evoke an entire remembered context.⁴⁴

In the next paragraph Ambrose contrasts Moses and Joshua with Christ:

And so, to Moses it was said: “Take off your shoes” (Ex.3:3); the same was said to Joshua (Jos.5:15/16). To Christ, however, this was not said; but rather it is written that John the Baptist said, “After me comes a man whose sandal I am not worthy to carry” (Mt.3:11). Those who could not be without sin were well admonished to remove their

⁴⁴ See p.450; Conte, 35-6.

shoes. He, however, not only did not take off his shoes but he also removed the shoes of others, since not only did he keep his body immune to sin, but he also granted indulgence for the sins of all. The Church, therefore, in imitation of Christ, is also beautiful in her sandals, washed from every fault.⁴⁵

Though Moses and Joshua were holy men, they were still not wholly free from sin. Christ alone kept his body, and all the sensual effects of having a body, free from sin. The Church also keeps her shoes, but this is because Christ has washed her from every stain. She is *abluta*, a patent reference to baptism.

Now Ambrose turns to another possible interpretation of the shoes of the bride. They may also represent the hierarchy of members in the Church. One wonders if here, as in stanza 11, he is remembering the events of Easter, 386.⁴⁶

And perhaps, when she [the Church] speaks wisdom among the perfect, she is beautiful in her higher members. But, when men of inferior status and learning follow the Word, when they do not forget the articles of the faith, when they keep the precepts of the bishop, then she is beautiful in her sandals. Often, the clergy fall into error, the bishop changes his mind, the wealthy side with an earthly prince of this world, the people keep the right faith. Whence also with good reason we may say of the Lord Jesus that in the affairs of his life in the flesh, when questions of morality were in dispute, the Word was beautiful in his footsteps. And, perhaps it follows that the apostles were sent out with bare feet, so that their disputations would not be overshadowed [by the flesh], but would shine forth. So also, the Church, the daughter of Aminadab (Sg.7:1/2 LXX), that is, [the daughter of] “Willing” or “Well-pleased” – since he [Christ] gathered her together willingly and with good pleasure – she also is beautiful in her sandals.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ideo ad Moysen dictum est: *solue calciamentum* (Ex.3:3), dictum est et ad Iesum Naue (Jos.5:15/16), ad Christum autem non est dictum, sed magis scriptum est dicente Baptista: *post me uenit uir cuius non sum dignus calciamenta portare* (Mt.3:11), quia illi bene admonentur ut soluant calciamentum suum, qui sine peccato esse non poterant. hic autem non solum calciamentum non soluit, sed etiam calciamenta aliorum absoluit, quia non solum corpus suum peccatis immune seruauit, sed etiam omnium dedit indulgentiam peccatorum. ergo ecclesia ad imitationem Christi speciosa est et in calciamentis omni abluta delicto (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.17*).

⁴⁶ See p.405, note 15.

⁴⁷ Et fortasse, quando sapientiam inter perfectos loquitur, speciosa est in superioribus membris; quando autem etiam inferioris status aut doctrinae homines uerbum secuntur, fidei seriem non obliuiscuntur, sacerdotis praecepta custodiunt, speciosa est in calciamentis. plerumque clerus errauit, sacerdos mutauit sententiam, diuites cum saeculi istius terreno rege senserunt: populus fidem propriam reseruauit. unde etiam de domino Iesu bene possumus dicere, quia et in his quae corporalia sunt speciosos gressus uerbum habeat, cum de moralibus disputatur. et apostoli ideo fortasse nudis mittuntur pedibus, ne obumbraretur eorum disputatio, sed eluceret. itaque ecclesia, filia Aminadab,

All of the complexity of Church life surfaces in this short account. First, there is the contrast between the higher and lower members. The higher are capable of carrying on discussions of faith and morals; they are the perfect, though remember Ambrose's question of stanza 1: "How can you be so pious in your opinions and so base in your morals?" This discussing of wisdom is also implicitly contrasted with disputations on morals near the end of the paragraph. The clergy is weak, the bishops are changeable, the wealthy are fickle. In contrast, Christ in the difficult circumstances of his life on earth always maintained perfect moral rectitude. So precarious is human grasp of true wisdom and moral integrity, that even his apostles had to be sent out without shoes. Ambrose knew only too well bishops who had changed their minds under pressure, or who had found devious ways to undermine his authority. In Milan, he had at least one dissenting bishop attached to the Court, Auxentius. He also knew the unnamed wealthy, who were members of the Consistory, who would side with Justina and Valentinian II, as well as Christians who would listen to Symachus's *relatio* and recommend the restoration of the altar of Victory. By contrast, ordinary Christians, like Monica, were in 386 a source of stability and faith for the bishop. These ordinary Christians are sandals for the Church. She retains her shoes even when the higher ornaments falter. She is the daughter of Aminadab, beautiful in her sandals.

Ambrose next moves from the feet to the thighs or hips and the necklaces that represent them. This is an obscure passage with various interpretations given.⁴⁸ Ambrose's focus here is on

hoc est uoluntarii uel beneplaciti, quia uoluntarius eam et beneplacitus congregauit, et in calciamentis speciosa est (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.18*).

⁴⁸ The wide variation among the translations of Sg.7:1b/2 seem to indicate a level of uncertainty. *Modulus* (Latin) and *ῥυθμός* in Greek both refer to measure, as in music or poetry. *ῥυθμός* also may refer to form, shape, proportion. Jerome gives *iunctura* in the Vulgate; these have been ungraciously translated as "joints." Ambrose's Latin term for "necklace" is *torques*. A torque is a solid metal piece, a broken circle in shape, worn around the neck, by women but also soldiers and victorious generals. In this case the curve of her hip could be seen as like the curve of a torque. To give some examples of later interpretation: the Rabbis said the 'thighs' represented circumcision (Jacob Neusner,

the necklaces rather than on the anatomy of the bride. One thing is clear though from the context of the passage as a whole: the bride is dancing, she is turning in the dance, her sandaled feet tap the floor, and the bridegroom watches and admires. If she is wearing necklaces and if they move in the same rhythm as her dance, one can easily make the connection between her hips and thighs and the image of necklaces. Also note that Psalm 44, of which Ambrose cites verse 4 is a Messianic epithalamium, similar in some respects to the *Song of Songs*.

Fittingly the *Song of Songs* adds: “The curves of your thighs are like necklaces (*torques*), the work of a master hand” (7:1/2), in order that the ornaments of the progeny of the Church may be praised in song. For, by “thigh” we recognize the sign of procreation, according to this: “Gird your sword on your thigh, most powerful One” (Ps.44:4). This signifies that when the Son of God emptied himself (cf.Phil.2:7), he was girded with the divinity of the Word and shod with human generation from the Virgin, for the purpose of giving salvation to all. But *moduli* are said to be precious ornaments worn by women normally suspended around the neck. Such, therefore, is the progress of the Church that it is compared to the most precious of ornaments and to the torques of victorious [generals]; for these are the ornaments of warriors. Thus Symmachus translated *peritrachelia*; that is, “things around the neck.” It is either therefore the generation of Christ or the propagation of the Church that crowns the necks of the faithful, in figure, with a necklace fashioned by a master hand; in reality, with the insignia of virtue.⁴⁹

The conclusion of this paragraph may appear surprising, but the progress of the Church (symbolized by the dancing feet) the generation of Christ and of Christians (symbolized by the thigh)

Song of Songs Rabbah: an Analytical Translation v.2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 174-5). The Glossa Ordinaria, referring to Bede, saw the *iunctura* as representing the harmonious joining of believing peoples through the ministry of preaching (*The Glossa Ordinaria on the Song of Songs*, trans. Mary Dove (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 141). Ellen Davis points to the vague description and the land geography of Israel under the description of the Shulamite (Ellen Davis *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 292)

⁴⁹ Meritoque additum est in Canticis: *moduli femorum tuorum similes torquibus opere manuum artificis* (Sg.7:1b) , ut posteritatis ecclesiae ornamenta canerentur. per femur enim insigne generationis agnoscimus iuxta illud: *accingere gladium tuum circum femur, potentissime* (Ps.44:4), quo significatur, quod filius dei, cum semetipsum exinanisset (cf.Phil.2:7), uerbi accinctus diuinitatem et generationem calciatus humanam prodiret ex uirgine, omnibus daturus salutem. moduli autem dicuntur ornamenta pretiosa quae suspendi matronarum ceruicibus solent. tantus ergo processus ecclesiae significatur, ut ornamentis pretiosissimis comparatus sit et torquibus triumphantium; haec enim ornamenta sunt bellatorum. unde et Symmachus *περιτραχήλια* dixit, hoc est quae sunt circa collum. siue ergo generatio Christi ex uirgine siue ecclesiae propagatio specie quidem tamquam manu artificis torquibus adornatis, uere autem uirtutis insignibus spiritalibus ceruices fidelium coronauit (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.19*).

the virtue of Christians (symbolized by the insignia of necklaces), all are wrapped together in another of Ambrose's complex images. Note, again, that all the beauty of the faithful comes from their identification with the Church.

In the next paragraph, Ambrose shares with his readers his enthusiasm for the beauty and praises of the bride. Then he comments on the following verse: "Your navel is a mixing bowl, well turned, that never lacks blended wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat encircled by lilies" (Sg.7:2). Ambrose's Latin for "well turned" (*tornatilis*) evokes the image of a bowl well shaped on the potter's wheel or wood turned on a lathe.

Indeed this whole description of the members of the Church is full of beauty and praise. For, her navel is praised "like a mixing bowl, well turned, that never lacks blended wine" (Sg.7:2a). This is because it is well versed in every teaching in the fullness of knowledge and it is never lacking in spiritual drink. Her belly is not only like a heap of wheat (Sg.7:2b), that is of the strong food enriched from the heavenly mystery, but it is also filled with the sweetness of moral teachings, as if filled [surrounded] with lilies.⁵⁰

The wine and wheat remind Ambrose of the Eucharist, which he mentions by the customary circumlocution, "the heavenly mystery"; but this image is also intertwined with his signature reference to the Scriptures as containing the stronger food of mystical teaching and the sweeter food of moral teaching. In Ambrose's mind the Scriptures and the sacraments are inseparable, though distinct.

Finally, Ambrose, following the *Song of Songs*, returns to the bride's head. Though the versions differ in verse numbers and details of translation, the full text is as follows: "Your head crowns you like Carmel and your flowing locks are like royal purple; a king is held captive in your tresses. How beautiful you are and how charming, my Love, in your delights!" (Sg.7:6-7).

⁵⁰ Denique tota ista descriptio membrorum ecclesiae plena decoris et laudis est. nam et *umbilicus eius tamquam crater tornatilis* praedicatur mixto non deficiens (Sg.7:2), eo quod in omni doctrina tornatus plenitudine cognitionis et potu non deficiat spiritali et uenter eius non solum aceruo tritici, id est cibis fortioribus caelestis mysterii saginetur, uerum etiam tamquam liliis quibusdam moralium suauitate repleatur (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.20*).

And so she herself has well merited to be a queen crowned with the blood of Christ, as it is written: “and the ornament of your head is as purple” (Sg. 7:6). The blood of Christ is purple, which, resplendent not only in color but also in power, dyes the souls of the saints; it makes kings, and better than kings, to whom he shall give an eternal kingdom. And with good reason the Holy Spirit exclaims at the sight of such great beauty in the Church, upon whom the blood of Christ flows: “How beautiful and sweet you are, my Love, (*caritas*), in your delights” (Sg.7:6). She is beautiful with the loveliness of virtue, sweet with the charm of grace, the remission of sins; she is troubled by no bitterness of sin. And now she herself is “*Caritas*,” who by loving the Lord has received his very name, since “God is charity.” (1Jn.4:16)⁵¹

It is the blood of Christ flowing upon the head of the Church that brings grace, virtue, and the freedom from sin to Christians and makes them fit for the Kingdom of Heaven. For Ambrose it is the Eucharist that makes the Church *Caritas*.

As in stanza 16, so here Ambrose uses the last two paragraphs of this section to bring his audience back from the *Song of Songs* into the framework of David’s prayer in Ps.118. He casts David in the role of one remembering events from the life of Abraham (danger on account of the beauty of Sarah, the sacrifice of Isaac) and then events from his own life (his flight from Saul, the incest of Ammon, the rebellion of Absalom), times of crisis when his steps had faltered and he would have prayed this verse of the psalm with which this section of commentary on the *Song of Songs* began, “Direct my footsteps according to your Word and let no evil prevail over me.”

⁵¹ Unde et ipsa tamquam bene merita regina Christi sanguine coronatur, sicut scriptum est: *et ornatus capitis tui sicut purpura*. sanguis Christi purpura est, qui inficit sanctorum animas, non solum colore resplendens, sed etiam potestate, quia reges facit et meliores reges, quibus regnum donet aeternum. Meritoque ad tantum ecclesiae decorem, cui Christi sanguis inrutilat, spiritus sanctus inclamat: *quam pulchra et suavis facta es, caritas, in deliciis tuis!* (Sg.7:6). pulchra decore uirtutis, suavis iucunditate gratiae, remissione uitiorum, quam nulla uexat amaritudo peccati, et ipsa iam caritas, quae diligendo dominum ipsius et nomen acceperit, quia *deus caritas est* (1Jn.4:16) (*Exp. Ps. 118.17.21-2*).

CONCLUSION

In stanzas 16 and 17 Ambrose has commented on passages from the *Song of Songs* in which the bridegroom praises the bride from head to foot. These passages are omitted from the *De Isaac*, since they describe the Church, as opposed to the individual soul, though over the course of his commentary, we have seen that Ambrose does in fact include references to the soul here as well. He also develops his commentary on the praises in such a way that we clearly see he is thinking of individual Christians, or groups of Christians, as members of the Church.

Ambrose gives his audience a magnificent vision: the Church is all-lovely in the richest sense of that word; she is pure, “washed” because filled with the baptized, whom she sustains in their baptismal purity through the Eucharist; she renders them fit for the Kingdom; she ravishes the heart of the King. Wholly identified with those she has brought into her life, she stands before the bridegroom, the Word, as *Caritas*, the mirror of his own love. Perhaps we can empathize with Augustine, when he asks, “Why do I understand these truths with greater delight when they are presented by means of this simile than I would if they were not?” At the same time, depending on our tastes and sensibilities, we may be ill at ease with such rich and sensual metaphorical imagery. There is an underlying tension between the beauty of the imagery and the need to discern the truth beneath them. I think Ambrose is fully aware of this tension; but he is also at home, “in his element,” standing in the breach between image and exegesis. He positively encourages his audience to savor the imagery, both by inviting them to stop and take a leisurely look and by his well placed interjection: “Indeed this whole description of the members of the Church is full of beauty and praise” (17.20).

In the excursus on the *Song of Songs* found in stanzas 16 and 17, Ambrose has halted his audience so long in order to view the bride, that he needs several paragraphs to return them to the context of the psalm under commentary. Also note that we are about three-quarters of the way through his *Expositio Psalmi 118*; his simultaneous commentary on the *Song of Songs* draws on verses from chapters 4/6 and the beginning of 7 out of a total of 8 chapters. So in these stanzas the *Song of Songs* and Psalm 118 are roughly – one cannot insist on a consistent parallel – in tandem.

So what has Ambrose communicated to his audience in stanzas 16 and 17? There are four elements I would like to emphasize. (1) There is what one might call the surface content. This covers the presentation and deciphering of the metaphors. Ambrose has taken the physical description of the bride found in the *Song of Songs* and interpreted it in a way that fits the general tradition of Christian allegorical exegesis, which considers the bride as symbol of the Church. He has brought out of this exegesis both commentary and exhortation relevant to his congregation. For example, the shoes of the bride are the unpretentious but faithful ordinary Christians in his church; the teeth are those who engage in the tasks of reading, digesting, and interpreting the Scriptures; “wheat,” “wine,” and “purple” in the *Song* signify the elements of the Eucharist; the pure, white, washed ewes symbolize the rites and effects of Baptism. Then there are “second tier” interpretations: the goats pasturing on high places, which wolves cannot reach, are like Christians cultivating a virtuous life within the safe confines of the Church; necklaces signify the adornments of virtue and the torques of victory; the complex associations of place names, waters and fountains, and number (here it is twelve) conjure up images of the typological and moral dimensions of baptism – in the Red Sea under Moses and the patriarchs, in the Jordan by John, in

the spirit by Christ – and Ambrose applies these different baptisms to the degrees of holiness and commitment in his own flock. Finally, the eyes of the bride and the twins of the teeth refer to the different senses of Scripture. Some may find these second tier interpretations far fetched, but Ambrose always maintains a clear connection between the image and an interpretation that is relevant to the life and thought of his audience. On the basis of this interpretation of the physical qualities of the bride, Ambrose presents a clear vision of the Church as a community of the faithful joined together by a sacramental life. In one sense there is nothing new in this understanding, but it seems to me that the clarity and the emphasis is a hallmark of Ambrose's thought. He is intent on identifying the faithful with the bride.

(2) There is what we might call the deep content. Let us return once again to Augustine's remarks from the *De doctrina christiana*. Since Ambrose could have delivered the same content and given the same understanding to his audience without the similes, why use them? Part of the answer lies – again in Augustine's terms – in the decoding of the metaphors. There is a pleasure and satisfaction attached to figuring them out. It is the “aha!” moment when one finally “gets” it. From a pedagogical standpoint, things figured out are often better remembered. When the subject matter is related to moral discipline and divine revelation, the process of working through metaphors and types – with help from Ambrose – is formative; it is the process of “digesting” Scripture that shows the continuity and scope of the divine plan of salvation as well as the imperatives for participating in that plan. There is, however, another part of this deep content, and this other element is what I would like to emphasize here. Augustine and Ambrose give hints of it, and we mentioned it briefly at the beginning of this chapter. Perhaps we may call it just the alluring beauty of the bride: she is young, exquisitely lovely and lovable. The bridegroom is not just in

admiration, he is totally enamored. What the Vulgate gives as *Carissima, in deliciis*, the RSV translates, “O loved one, delectable maiden!” That translates the sense. One reason why modern exegesis has insisted so on the sensual aspect of the images is that an allegorical interpretation that insists solely on a spiritual decoding of such obvious sensuality appears to fly in the face of reality. One of the interesting aspects of Ambrose’s treatment of the *Song of Songs*, however, is that he embraces the tradition of allegorical interpretation without denying the obvious beauty and attractiveness of the bride as a natural starting point. There is what one might call a tacit agreement between Ambrose and his audience that they may keep this starting point in mind throughout his commentary. The result should be, in Conte’s terms, a profound understanding that is based on the association of memory and of new material, in which both are preserved, in which the audience refuses to opt solely for one or the other. Conte is speaking of the poetic memory that comes from a literary tradition shared by poet and reader alike. Here Ambrose is working with experiential memory: everyone, or nearly everyone, knows what it is to be in love; everyone has had the experience of being enraptured by beauty. He and his audience also share a basic, working knowledge of the long history of salvation from the Old and New Testaments, so that he may encapsulate them in images from the *Song of Songs*. These make up the collective memory Ambrose and his audience bring to his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. He intends his audience to combine that memory with the realities of the Christian life he outlines in his interpretation of the metaphors: baptism, the Eucharist, life in the Church, the true love of God that comes from that life. Ideally, the result is a deep poetic sense of the reality of the Christian life and an attraction for that life, combined with a sense, their own deep personal sense, of what it is to live and love. This is where the two aspects – memory and new material – meet. The new

understanding is difficult to articulate, but it is understood and it is compelling. However one may wish to express this deep content, it is in some way a combination of (1) the deep human experiences of life and love, (2) a sense of the historical reality of salvation, and (3) the realization that (1) and (2) stand on the threshold of life and love that come to the Christian through Christ and the Church. So Ambrose's use of the *Song of Songs* makes the Christian life in the Church believable as an extension, so to speak, of the bases of human life that no one would wish to live without. This is difficult to explain, but it taps into a sense of continuity on a deep psychological level. This is one aspect of the great mystery that generations of mystics have tried to explain in terms of the *Song of Songs*. It is no accident that they look back to Origen and Ambrose as the sources of this tradition.⁵²

(3) For Ambrose and his audience Virgil was part of the deep content to the extent that he symbolized the literary and cultural tradition to which they all belonged to varying degrees and which they shared as a treasure.⁵³ As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, literary allusions are like a conversation between the poet and his audience. He makes the allusion; his audience picks it up and interprets. When, therefore, a speaker or author like Ambrose alludes to Virgil, he expects his audience to understand and to incorporate the resonances into their reception of his discourse. The resonances are specific. In stanza sixteen, he alludes to the wonderfully rich and poignant nostalgia of pastoral imagery, transformed by the new parameters of Christian life. In stanza seventeen, he alludes to the wild and fearful havoc wrought by Allecto, in contrast

⁵² E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: the Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 25, 36.

⁵³ "Not only was Vergil widely known, and well known too, but he enjoyed canonical status as a defining characteristic of Roman culture. His appeal as a bedrock of *Romanitas* was no doubt keener for the other changes in the essence of Roman culture that the fourth century encompassed. Against the fourth century's shifting landscapes sketched above, Vergil could provide a much needed sense of continuity with the past." (*Romane Memento: Vergil in the Fourth Century*, ed. Roger Rees (London: Duckworth, 2004), 6).

to the beautiful and measured control of the bride. On a more basic level, Ambrose expects the audience to pick up Virgil himself and to incorporate him into their imaginative and literary lives as Christians. Ambrose saw in the *Song of Songs* a book of the Scriptures that was similar to the love stories and the poetry of the classical tradition. Hence, inserting Virgil into passages of commentary on the *Song of Songs* came naturally to him.⁵⁴ It created a sense of continuity between the deeply human culture that was the common heritage at Milan in the 380s and the Christian culture based on the exegesis of Scripture and the sacramental life of the Church.

(4) From a rhetorical standpoint what was Ambrose doing when he dwelt on the metaphors of the *Song of Songs*? Ambrose was renowned for the sweetness, the *suavitas*, of his delivery. Augustine says that before he paid any attention to Ambrose's content, "he hung intently on his words"; "he was delighted by the sweetness (or pleasantness) of his discourse." He compares him with his Manichaean benchmark, Faustus, as more erudite, though less cheerful and soothing.⁵⁵ It seems to me that both Ambrose's measured sweetness and his erudition appear in the passages from stanzas 16 and 17 devoted to the *Song of Songs*. In classical rhetorical theory, the duties of the orator are to teach, delight, and persuade (*docere, delectare, movere*).⁵⁶ Augustine rethinks the question of *delectare* in the *De doctrina christiana*, emphasizing that it is not an end in itself but an instrument of conversion; it facilitates the persuasion that is at the heart of conversion: "if the truth is to be moving, it must be presented *suaviter*,

⁵⁴ Cf. Davidson's "Doing What Comes Naturally."

⁵⁵ et verbis eius suspendebar intentus, rerum autem incuriosus et contemptor adstabam. et delectabar suavitate sermonis; quamquam eruditioris, minus tamen hilaris atque mulcentis quam Fausti erat, quod attinet ad dicendi modum (Augustine, *Conf.* 5.13.23).

⁵⁶ Lausberg, 257, 1078-9; see also, Adolf Primmer, "The Function of the *genera dicendi* in the *De Doctrina Christiana*," in *De Doctrina Christiana: a Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane W.H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 68-86.

sweetly.”⁵⁷ Delight in the service of the truth was a lesson Augustine finally learned from the sermons of Ambrose. In any case, in Ambrose’s varied pace of his commentary on Ps.118 marked by “excursions” to view the images of the *Song of Songs*, *variatio* and *delectatio* served the transmission of deep content.

⁵⁷ John C. Cavadini, “The Sweetness of the Word: Salvation and Rhetoric in Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*,” in Arnold and Bright, 165. Cavadini argues that Augustine sees the principles of rhetoric as discovered, not invented. The same rhetorical principle of *suavitas*, therefore, governs the process of conversion – the divine persuasion. Book 4 of the DDC is about conversion and the cooperation in that task of the Christian rhetor through his preaching.

CHAPTER FIVE

STANZA 22 (*TAU*) THE PRAYER OF THE LOST SHEEP AND THE MARRIAGE OF THE BRIDE

INTRODUCTION

Ambrose opens the final stanza of Psalm 118 with a few paragraphs (1-4) on the meaning of the letter *tau*. In Latin, he says, it means *erravit* (“he wandered, erred”) or *consummavit* (“he accomplished, finished”). He considers both senses appropriate for the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the last stanza of this psalm.

We said that this psalm, the 118th, signifies the progress of humankind. He who has been formed (*eruditus*) by the instructions of moral teaching, abandons the childishness of an unexercised mind and takes on the knowledge of mature counsel and the habit of mind belonging to prudent old age. Where there is error, sin is implied. This, therefore, is progress: the cessation of sin.... For, of him it is said “he erred” [past tense], who now is in error no longer.¹

This statement might lead one to believe that Ambrose sees the content of the last stanza of Psalm 118 to be a reflection on the perfection attained after a moral progress through the stanzas of the psalm. This is the agenda he suggests as he begins his commentary on the first verse:

“Now let us recognize from the following [verses] what is the thought of the perfect man.”² The first four verses of the stanza (169-172) and Ambrose’s commentary on them (paragraphs 5-21)

¹ pslamo autem isto, hoc est centesimo octauo decimo profectum hominis diximus significari, qui doctrinae moralis magisteriis eruditus deponeret omnem inexercitatae mentis infantiam, adsumeret autem ueterani consilii scientiam et prudentiae senilis aetatem. ubi autem error est, culpa signatur. hic ergo est profectus, finis ut culape sit.... de eo enim dicitur “errauit,” qui in errore iam non sit (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.1*).

² nunc cognoscamus ex subditis, quae sit uiri consummati sententia (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.4*).

present various aspects of the prayer and praise of the just man, perfected, like David himself, in the school of virtue. In the next three verses (173-5) the themes of desire, preparation for eternal life, and the choices men face that lead them to or away from God return to the discourse. Finally, the last verse (176), which we analyzed briefly (part three, section one, chapter five) returns to the theme of *erravi*, this time in the first person singular (“I have erred”), with a prayer for deliverance.³ One has the distinct impression of returning to the beginning: the process of moral progress, in this life at least, knows no end.

On another level, however, this last verse does lead to a definitive fulfillment – to use Ambrose’s interpretation of the name *tau*: a consummation – of a long process of moral and mystical initiation. This is represented by the fact that Ambrose brings the bride and bridegroom of the *Song of Songs* to a final and permanent union. Though the Biblical book of the *Song* is framed in terms of love leading to marriage, nothing in the last chapter indicates that an actual marriage has taken place; but Ambrose, the pastor, mystic and exegete, works this final chapter into an account of betrothal and marriage reminiscent of the conventions of late Roman custom. As a result, under the text of his commentary, we glimpse Ambrose the Bishop of Milan working through the logistics of a marriage settlement: after dismissing obstacles raised by the daughters of Jerusalem (read: matrons of Milan) due to the young age of the bride, and having assured himself of the free consent of both parties – young as she is, the bride willingly, and independently, marries for love – he, as it were, acknowledges the contract. It is a small but marvelous glimpse into some aspects of high-society late Roman marriage.

³ Erravi sicut ovis quae perierat; uiuifica servum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus (Ps.118:176).

It is also no accident that Ambrose brought his informal commentary on the *Song of Songs* to such a close in the context of the last verse of the last stanza of Psalm 118. I think this closure represents his definitive commentary on Psalm 118 and on the Law behind the psalm. The return in stanza twenty-two to the theme of error and desire for deliverance, which prepares the coming of the Word and leads to the marriage of the bride – both well developed in stanza one – creates a parallel between the first and last stanza of the commentary. They are like the two wings of a Flemish altarpiece. After the liturgy when the wings are closed, together they tell one and the same story.

Stanza 22 contains a number of rich passages it is difficult to pass over: paragraphs 24-26, for example, so reminiscent of the *De Bono Mortis*, are filled with intense longing for the fullness of life after death. Since our primary concern here is the paragraphs devoted to the *Song of Songs* and the passages parallel to stanza one, I would like to mention only paragraphs 17-19 and then focus on paragraphs 27-45. This last section comprises more than a third of the whole stanza and is a joint commentary on the final verse of Psalm 118 and the final verses of the *Song of Songs*.

Paragraphs 17-19 are a commentary on the third verse (171): “My lips shall burst forth (*eructabunt*) in praise, when you have taught me your statutes.”⁴ *Eructo* (“Burst forth”) is a strong verb. On a physical level it has a primary association with food and means “disgorge, vomit, discharge.” On a spiritual level, it means “burst forth, declare, overflow”; it may be used of prophetic, inspired speech and is found in the psalms as here and in Psalm 44 (45).⁵ Ambrose develops at length the spiritual sense of *eructo* in the context of spiritual food, so that in

⁴ *eructabunt labia mea hymnum cum docueris me iustificationes tuas* (Ps.118:171).

⁵ Blaise, 314.

paragraph 19 he may exploit the double meaning when it comes to the banquets frequented by members of his congregation.⁶ Also, *epulae* refers not to food in general, for which *cibus* would be used, but to sumptuous banquet dishes or to the banquet itself and in Christian authors to the Eucharist. Ambrose makes the same distinction here that he made in the *De Bono Mortis* between the stronger and sweeter foods of Scripture. Here he mentions the *Song of Songs* by name. After quoting verse 171, he begins:

He bursts forth (*eructat*) in a hymn, who can say, “We are a good odor of Christ for God” (2Cor.2:15) and he bursts forth with good reason, he who has tasted many sweet precepts of the Lord. He bursts forth in a hymn, who had [previously] burst forth in the word. Indeed David had earlier burst forth with a goodly theme (*uerbum bonum*; Ps.44:4); here he bursts forth with a hymn. For he had tasted the good bread that comes down from Heaven. This is the good bread, which if a man eats of it, he shall never die (Jn.6:50). The word of God has its sumptuous dishes (*epulae*), some are stronger, such as the Law and the Gospel, some are sweeter, such as the psalms and the *Song of Songs*. The Church, or the pious soul, was bursting forth in a hymn to whom the Word of God was saying, “Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet” (Sg.2:14). She was bursting forth in a hymn to whom he was saying, “Your lips distill honey from the honeycomb, Oh my Bride, honey and milk are under your tongue.” (Sg.4:11)⁷

Both the words of Scripture and the words of the bride are described in terms of food. These words are associated with the Word, who is the Bread come down from Heaven. The unmistakable reference to the Eucharistic discourse from John’s Gospel in connection with the other food imagery aligns the word of Scripture with the Word/Bread of the Eucharist. The

⁶ In paragraph 17 some form of *eructo* occurs nine times. There are three more occurrences of it in 18 and 19. So this strong verb, with unmistakable overtones, is found 12 times in three rather brief paragraphs. Ambrose drives home his message.

⁷ Sequitur uersus tertius: *eructabunt labia mea hymnum, cum doceris me iustificationes tuas. eructat hymnum, qui potest dicere: bonus enim odor Christi sumus deo, et bene eructat, qui plurima et suauius praecepta domini gustauerit. eructat hymnum qui eructauerit uerbum. denique et Dauid ante eructauit uerbum bonum, hic eructat hymnum. bonum enim panem gustauit qui descendit e caelo. bonum panem, quem si quis manducauerit non morietur in aeternum. habet uerbum dei epulas suas, alias fortiores, ut est lex et euangelium, alias suauius, ut sunt psalmi et Cantica canticorum. eructabat hymnum ecclesia uel anima pia, cui dicebat deus uerbum: insinua mihi uocem tuam, quia uox tua suauis est. eructabat hymnum, cui dicebat: fauim destillant labia tua, o sponsa; mel et lac sub lingua tua (Exp. Ps. 118.22.17).*

Church and the pious soul – Ambrose mentions both – burst forth in hymns of praise, after having feasted on all those varied and delicious foods.

Ambrose continues to develop his argument in paragraph 18: no one can overflow in a hymn unless he has first learned the statutes of God (verse 171 above) and learned them from the Lord, his God. This is why – in the same verse 171 – David asked that God himself teach him. Yet how can anyone sing hymns when he is filled with fear and dread of punishment? How can anyone sing who has serious sin on his conscience, unless he first finds security in forgiveness?⁸

Finally, in paragraph 19 the food imagery coalesces with the discomfort of a bad conscience to home in on the sin Ambrose wishes to present to his audience:

And you, therefore, eat the foods of the heavenly Scriptures. Eat, that they may last for you into eternal life. Eat them every day, so that you may not hunger. Eat that you may be filled. Eat that you may burst forth with a rich feast of heavenly words; spiritual dishes do not normally harm but rather benefit those who have eaten to the full.⁹

Eating large amounts of food, to the point of excess, has run through these paragraphs like a sub-theme.¹⁰ For Ambrose the only difference between the bride and the Milanese standing before him is that one has been to the right kind of banquet and the other perhaps not. At least the punch

⁸ Sed non potest quis ante eructare hymnum, nisi didicerit iustitias dei et didicerit ab ipso domino deo suo. ideo hoc specialiter David petit, ut eum doceat deus; audierat enim et cognouerat in spiritu, quia unus magister est, et ideo ubique ipsum doctorem fieri postulabat, ut ab ipso disceret iustificationes eius. quomodo enim cantare potest in metu positus et timore poenarum? quomodo cantare potest grauium sibi conscius delictorum, nisi prius fiat ueniae securus? denique in posterioribus habes: quomodo cantabimus canticum domini in terra aliena?, in qua inpugnetur, in qua captiuetur in lege peccati, in qua defleat atque deploret suae captiuitatis aerumnas (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.18*).

⁹ Et tu ergo ede scripturarum caelestium cibos et ede, ut permaneant tibi in uitam aeternam, et ede cotidie, ut non esurias, ede ut replearis, ede ut uerborum caelestium eructes saginam. spiritales epulae non obesse solent, sed prodesse satiat, ideoque repleti uolebat propheta, qui dicit: repleatur os meum laude tua, ut cantem gloriam tuam. qui cantat dei gloriam, hymnum domino cor eius eructat. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.19*).

¹⁰ I would like to point out that this passage (17-19) is the third passage we have seen in which explicit food and drink imagery takes center stage. The first was in the General Introduction, in the section “Christ the Center and Unifying Principle of Scripture,” where Ambrose focuses on drinking and eating Christ. The second was found in part 3, sect.2, ch. 3, stanza 16, where the teeth of the bride chew the texts of Scripture and convert it into life-giving juices for the soul. In every case, it is a question of consuming the Scriptures but the sacramental overtones are also clear. This is another instance of the parallel in Ambrose’s thought between the Scriptures and the sacraments. They both transmit life to the soul in similar ways, by ingestion.

line (the last sentence) nails the contrast between the wonderfully rich spiritual food contained in the Scriptures and the sacraments as opposed to the repulsive banquets marked by over-eating, satiety, and illness. In paragraph 18, Ambrose touches the deep levels of consciousness in his congregation (*gravium sibi conscius peccatorum*). Will they get sick and tired enough of their banquets to turn finally to the beneficial, healthy, equally rich Scriptural and sacramental feast? The Eucharist and the strong and sweet foods of the Scriptures, ruminated day after day, nourish and delight; and the memory of them also anchors the soul. It is this memory that is the last word of the psalm; it is what, according to the imagery of the psalmist, allows the Shepherd to find the lost sheep; it is also what, according to the imagery of Ambrose in his commentary, makes the bride ready for marriage.

At 27 Ambrose turns to the final verse of the psalm: “I have wandered away like a lost sheep. Give life to your servant; for I have not forgotten your commands.”¹¹ This is the version Ambrose puts at the head of 27. Then he explains that in the context of a lost sheep, it makes better sense to say “Seek out your servant” than to say “Give life to your servant.” He has at hand versions of the Scriptures that have one or the other. He thinks that the second is a corruption of the first: a copyist or a translator misread the Greek “seek out” (ζητησον) and by omitting the “τη” read “Give life” (ζησον).¹² Instead of making a final decision as to the sense, he accepts both as legitimate interpretations. This is an interesting example of Ambrose’s attention to questions of translation and – possibly mistaken – interpretation. In the present stanza, however,

¹¹ *erravi sicut ovis quae perierat. uiuifica seruum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus* (Ps.118:176). The LXX, the Vulgate and modern versions all have “seek out” (quaere) rather than “uiuifica.” Ambrose had multiple versions at hand, some of which read *quare* and some read *uiuifica*.

¹² 27. Sequitur uersus octauus: *erravi sicut ovis quae perierat. uiuifica seruum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus* (Ps.118:176). Graecus habet: *quaere seruum tuum*, hoc est ζητησον, et potuit falli scriptor, ut scriberet ζησον, quod est uiuifica. sensus quidem uterque constat, sed oportunior est huic loco: *quaere seruum tuum*, quoniam ovis quae erravit quaerenda est a pastore, ne pereat. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.27a*)

he keeps both meanings, in order to exploit both. Together both version of the verb form the parallel between stanzas 1 and 22 and reveal the added dimension Ambrose gave to his commentary on Psalm 118 by bringing in the *Song of Songs*. He interprets “seek out” at 27-30 and “Give life” at 32-45.

“SEEK OUT YOUR SERVANT” (27-30)

This statement is a prayer, a direct address on the part of the psalmist, who likens himself to a lost sheep and asks God to seek him as a divine Shepherd. Rather than explain the significance of such a prayer, Ambrose begins by identifying his audience with the lost sheep: “You should confess your sins. There is no shame in that because all have sinned; and by the admission of your guilt you will become a found, instead of a lost, sheep.” Throughout the rest of the section Ambrose makes the prayer he recommends to his audience, placing it in the mouth of the sheep. In one sense there is nothing unusual about this; the psalmist invites it indirectly, and the image of the sheep cared for and fed by the divine Shepherd from Psalm 22 was well known to all as part of the mystagogical catechesis. On the other hand, it was certainly an intentional move on Ambrose’s part and a masterful display. It varied his discourse, pleased and refreshed his audience; it was calculated to inspire them – gently and with humor – to take serious action with regard to their sins. The passage is a marvelous piece of rhetoric that certainly delighted the audience and may have persuaded some as well. In my translation I have tried to capture a sense of the rhythm of the Latin; this is a passage to be read out loud, as Ambrose’s audience would have heard it or read it.¹³ I have placed the text and translation side by side. Comments will follow.

¹³ Note Augustine’s comment in DDC, Eng.113.54 on the reader’s choice... and later at 57.

ideo dicit '*errauit*'. dic et tu iniquitates tuas, ut iustificeris. quod lapsum fateris, in eo tibi cum omnibus commune consortium est, quia nemo sine peccato. negare hoc sacrilegium est - solus enim deus sine peccato est -, confiteri hoc deo inpunitatis remedium est. *errauit*, inquit - sed qui *errauit* in uiam potest redire, in uiam reuocari potest - et pulchre addidit: *sicut ouis quae perierat*; non enim perit qui agnoscit errorem. (22.27b)

Quaere, inquit, *seruum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus* (Ps.118:176). ueni ergo, domine Iesu, quaere seruum tuum, quaere lassam ouem tuam, ueni, pastor, quaere sicut oues Ioseph. *errauit* ouis tua, dum tu moraris, dum tu uersaris in montibus. dimitte nonaginta nouem oues tuas et ueni unam ouem quaerere quae *errauit*. ueni sine canibus, ueni sine malis operariis, ueni sine mercenario, qui per ianuam introire non nouerit. ueni sine adiutore, sine nuntio, iam dudum te exspecto uenturum; scio enim uenturum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus. ueni non cum uirga, sed cum caritate spirituque mansuetudinis. (22.28)

Noli dubitare relinquere in montibus nonaginta nouem oues tuas, quia in montibus constitutas lupi rapaces incursare non possunt. in paradiso semel nocuit serpens; amisit ibi escam, postquam Adam inde depulsus est; illic iam nocere non poterit. ad me ueni, quem luporum grauium uexat incursus. ad me ueni, quem eiectum de paradiso serpentis diu ulceris uenena pertemptant, qui *errauit* a gregibus tuis illis superioribus. nam et me ibidem conlocaueras, sed ab ouilibus tuis lupus nocturnus auertit. quaere me, quia te requiro, quaere me, inueni me, suscipe me, porta me. potes inuenire quem tu requiri

And so he says, "I have wandered." You too, confess your iniquities, that you may be justified. If you confess that you have fallen, in that you share the common lot of all, since no one is without sin. To deny it is a sacrilege – only God is without sin – to confess it to God brings the remedy of impunity. "I have wandered," he says – but one who has wandered may get back onto the path, he may be called back onto it – and rightly he adds: "like a lost sheep"; for he is not lost who acknowledges his error.

"Seek," he says, "your servant, since I have not forgotten your commands." Come, then, Lord Jesus, seek your servant, seek your weary sheep. Come, my Shepherd, look for your sheep as Joseph looked for his flock (cf. Gen.37:14). Your sheep has wandered while you tarry, while you pass your time in the mountains. Leave your ninety-nine sheep and come search out the one sheep who has strayed. Come without hounds, come without evil workmen, come without the hired man, who knows not how to enter by the gate (Jn.10.1). Come without an assistant, without a herald. For a long time now I have been waiting for you to come. I know indeed you will come, *since I have not forgotten your commands* (Ps.118:176). Come without the rod, but with charity and the spirit of gentleness.

Do not hesitate to leave in the mountains your ninety-nine sheep, since in the mountains ravening wolves cannot ambush those you have settled there. Once only the serpent bit in Paradise; there he lost his prey, after Adam had been expelled. There, now, he cannot injure. Come to me, harassed by raids of dreadful wolves. Come to me, expelled from Paradise, sorely tempted by the poisons of the long festering bite. I have wandered from those flocks of yours up on the heights; for you had gathered me too up there with them. But the nocturnal wolf lured me away from your flocks. Seek me, since I seek you. Seek me, find me, lift me,

dignaris, suscipere quem inueneris, inponere umeris quem susceperis. non est tibi pium onus fastidio, non tibi oneri est uectura iustitiae. ueni ergo, domine, quia, etsi erraui, tamen *mandata tua non sum oblitus*, spem medicinae reseruo. ueni, domine, quia et erraticam solus es reuocare qui possis et quos reliqueris non maestificabis; et ipsi enim peccatoris reditu gratulabuntur. ueni, ut facias salutem in terris, in caelo gaudium. (22.29)

Ueni ergo et quaere ouem tuam non per seruulos, non per mercennarios, sed per temetipsum. suscipe me in carne quae in Adam lapsa est. suscipe me non ex Sarra, sed ex Maria, ut incorrupta sit uirgo, sed uirgo per gratiam ab omni integra labe peccati. porta me in cruce quae salutaris errantibus est, in qua sola est requies fatigatis, in qua sola uiuent quicumque moriuntur. (22.30)

carry me. You can find whomever you deign to seek, lift the one you find, lay upon your shoulders the one you lift. You feel no revulsion for this loving burden, no annoyance to bear it for justice' sake. So come, Lord, since even though I have wandered, *I have not forgotten your commands*; I cling to my hope in your cure. Come, Lord, for you alone can both call back the wanderer and you will not grieve those you left behind. But these will rejoice at the return of a sinner. Come, that you may bring salvation to earth and joy to Heaven.

Come, therefore, and seek your sheep not through servants, not through mercenaries, but by yourself. Lift me up in the flesh that in Adam fell. Lift me up, [born] not of Sarah but of Mary, as she is a virgin incorrupt, indeed a virgin by grace free from all stain of sin. Carry me on the cross that brings salvation for the wandering, in which alone is rest for the weary, in which alone whoever dies shall live.

Ambrose deploys considerable expertise and charm in these paragraphs, both following and adjusting the traditional rules for rhetorical delivery. So before going into detail, I would like to review briefly what Augustine, following Cicero, has to say about the duties of the Christian rhetor and the styles he should use. This review will be useful here and also in the general conclusion to this chapter. Since the passage above is drawn from or is similar to homiletic material, we will look primarily at *De doctrina christiana* Book 4, where Augustine bases his divisions on Cicero's principles but adapts them to the requirements of the Christian preacher. Augustine makes clear conceptual divisions, but in one of his examples from Ambrose he shows the traditional rules traveling in new directions in order to fit the demands of a Christian audience.

The traditional rhetorical principles relate the duties of the speaker to the styles of delivery. At 4.74, Augustine presents Cicero's division of the speaker's duties and his own inter-

pretation of them. He explains that according to Cicero the eloquent speaker has three duties: he must instruct, delight, and move.¹⁴ When the Christian orator is instructing the faithful, he must focus on the content of his speech; he is communicating an idea to his audience and his goal, therefore, is that they understand. Under most circumstances, however, depending on the topic, exclusive focus on content without attention to the particular needs of the audience is not enough. Their interest needs to be engaged in order for them to receive the content. The preacher must, therefore, make his subject pleasant and delightful, so that the audience will be gripped by it and listen (4.75). Finally, if the preacher is speaking of a course of action to be taken, the audience may understand the teaching, they may enjoy the presentation, but they may not act. So the preacher must launch an emotional appeal that provides convincing motives for action (4.79-80). Cicero dwells at length on the orator's need for decorum (*Orator* 70-4). This is the indispensable virtue, or summation of virtues, that allows him to judge rightly how to engage and move his audience. Augustine would no doubt agree, but he insists here instead on the preacher's need for prayer (4.87-8), since it is God who is the primary agent, who has chosen to reach the audience through the preacher (4.94-5). This emphasis on prayer adds a new theological and metaphysical dimension not only to the preparation of the Christian orator but to the discourse

¹⁴ Following is the passage from the *Orator* where Cicero briefly outlines both the duties and the styles: Erit igitur eloquens – hunc enim auctore Antonio quaerimus – is qui in foro causisque civilibus ita dicet, ut probet, ut delectet, ut flectat. Probare necessitatis est, delectare suavitatis, flectere victoriae; nam id unum ex omnibus ad obtinendas causas potest plurimum. Sed quot officia oratoris tot sunt genera dicendi: subtile in probando, modicum in delectando, vehemens in flectendo; in quo uno, vis omnis oratoris est. (Cicero, *Orator*, 69-70);

Dixit enim quidam eloquens, et verum dixit, ita dicere debere eloquentem ut doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat. Deinde addidit, *docere necessitatis est, delectare suavitatis, flectere victoriae*. Horum trium quod primo loco positum est, hoc est docendi necessitas, in rebus est constituta quas dicimus, reliqua duo in modo quo dicimus. Qui ergo dicit cum docere vult, quamdiu non intellegitur nondum se existimet dixisse quod vult ei quem vult docere, quia etsi dixit quod ipse intellegit, nondum illi dixisse putandus est a quo intellectus non est; si vero intellectus est, quocumque modo dixerit, dixit. Quod si etiam delectare vult eum cui dicit aut flectere, non quocumque modo dixerit faciet, sed interest quomodo dicat ut faciat. Sicut est autem ut teneatur ad audiendum delectandus auditor, ita flectendus ut moveatur ad agendum. *De doct. chr.* 4.74-5 (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 2004), 228).

itself. Prayer included in the oration, as in the passage here, becomes a rhetorical commonplace in Christian oratory.

In his presentation of the three styles, related to but separate from the duties of the orator, Augustine refers again (at 4.96-7) to Cicero. In the *Orator*, Cicero says, “He is eloquent who is able to speak of petty or lowly topics (*humilia*) with clarity and precision [*subtiliter*, i.e. without emotion], of important topics with solemnity or vehemence (*graviter*), and of topics in between with a temperate style [*temperate*]” (*Orator* 100).¹⁵ After correcting Cicero’s principle, by stating that for the Christian preacher there are no petty or unimportant topics, because all topics upon which he might preach ultimately relate to eternal life (4.97-103), Augustine combines the duties with style: the emotionally restrained style marked by precision is for instruction, the temperate or moderate style for delight, the grand or vehement style for persuasion (4.104; also again 4.96).¹⁶ But, Augustine says – as would Cicero – the preacher will combine all three in such a way that a varied style results according to the needs of his audience (4.104-6, 134). Augustine gives examples of each style from texts of Paul, Cyprian, and Ambrose. As he presents these examples, he gives running commentaries that represent his adjustments to the tra-

¹⁵ Is est enim eloquens qui et humilia subtiliter et alta graviter et mediocria temperate potest dicere (*Orator* 100). See also Lausberg, no. 1079. He gives the different names for the three *genera dicendi*, as well as the subject, purpose, range, virtues, vices and examples of each style.

¹⁶ Augustine follows Cicero closely in his discussion without naming him, though one senses a certain tension here, especially with regard to the middle, mixed style, which Augustine subordinates in Christian preaching to the duty of producing moral persuasion and not the personal satisfaction or aggrandizement of the orator: Augustine himself does use the middle style with moderation. *De doctr. chr.* 4.142-4. See the nuanced presentation of Roberts, 125-30; note also that Augustine praised Ambrose for the “sweetness” of his delivery, a mark of the middle style. But see John Cavadini, “The Sweetness,” Arnold and Bright: “What finally renders any cultural artifact “useful” is the sign of the cross, “the foolishness of God... the foolishness of preaching” which disassembles the sweetnesses formed by perverse sign systems[including the middle style], and which turns everything else into a sign - in effect a sacrament - of God’s Wisdom” (172). See also: “Augustine will not carry on Cicero’s doctrines but dissociate himself discreetly from his master. So we see that our judgment on the relationship between Augustine and Cicero must be a differentiated one. On the positive side was Cicero’s stimulus to reach a better comprehension of the concept of adequacy in style, *congruenter dicere*. But adequacy for what? That was an open question.” (Primmer, 80).

ditional rules. (1) He says that one must be careful not to lighten the weight of the Scriptural texts by introducing too much prose rhythm; he himself does not neglect it but applies it with moderation (4.116-7). (2) When the preacher is instructing, he must foresee objections that may be raised to his points; answers to anticipated questions, therefore, are appropriate to the restrained style (4.110). (3) The high style differs from the moderate style primarily through the introduction of heartfelt emotion (*pectoris ardorem*). Ornamentation may be present, but the power and beauty of it comes from a passionate heart, not from an elegant style.(4.118-9). Augustine makes much of this point by using the example of a warrior with a jeweled sword. When he is fighting as a warrior should, it matters little if the sword is studded with precious stones. This is one area in which Augustine senses that Christian rhetoric differs from the old school, and this is borne out by Cicero's description of the third style as "splendid, abundant, solemn, and ornate" (*amplus, copiosus, gravis, ornatus*; *Orator*, 97). Finally (4), after his examples of the mixed or moderate style from Cyprian and Ambrose, Augustine makes a comment that shows him pushing the limits of the conceptual divisions. The texts chosen from Cyprian and Ambrose come from their respective treatises on virginity. Augustine says,

I have presented these two passages as examples of the mixed style, because the aim is not to make virgins of women who have not yet professed virginity, but to show women who have professed virginity how they should behave.¹⁷

This means that the examples from the *De Habitu Virginum* (bk.3) and the *De Virginibus* (2.2.7-8) are passages in praise of virginity that are meant to encourage and energize those who have already embraced the vocation. But then Augustine continues:

¹⁷ Haec autem propterea in exemplo huius temperate generis posui, quia non hic agit ut virginitatem voveant quae nondum voverunt sed quales esse debeant quae iam votae sunt (Augustine, *De doct. chr.* 4.130a).

In order to embark upon such a great undertaking, the mind must be excited and inspired by the grand style of speaking. Yet Cyprian the martyr was writing about the life-style of virgins, not about making a profession of virginity, whereas Ambrose the bishop was also using his great eloquence to inspire them to virginity.¹⁸

Augustine seems to be saying that a young woman who embraces a life of virginity must have within her the same convictions as those found in the high style. So Cyprian writes about the life-style of virgins, not about their vocation as such. Ambrose, on the other hand – whose text Augustine has just cited as an example of the mixed style – is also using his great eloquence in this passage to lead young women to the vocation, a task normally reserved, according to the rules, for the high style. Augustine does not conclude, but the implication seems clear, that Ambrose was going beyond the old conceptual limits of the mixed style. He is adapting the old forensic model to totally new needs and circumstances. In the examples from Paul, Augustine gives two examples of the high style, one ornamented (Rom.8:25-39), the other not (Gal.4:10-20). For some reason he chose not to do the same with Ambrose. So what is Augustine trying to do here? First, his purpose in the *De doctrina christiana* is to give guidelines, not to be systematic.¹⁹ His goal is to hand on the rhetorical tradition to a new generation of Christian homilists. He appeals to Ambrose, who is as classical as they come but also an exciting new landmark. Augustine seems to be saying here that in Christian preaching, where the need for growth and conversion is permanent, the preacher may need to combine the mixed and the high styles.

¹⁸ Nam ut aggrediatur animus tantum ac tale propositum, grandi utique dicendi genere debet excitari et accendi. Sed martyr Cyprianus de habitu virginum, non de suscipiendo virginitatis proposito scripsit, iste vero episcopus [Ambrose] etiam ad hoc eas magno accendit eloquio (Augustine, *De doct. chr.* 4.130b).

¹⁹ “The three *genera* [*dicendi*] only represent a selection of the possibilities of the really necessary forms of expression.... In practice the system of three *genera* dissolves into a large number of variants” (Lausberg, n.1080). Lausberg then cites Quintillian: *ac sic prope innumerabiles species reperiuntur, quae utique aliquo momento inter se different* (Inst.12.10.67).

All four of the points made in the previous paragraph apply to the text on the lost sheep above. They are: (1) the moderate use of prose rhythm, (2) the answering of objections, (3) the high style marked by heart-felt emotion, and (4) combined styles. Since (1) and (4) require more detailed rhetorical analysis, I begin with (2) and (3). So the order is: (2), (3), (4) and (1).

(2) Paragraph 27 is a good example of the restrained style. Ambrose presents two different Latin translations of the second half of the psalm verse. It reads either “Seek out your servant” or “Give life to your servant.” He proposes as an explanation for the difference a translation error from the Greek, but he says that both readings have something to offer and that he will interpret each one. Then, he makes a forceful entry into the subject matter by telling his congregation in plain language to confess their sins. In the next sentence he forestalls objections such as: “Others may need to confess but I do not”; “What good will it do me?”; “What will people think if I confess?” This is the restrained, instructive, style.

(3) The high style is marked by “heart-felt” passion. Paragraphs 28-30 do not contain a diatribe or a fearful warning, but an intense prayer for deliverance. Though prayer and emotional appeal are of course part of the tradition from Homer to Cicero, here the judge and the jury are God himself, known to know all the facts of the case and known to be merciful. So the appeal presents similarities to the peroration of a forensic speech; but there are differences, since one can only persuade God by a frank admission of the truth. The prayer here is marked by intense desire; *ueni* (come; 14 times) and *quaere* (seek; 8 times) run through it like a drum roll. The sheep also presents a graphic description of its danger and its suffering. It makes pointed appeals to the personal interests of the Shepherd, in order to induce him to come: the ease of the rescue

due to his greatness, the immense relief for the sheep and the joy for others that will result.

Finally the sheep is his own flesh and blood, so to speak, the child of Mary not of Sarah. All of this is a peroration and keeps the passage at a high level of emotion. There is also almost a tenderness and gentleness that stem from the goodness of the Shepherd and a confidence that the sheep will be favorably heard. This is the new element, however one may wish to describe it, that somehow gives a new color to the high style. This leads us to the fourth point, a combined style.

(4) As we said earlier, Ambrose uses the sheep to give a light touch to a serious message. According to the rules, humor is a rhetorical ornament for the mixed style; here we have a subtle and delightful use of it in combination with elements that would normally belong to the high style.²⁰ No one would laugh, but neither would they forget the high rhetoric attributed to a sheep in distress. Finally (1), related to the fourth point is the first: the use of prose rhythm. The prose rhythm of this text, based largely on the repetition of words and the similarity of cola, verges on the rhythm of poetry. It is so marked that it has a kind of “lyricism,” if I may use that word, that softens the intensity of the text itself and turns it into something more like a contemplation than a desperate plea. In an age when poetry itself is laden with an elaborate and convoluted style,²¹ Ambrose in his hymns and here in his prose creates a kind of poetry that could be appreciated by all sectors of his congregation. Both of these points seem to place this text in a class by itself: it is too intense to fit the textbook mixed style, too light and pleasant to fit the grand style.²²

I would like to present a schematization of one paragraph of the passage and then mention some of the ornaments found in the other paragraphs. Finally, we will look again at the

²⁰ Lausberg, no. 1072,2f.

²¹ Roberts, 2-3. (‘leptologia’) 39-43, 132-5.

²² See note 18 above.

content of the passage as a whole, in order to discover who precisely is represented by the sheep.

Following is a schematic rhetorical analysis of paragraph 28:

Quaere, inquit, seruum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus (Ps.118:176).²³

ueni ergo, domine Iesu,
 quaere seruum tuum,
 quaere lassam ouem tuam,
 ueni, pastor,
 quaere sicut oues Ioseph. }^a }^b

errauit ouis tua,
 dum tu moraris, }^c
 dum tu uersaris
 in montibus.

dimitte nonaginta nouem oues tuas
 et ueni unam ouem quaerere quae errauit. }^d ✕

 ueni sine canibus,
 ueni sine malis operariis, }^e
 ueni sine mercenario,
 qui per ianuam introire non nouerit.
 ueni
 sine adiutore, }^f
 sine nuntio,
 iam dudum te expecto uenturum; }^g
 scio enim uenturum,
 quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus. }^h

 ueni non cum uirga,
 sed cum caritate
 spirituque mansuetudinis. }^j

FORMAL ELEMENTS

The following is a partial list of rhetorical figures and elements one might mention in this beautifully constructed passage. Ambrose knows just when and how to vary the rhythm, so that the repetition of words and the balancing of phrases does not become tedious.

²³ My thanks go to Dr. William McCarthy for guidance and suggestions in the delightful task of decoding Ambrose's poetic and rhetorical genius in these paragraphs.

- a. Isocolon with anaphora: *quaere*. Though the members are separated by a *ueni Pastor*, they each have the same number of two syllable words. Depending on the delivery of the orator they sound almost like metrical feet.
- b. Expanding tricolon with the anaphora: *quaere*.
- c. Isocolon with anaphora: *dum*. The *in montibus* that follows adds variety and acts as a breather before the next figure.
- d. Rhythmic chiasmus with *et* in the center. *nouem oues tuas* is balanced by *ueni unam ouem*, *nonaginta* by *quaerere quae*, and *dimitte* by *erravit*.
- e. Tricolon with anaphora: *ueni sine*. The cola are not equal in length but they form a rhythmical unit, since each line begins with *ueni sine* and, like so many lines in Ambrose's hymns, all four words in this section have the accent on the third to the last syllable. Depending on the delivery, this may have had a resonance of iambic dimeter, the rhythm of the hymns; the last syllable of the line is common but the sixth syllable usually coincides with the grammatical word accent. For example, if the first "ueni" had been "reueni," we would have had exactly the rhythm of the hymns: *reueni sine canibus*. This indicates perhaps how close Ambrose is here to a poetic hymn.
- f. A small isocolon is introduced by two more *sine*; the likeness between the lines would be increased by an elision of the *e* of *sine* with the *a* of *adiutore*. More significant, we have a fourth *ueni* here and a fourth and fifth *sine*. Ambrose adds just the right touch of variation, so that we hear the words ringing in our ears but do not grow tired of them. In intense prayer, in a time of great need, we tend to focus on a small phrase and we repeat it over and over. The words are the vehicle for something much deeper coming from the heart. We see here that Ambrose has captured this sentiment, but at the same time by introducing slight variations he has kept the prayer moving forward without *taedium*.
- g. Another isocolon from *te expecto...* and *scio enim...* but with pronounced epiphora on *uenturum*; this is of course a new form of the same verb *ueni*. Note also the balance between *iam dudum* and *uenturum*; the two reinforce each other.
- h. The next line is taken directly from the psalm, but Ambrose has incorporated it wholly into his poetry. With the earlier subordinate clause *qui per ianuam...* it makes an isocolon.
- j. Finally, we have one last *ueni* followed this time by *non cum* as opposed to *sine*, followed on a positive note by a *sed cum*. There would probably have been some elision in the last line. These three lines together would have been perceived as expanding cola.

THE FORMAL ELEMENTS CHANGE THE CONTENT

1. The first phrase has a word rhythm: *ueni, quaere, quaere* | *ueni, quaere*. The second has *erravit, dum, dum*: two tripartite groups with one double. The sheep calls for the Shepherd to come, but it will not be easy to find her. He will need to seek far and wide. There is an implied contrast between *ueni* and *quaere*. A similar contrast is felt between *erravit*, the state of having wandered off and the delay of the Shepherd signified by *dum*. The isocolon here (c.) paints the idea of delay; there is no movement. Also *lassam* is emphasized by its position as the first word after *quaere* in the second part of the cola of the first phrase. All the words in these two short phrases are of two syllables that begin and end alike. So the *lassam* stands out. The sheep is *tired*, while the Shepherd delays and then rummages about trying to find her.
2. The chiasmus might be thought of as the structural center of the passage, with regard to form and content. The contrasts between the two halves address the problem faced by the Shepherd and recognized by the lost sheep: should the Shepherd leave the 99 in order to seek the one? 1) the beginning *dimitte* contrasts with the end *quaerere*. After an implied reproach in the previous phrase, signified by *dum*, comes the imperative “Leave the place where you have been tarrying and come *find me*.” 2) the middle terms contrast the 99 with the one.
3. Ambrose builds up another interesting contrast (h) between the sheep who remembers the divine commands and the hireling who does not know them: *non sum oblitus* is set up against *qui... non noverit*.

The same rhetorical figures are found in the other paragraphs of this passage. They create the same near poetic ambiance; for example, in 27 “sed qui errauit | in uiam potest redire, in uiam reuocari potest” (anaphora with chiasmus); in 29 “quaere me, quia te requiro” (chiasmus with paracheisis, or repetition of the same consonant and vowel sounds); There is also a large number of artfully arranged cola: for example at the end of 31 “in cruce... in qua sola est requies fatigatis, in qua sola uiuent quicumque moriuntur” (isocolon) and at the beginning of 31 “Ueni ergo et quaere ouem tuam non per seruulos, non per mercennarios, sed per temetipsum” (tricolon). Finally, for the more refined in Ambrose’s audience: the sheep contemplates the gestures of the Shepherd twice. The first time, it is a list with asyndeton: “quaere me, inueni me, suscipe me, porta me.” Then, she runs through them again more elaborately and poignantly: “potes in-

uenire quem tu requiri dignaris, suscipere quem inueneris, inponere umeris quem susceperis.”

Three infinitives followed by a relative clause depend on “potes.” The infinitive of the preceding group is repeated in the next. This is a variation on the rhetorical figure of *climax* (as in “ladder”) or *gradatio*.²⁴ The figure known as “the ladder” is used to describe the “ascent” of the sheep onto the shoulders of the Shepherd. The elaborated repetition of the steps to the rescue places the whole prayer within the framework of the Gospel parable of the Good Shepherd, who does in fact leave the 99 and seek out the one (Mt.18:12-3).

In these paragraphs the sense of rhythm and meter comes primarily from 1) strings of two or three syllable words artfully arranged, 2) from the number syllables in balancing cola, 3) from anaphora and epiphora, and generally from a sustained but varied repetition of several significant terms throughout, primarily forms of *ueni*. An interesting conclusion follows from these observations: some of Ambrose’s audience were well versed in the rules of poetic meter but others not. Also, the Latin most people spoke would have attuned their ears to accent more than to meter.²⁵ By choosing the elements noted above, Ambrose easily and naturally satisfied the ears and the tastes of all sectors of his audience.²⁶ All would have left this marvelous performance with a vivid and lasting image of the lost sheep waiting and praying for rescue.

Before continuing to the second interpretation of the psalm verse: “Give me life,” we need to ask, “Who is the sheep?” It is difficult to decide who precisely is represented by it. After the injunction to confess one’s sin, the prayer seems to begin with a personal appeal on the part of a sinner to the Lord as Shepherd (*Veni, ergo, Domine Iesu*). The soul as sheep acknowledges

²⁴ Lausberg, no. 623.

²⁵ Fontaine, *Hymnes*, 189-92.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 90.

her error and her fatigue. As we said, the mention of the 99 other sheep not lost, of the Shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders, and of the hired hand, places the sheep in the context of the New Testament parables of the Good Shepherd (Mt.18:12-3; Lk.15:4-7; Jn.10.11-4). Yet, as paragraph 28 progresses, we realize that the perspective is larger than that of the New Testament or the individual soul. The sheep asks that the Shepherd come without a herald or assistant and with gentleness; she has been waiting for a long time. Though the context is slightly different, the desire and the wait are similar to the trajectory of the bride, as *caro* (flesh), the whole fallen human race, in stanza one. This expansion of the image continues in paragraph 29 where the sheep thinks of the mountains where the others are safe and of Paradise from which she has been exiled; she is harassed and sorely tempted by wolves and by the old serpent's bite. She remembers that she was once a faithful sheep before she was lured away. She longs to experience the gestures of the Shepherd as they are sketched in the parable: "seek me, lift me, carry me." She reminds the Shepherd of the good reasons he has for coming: he will bring salvation to earth and joy to Heaven. Finally, in a surprising climax, she reminds him that she is born not of Sarah but of Mary, the immaculate virgin. She asks to be carried on the cross that brings salvation and eternal life. So who is this sheep? Ambrose presents the entire gamut of possibilities and the sheep is all of them at once. Again we see Ambrose's layered effect, where many levels of meaning operate together. In the end he takes all of these meanings and localizes them in the Christian who lives under the economy of the cross and Church, symbolized by the immaculate virgin. The sheep is unmistakably Ambrose's congregation, needing the cross for salvation and eternal life, but also representing in themselves the whole history of desire for a savior. If one may read the events and metaphors of Scriptures as a multi-level reality, it is natural to view

Christians themselves in the same light. So although the metaphor is different, we see here the same build-up of desire and of poetic and Scriptural allusions as we have seen with the *Song of Songs*.

“GIVE LIFE TO YOUR SERVANT.”

In a short transitional paragraph (31), Ambrose turns to the second interpretation (“Give life to your servant”). He says: “‘Give life,’ however, is also a fitting interpretation, inasmuch as he cannot die, whom the Power has carried on his shoulders.”²⁷ He implies here that the second interpretation follows from the first because whomever the Shepherd rescues receives eternal life from the power of the cross, symbolized by his shoulders (see 30 above). Ambrose relates the two interpretations in a more subtle way as well. Both focus on the fact of the separation of the soul from God. In the first, the soul is at a loss, except that she remembers the commands of God; she is passive but begs the Lord to come. In the second, the soul realizes that she has wandered but she, the bride, is in love and so *she* seeks out the beloved. For Ambrose the great secret of the Christian life is that, speaking in terms of the *Song of Songs*, the beloved may be found, married, and kept. The marriage of the bride is Ambrose’s definitive solution to the problems and sufferings caused by separation from God.

Turning, therefore, from the image of the lost sheep, Ambrose focuses his attention, in the final paragraphs of his commentary, on the bride of the *Song of Songs*. I think it is fair to say that he is committed to a commentary on the final verses of the *Song of Songs* as the conclusion to his commentary on Psalm 118, and so he draws a unified narrative out of verses from the *Song*

²⁷ Pulchre autem etiam *uiuifica* potest dici, eo quod mori non possit quem humeris suis Uirtus portauerit. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.31*)

that do not necessarily lend themselves to a definitive interpretation. He does not force the text; but after reintroducing the bride at 32, he works the final verses into an account of the marriage of a very young bride (32-40). She is barely old enough; and the older women in the family think she is too young. They try to postpone it until she is a little older; but she is in love and takes the side of the over-eager groom against the older women. Ambrose concludes the little drama with a quasi-juridical comment: “the spiritual marriage is celebrated, sought by mutual consent” (*celebrata coniunctio spiritalis est mutuo expetita consensu*; paragraph 40). At 41 Ambrose ties this marriage imagery back to the first part of the verse, “I have wandered like a lost sheep.” By a triple reference to the erring of the sheep, he shows that all the damage and sorrow caused by the wandering and error of mankind has been redeemed and reversed by the marriage of the bride: “One sheep wandered, but once she was called back, she filled the entire circuit of the world” (*una igitur ouis errauit, sed reuocata totius spatia orbis impleuit*; *Exp. Ps. 118.22.41*). And now we see clearly, once again, that the image of the bride has taken on the proportions of the whole Church. Finally, 42-45 describe the bride and bridegroom together in the gardens of the last two verses of the *Song of Songs*. No further mention is made of Ps.118.

In the translations that follow I have occasionally summarized passages of less significance to the main topic, but the full Latin text is in the notes. Ambrose makes it clear that he is speaking throughout of the individual soul and of the Church at large; and so, at 32, he reintroduces the soul and the Church:

The soul says, therefore, and the Church says: “I have wandered like a lost sheep” (Ps.118:176a). But she also says, “I sought him whom my soul loves” (Sg.3:1). This is equivalent to: “Give life to your servant, since I have not forgotten your commands” (Ps.118:176b). I seek you but I cannot find you unless you want to be found. And you indeed do want to be found, but you want to be long sought, very diligently searched out. Your Church knows this: that you do not want her to seek you sleepily, you do not want

her to search for you lazily. Indeed, you knock at the door to arouse her. You investigate to see if her heart wakes while her flesh sleeps; you want to raise her up as she lies there, saying, “Awake who sleep and rise from the dead” (Eph.5:14). You thrust your hand through the hole [in the door], that she may awake and if she gets up with delay, you leave her (cf.Sg.5:2-6). You want her to seek you again and to seek you from among many, and not to forget to seek: let her “not forget your words” (cf.Ps.118:176b), and if she holds on to them, you are such that you offer yourself to be seen and do not shun to be held (cf.Sg.8:2).²⁸

For Ambrose the two statements “Give life to your servant, since I have not forgotten your commands” and “I sought him whom my soul loves” represent the same impulse of the soul. She knows instinctively that seeking him whom she loves will bring her the fullness of life. She has come to terms with her own weakness: “I have wandered like a lost sheep,” and so she now has the freedom to turn to the one who can restore the integrity and the joy of her life. The scene from the *Song of Songs* from which the quotation is taken here shows the bride rising from sleep at night and roaming about the city looking for the beloved. Ambrose has combined this with another, Sg.5:2-6, in which the beloved knocks at her door at night, but she is too slow to rise and open, so he leaves quickly, in order to spur her on to a more ardent search. Her method of pursuit is not to forget his commands, by keeping alive the memory of his words. The verb *tenere* (hold) is used twice and refers to Sg.8:2, where the bride says that she will take hold of the beloved, lead him to her mother’s house (LXX, Vulgate), and there he shall teach her (Vulgate). By holding on to his words, therefore, she embraces and clings to him. In the Gospel

²⁸ Dicit ergo et anima, dicit et ecclesia: *erravi sicut ovis quae perierat*; sed dicit: *quaesiui quem dilexit anima mea* (Sg.3:1). hoc est dicere: *uiuifica seruum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus* (Ps.118:176b). ego te quaesiui, sed inuenire non possum, nisi tu uolueris inueniri. et tu quidem uis inueniri, sed uis diu quaeri, uis diligentius indagari. nouit hoc ecclesia tua, quia non uis ut te dormiens quaerat, non uis ut iacens te inuestiget. denique pulsas ad ianuam (Sg.5:2), ut excites dormientem, exploras, si cor uigilat et caro dormit (cf.Sg.5:2), uis iacentem leuare dicens: *surge qui dormis et exsurge a mortuis* (Eph.5:14). mittis manum per cauernam (cf.Sg.5:4), ut surgat, et, si tardius surrexerit, derelinquis (Sg.5:6). uis ut quaerat iterum et quaerat a multis et non obliuiscatur quaerere; non obliuiscatur sermones tuos (cf.Ps.118:176b), et, si tenet eos, offeras te uidendum, non refugias teneri. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.32*).

of John Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn.14:15). The point is that the object of the bride’s desire is the person of Christ, and she knows, sinner that she is, if she remembers his commands, he will respond fully.

This is the heart of Ambrose’s commentary on Psalm 118. Without Christ the precepts of the Law are beautiful and holy, they reveal the goodness of God, but the soul is incapable of fulfilling them. In the well-known seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul describes the problem with finesse. Note that he also lays out the problem in terms of marriage: the advent of Christ has caused the Israelites to pass over, so to speak, into a new marriage contract:

Do you not know, brethren – for I am speaking to those who know the law – that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.... Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.... What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” ...The very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!.... For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. (Rom.7:1-4, 7, 10-11, 19, 24-8:2)

One might say that the presence of the *Song of Songs* in his commentary on Ps.118 represents Ambrose’s solution to Paul’s dilemma of Romans 7. By means of the *Song of Songs* he casts the light of the reciprocal love between the incarnate Word and the soul or the Church over the old landscape of the Law. In the treatises that form the subject of this dissertation we have consistently seen Ambrose describe not only the longing of the bride but also the responses of the bridegroom to her desire. In the *De Isaac* there was the detailed description of the kiss

(ch.2.4), the commentary on “My beloved comes leaping on the mountains” (ch.2.6), the marriage of the bride and bridegroom (ch.3.9), and finally the union of the bride to the highest Good (ch.3.4). In the *De Bono Mortis*, the garden scene from the *Song of Songs* is introduced and described as a marriage feast. In the *Expositio Psalmi 118*, we saw in stanza 11 – in a context where other possibilities abound – Ambrose choose only the bridegroom’s exclamation, “You have ravished my heart with one of your eyes.” Stanzas 16 and 17 are devoted to the bridegroom’s praise of the bride. In stanzas 1 and 22, especially, the fulfillment of all desire for the good and holy commands of the Law, the resolution of all difficulties and failures caused by sin, and the fullness of life that follows from a liberation from sin: all of this, for Ambrose, is accomplished through the marriage of the bride, identified as the soul within the Church.

After returning the bride to his discourse in 32, therefore, Ambrose adds in 33 the all-important qualification that only within the Church can the bride fulfill all the obligations asked of her. These obligations, as they are outlined here are 1) right thinking and 2) baptism:

And when she has become worthy to embrace you, she will show you her fruit, she will show that she has “not forgotten your commands” (Ps.118:176). She will say to you, “Come, my Love, let us go out to the country; over our doorways are all the fruit of the trees; I have kept the old and the new for you, my Love” (Sg.7:11,13). This means: “I have kept all the commands of the Old and the New Testaments.” Only the Church can say this; no other congregation can. The Synagogue cannot who neither holds to the letter of the New Testament nor to the spirit of the Old. The Manicheans cannot say “I have kept the old for you” who do not accept the prophets. With good reason she is seen to be dressed in white [*dealbata*, Sg.8:5 LXX] who is splendid with the grace of both Testaments.²⁹

²⁹ Quae cum te meruerit amplecti, ostendet fructus suos, docebit *non oblitam se mandatorum tuorum* (Ps.118:176), dicet tibi: *ueni, frater meus, exeamus in agrum, et in foribus nostris omnis fetus arborum, noua et uetera, frater meus, seruauit tibi* (Sg.7:11,13). hoc est dicere: “teneo mandata omnia noui et ueteris testamenti.” sola hoc dicere ecclesia potest. non dicit alia congregatio, non dicit synagoga, nec secundum litteram noua tenens nec secundum spiritum uetera. non dicit haeresis Manichea: “uetera seruauit tibi,” quae prophetas non suscipit. merito *dealbata* cernitur quae utriusque fulget gratia testamenti. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.33*).

(1) Right thinking. The litmus test of orthodoxy – and, as Ambrose outlines it here, the qualifying trait of the bride – is her ability to bring forth the old and the new. Since as an historical fact, and a theological necessity, it was only from within the Church that the distinction between the Old and New Testaments arose, the acceptance of both as a unified revelation of Christ continued to be a measure for orthodoxy, or “right thinking.”³⁰ Christ himself had concluded a string of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven with, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt.13:52), and this statement became a standard Scriptural text with which to address the problem. So we see that Ambrose elsewhere in his commentary on Psalm 118 (5.7), after likening Christ in the rapid spread of the Church to the “flower of the field” (Sg.2:1), says that Paul too was the same sort of flower, since he gave off the good odor of Christ and “was able to bring forth the new and the old from the treasure of his heart.”³¹ Again, in a letter of consolation to his friend, the layman Faustinus, Ambrose also emphasizes the interdependence of the old and the new:

If someone is “in Christ, he is a new creature” (2Cor.5:17), not formed in a newness of nature but of grace. For, “the old realities that were according to the flesh have passed away, all things are made new” (2Cor.5:17b). What are these, if not the things that the scribe knows who is well versed in the Kingdom of Heaven, the one who like the householder “brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt.13:52): neither the old without the new nor the new without the old? For this reason the Church says, “I have kept for you both the new and the old.” (Sg.7:13)³²

³⁰ Young, 14-6.

³¹ in totam enim terram fides populi credentis exiuit et in spatioso posuit pedes suos Christus; et ideo pulehre ait florem se esse campi (Sg.2:1). flos erat etiam Paulus, qui dicebat: *bonus odor Christi sumus deo* (2Cor.2:15), et uere flos, qui poterat noua et uetera de sui cordis proferre thesauro (*Exp. Ps. 118.5.7*).

³² si quis in Christo, nova creatura est (2Cor.5:17a) non naturae novitate formatus, sed gratiae. *Uetera* itaque, quae secundum carnem erant, transierunt, facta sunt nova omnia (2Cor.5:17b). Quae illa nisi quae scriba doctus in regno caelorum novit, similis illius patrisfamilias qui profert de thesauro suo nova et vetera neque vetera sine novis neque nova sine veteribus? Ideo et ecclesia dicit quia *nova et vetera servavi tibi* (Sg.7:13). (Ep.8 (39).7:63-9)

This passage is of interest both because it shows how closely related the Old and New Testaments were for the early Christian exegetes and also because it shows them in action: we glimpse here the reworking of key texts that belong to the treasure of the exegete; like the householder, he brings them out again and again in varied circumstances – here it is a *consolatio* – to build up a vision of the Christian life. The *Song of Songs* is itself just such a text for Ambrose.

(2) Baptism. Towards the end of paragraph 33 we find *dealbata* (literally: made white or “white washed,” clothed in white). This term comes from the LXX rendering of Sg.8:5. As we saw earlier, it entered into the tradition of the baptismal liturgies for the clothing of the neophytes in white robes as they ascend from the font and into the mystagogical catecheses.³³ It is a code word for baptism. Here the white splendor of the bride is a reflection of baptism and the grace of the Old and the New Testaments.³⁴ Once again, the Church, the sacraments, and the baptized are brought into the same image.

To the one who faithfully keeps the new and the old, the bridegroom responds with an invitation to greater conformity and intimacy: Be the wax to my seal; be my seal. Let my image, after which you were made, shine forth in your heart and in your actions.³⁵

The bridegroom responds to her: “Put me as a seal on your heart, as a seal upon your arm (Sg.8:6) [you] who have kept the old and the new for me. You are my seal, you are [formed] after my image and likeness. The image of justice shines brightly in you, the image of wisdom, the image of virtue; and because the image of God is in your heart, let it also be in your works. The likeness of the Gospel will be in you, if you offer to your persecutor your other cheek (Mt.5:39), if you love your enemy (Mt.5:44), if you take up

³³ Part 3, sect. 1, ch.5: Fourth Aspect.

³⁴ Ambrose’s entire presentation of baptism in the *De Mysteriis* and the *De Sacramentis* is built upon the correlation between Old Testament events and the rites of the sacrament. They are related as *figurae* to *veritas* and the identity between them is more than symbolic. Mazza makes the interesting observation that Ambrose explains the sacraments by means of his exegesis of Old Testament events (Mazza, 15-6). So the relationship here between orthodoxy and the sacraments is essential.

³⁵ See also Ep.12.15-6.155-69 (CSEL 82.1,99-100).

your cross and follow me (Lk.9:23). I carried the cross for you, so that that you would not hesitate to carry it on my account.³⁶

The seal is the effect of baptism. Though he does not dwell here on the connection between baptism (Sg.8:5) and the seal (Sg.8:6), in other passages Ambrose develops the association. At *Expositio Psalmi 118.19.27-28*, the daughters of Jerusalem – here these are the souls of the prophets, patriarchs, and the just under the old law or they are the heavenly powers – marvel at the beauty of the bride, ascending in white, who used to be black (Sg.1:5 and 8.5). The bridegroom hears the praises of her as she ascends and responds to her beauty; he “considers the people now apt to bear his seal in our hearts and on our arms.” Ambrose follows this up with some practical advice: “As God is truthful, so you also sign your understanding, or powers (*sensus*), and your works with truth.”³⁷ Here in stanza 22 he associates the *signaculum* with the cross. The practice of signing the forehead with the cross is ancient;³⁸ In the *De Isaac*, Ambrose says, “Christ is a seal on your forehead, a seal on your heart: on your forehead that you may always confess him; on your heart that you may always love him; a seal on your arm that you may always act [for him].”³⁹

The sealing of the bride leads Ambrose to the final verses of the *Song of Songs*. He engages in a flight of imagination that must have been for his audience a delightful, perhaps

³⁶ Respondit ei sponsus: *pone me ut signaculaum in cor tuum, ut sigillum in brachium tuum* (Sg.8:6), quae noua et uetera seruasti mihi. signaculum meum es, ad imaginem meam es et similitudinem. fulget in te imago iustitiae, imago sapientiae, imago uirtutis. et quia imago Dei in corde est tuo, sit et in operibus tuis, sit effigies euangelii in tuis factis, ut in tuis moribus mea praecepta custodias. effigies euangelii erit in te, si percutienti maxillam alteram praebeas, si diligas inimicum tuum, si crucem tuam tollas et me sequaris. ideo crucem ego pro uobis portauimus, ne tu propter me portare dubitares. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.34*).

³⁷ qui audit tantam deuotionem ecclesiae, idoneos putat esse iam populos qui in corde nostro et brachio signaculum eius portare possimus, sicut ergo deus uerax est, et tu signa in tuo sensu et opere ueritatem. (*Expositio Psalmi 118.19.28*). See also *Exp. Ps. 118.14.34*; *De Isaac* 8.75-6.

³⁸ To give only two examples, Tertullian *De cor.mil.*3 and Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Or.*4.14 and 12.8.

³⁹ signaculum Christus in fronte est, signaculum in eorde: in fronte, ut semper confiteamur, in corde, ut semper diligamus, signaculum in brachio, ut semper operemur (*De Isaac* 8.75). Also: *ostendit ergo [sponsa] faciem suam signaculum crucis praeferens* (*Expositio Psalmi 118.6.33*)

amusing, excursus into the contemporary world of marriage preparations among Milanese families. As I said earlier, I think the little drama he concocts arises from a desire to finish his *Expositio* with a continuous narrative of some rather unpromising verses from the *Song of Songs*. Or perhaps Ambrose, the practical ex-lawyer and – no doubt – occasional marriage consultant, merely incorporates a marriage discourse he regards as normal and customary. In any case the daughters of Jerusalem in stanza 22 are alarmed by the sealing of the bride.

So who are the daughters of Jerusalem? They figure in the Scriptural book of the *Song of Songs* as a kind of dramatic chorus, of flexible identity, as in the passage from stanza 19 above. In the following paragraphs they enter as older women trying to influence the marriage arrangements being made for a very young bride. As we said earlier, we may think of them as the matrons of Milan. Since, however, the marriage is ultimately a spiritual union of Christ and the Church, their machinations are dismissed by Ambrose as meddling excuses. In this fanciful tale, there is an interesting tension between hard reality and spiritual metaphor.

The daughters of Jerusalem heard that the Lord Jesus had already joined the Church to himself, and because as they considered the greatness of the Word, they judged that she was unequal to such a marriage and that she might not be able to sustain the burden of this relationship, they made a plea on her behalf, saying, “Our sister is little and she has no breasts” (Sg.8:8). For such is the customary excuse of those who wish to defer a marriage. They allege that she is frail due to her young age and add that she has no breasts; for these signify that she has arrived at the age for marriage. This is generally taken as the common sign for all virgins that they shall soon be wed, since as the breasts begin to form (*eminere*) they [the virgins] are judged apt for marriage.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Audierunt hoc filiae Hierusalem, quod iam dominus Iesus sibi ecclesiam copulabat et, quia considerantes magnitudinem uerbi, imparem tantis nuptiis aestimabant, ne forte copulae pondus sustinere non posset, excusant dicentes: *soror nobis parua et ubera non habet* (Sg.8:8). sic enim qui uolunt differre nuptias excusare consuerunt, ut praetendant immaturae aetatis infirmitatem et adstruant, quod ubera non habeat, quae nubilis significant tempus aetatis. hoc solet symbolum commune omnibus uirginibus esse nupturis, ut, cum ubera coeperint eminere, tunc coniunctioni habiles iudicentur. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.35*).

The daughters of Jerusalem may have had a valid point. The legal age at which women could marry was twelve.⁴¹ Soranus, on the other hand, gives the age of fourteen for the normal age of puberty in women and warns of the dangers for mother and child if a woman becomes pregnant before she has reached physical maturity.⁴² So there is roughly a two year gap between legal allowance and medical wisdom. Soranus observes as a matter of course, for which no elaboration is needed, that women, like nature herself, wear themselves out and reach a state of exhaustion produced by the process of childbearing.⁴³ The evidence suggests that in late antique Roman high society, girls married between the ages of twelve and fifteen; lower class girls may have married a few years later.⁴⁴ Their status under the law is *viripotens*.⁴⁵ One may legitimately surmise that for some young Roman virgins, the counsels of the older women of the family, or allegations as Ambrose calls them, were serious and well motivated. It would be taking Ambrose's little story too far to try to determine in detail who were the daughters of Jerusalem, but in actual Roman marriage arrangements, the advice of the mother of the bride would have some weight, even if the final decision lay with the father or guardian. Augustine speaks of the mother as the one "whose decision in the giving of a daughter in marriage nature prefers to all others."⁴⁶

According to the daughters of Jerusalem, the bridegroom is over-zealous. They indicate that they wish to delay the marriage not because it is a bad match but because the bride needs

⁴¹ See the discussion of the questions of minimum legal age as well as of the complications that were foreseen and did in fact arise in Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 39-43. An underage bride was *minor duodecim annis nupta*; a set of legal norms existed to handle such cases, eg. the legalization of gifts and dowry if the couple remained together after the girl's twelfth birthday. See also Grubbs p.141, referring to the Digest of Justinian.

⁴² Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.8.

⁴³ Soranus, 1.11.

⁴⁴ Grubbs, 141, 154-6; and Treggiari, 39-43 and 398-410. See also the cautionary remarks of Arjava, 32-5. He does not reject the young age, but points out that evidence is sparse and subject to regional variation.

⁴⁵ Treggiari, 41.

⁴⁶ Arjava, 36, citing Augustine: *mater, cuius voluntatem in tradenda filia omnibus, ut arbitror, natura praeponit*, (*Ep.*254).

more time to mature and prepare. It looks as if they are hoping to use the betrothal ceremony as an opportunity to impose some limits on the speed with which the marriage seems to be progressing. At the betrothal a contract was drawn up for the dowry and other gifts, there was a clasping of hands and a kiss and sometimes festivities.⁴⁷ Symmachus (the translator) implies that the bridegroom addresses the bride directly as part of the formal arrangements. By the end of the fourth century, Christians sought the consent and blessing of the bishop or of a priest. Ignatius of Antioch had already encouraged the practice in the early second century.⁴⁸ Ambrose says:

And so they [the daughters of Jerusalem] are alarmed that in the fervor of love the bridegroom is urging forward the marriage and they say, “What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?” (Sg.8:8). Or as Symmachus translates “[on the day] on which he speaks to her?” That is, at the ceremony of betrothal, there is customarily an exchange and a confirmation of the nuptials. “What, therefore, shall we do?,” they say in agitation, “since he is hastening the spiritual union?” They cannot excuse her from such great nuptials; indeed no one would consider the union of the soul with the Spirit or of Christ with the Church anything other than a blessed match. Yet since the plenitude of the Word or of the Holy Spirit flashes and gleams with splendor and nothing can compare with it, they wish to defer [the marriage] so that by that delay the soul or the Church might become more perfect.⁴⁹

The stalling tactics of the daughters of Jerusalem are for the protection of the bride and to make her more apt and beautiful. The metaphor begins to break down at this point, as the daughters look for fitting ornaments, represented by doors and bastions of silver. The bride herself has placed all her hope in the bridegroom, the Word. She is radiant with the heavenly words of Scripture, and so she is judged (by whom?) apt for the marriage.

⁴⁷ Grubbs, 142, 148.

⁴⁸ Grubbs, 148; Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Polycarp*, 5.2.

⁴⁹ *Turbatae igitur, quod studio dilectionis urgeat nuptias sponsus, dicunt: quid faciemus sorori nostrae in die qua loquitur in ea?* (Sg.8:8) uel, ut Symmachus, *qua loquitur ei*, hoc est: sponsalium celebritate solet fieri conlocutio et confirmatio nuptiarum. quid ergo faciemus, dicunt turbatae, quia urgetur coniunctio spiritalis? a tantis nuptiis excusare non possunt; nemo est enim qui copulam uel animae et Spiritus uel Christi et ecclesiae non beatam putet. sed quia plenitudo Verbi uel Spiritus Sancti uibrat et fulget et nihil est quod ei possit aequari, ideo differre desiderant, ut illa dilatione uel anima uel ecclesia possit esse perfectior. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.36*)

They [the daughters of Jerusalem] say, therefore, “If she is a wall, we will build battlements upon her; and if she is a doorway, let us fashion upon her doors of cedar” (Sg.8:9). The soul of a saint is a wall. The Church also has her walls, and as she is more perfect now; she says, “I am a walled city” (Is.27:3 LXX). The wall here has twelve apostolic gates (cf.Rev.21:12-15), through which a way into the Church opens to the people of the nations. But even if a wall covers the entire circuit of a town, it is better fortified when it has battlements prepared, in which the defenders of the town may have a safe refuge for observation and keeping watch. Since this city is rational and all its hope is in the Word of God, bastions of silver, not of iron, are required. She is accustomed to repelling hostile attacks more with heavenly words than with charms of the body. Relying on this protection, radiant with this splendor, she is judged apt for a union with Christ.⁵⁰

Paragraph 38 is an aside in which Ambrose comments that Christ also is called a doorway or gate (Jn.10.9). Then, he describes the doors the daughters are devising for the bride. They are doors of cedar because cedar cannot be destroyed by moths or worms (heresies); cedar has a good odor and is useful for rooftops. It is also used for letter blocks with which small children learn the rudiments of the alphabet. This reminds Ambrose and his audience of the image from the Prologue by which the alphabetical psalm 118 is likened to a moral alphabet for life. In this paragraph also Ambrose calls the daughters of Jerusalem angels or the souls of the just. In the remainder of the commentary their identity is mixed.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Dicunt ergo: *si murus est, aedificemus super eum receptacula; et si ianua est, sculpamus super eam tabulas cedrinas* (Sg.8:9). murus est anima sancti. habet et ecclesia muros suos, quae iam perfectior dicit: *ego ciuitas munita* (Is.27:3 LXX). hic est murus qui habet duodecim portas apostolicas, per quas populo nationum patet ingressus in ecclesiam. sed murus quamuis ambitum totius urbis includat, tunc tamen est munitior, cum receptacula habuerit praeparata, in quibus propugnatores urbis tutum speculandi ac tuendi possint habere subsidium. sed quia rationabilis haec ciuitas est et omnis spes eius in Dei Verbo est, non ferrea, sed argentea ei propugnacula requiruntur, eloquiis caelestibus magis quam corporis uoluptatibus hostiles impetus repulsare consueta. eo fulta praesidio, eo splendore fulgens habilior Christi copiae iudicatur. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.37*).

⁵¹ Following is the entire paragraph 38: Et quia ianua Christus est, qui ait: *per me si quis introierit saluabitur* (Jn.10.9), et ecclesia ianua nuncupatur, quia per ipsam patet populis aditus ad salutem. sed ne haereticorum corrumpatur tineis aut uermibus (Is.51:6), dicunt filiae Hierusalem, uel angeli uel animae iustorum: *aedificemus super eam tabulas cedrinas* (Sg.8:9), hoc est fidei sublimis bonum odorem (cf.2Cor.2:15); est enim suauis huius materiae odor, quam non uermis, non tinea corrumpat. ideo huius materiae usus eligitur tectorum fastigiis eleuandis formandisque litterarum elementis, quibus aetas puerilis ad studium liberalis eruditionis inuitur. est ergo materia ista sublimis ad gratiam, leuis ad onus, suauis ad odorem, utilis ad instrumentum scientiae, habilis ad ministerium cognitionis aeternae. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.38*).

At 39 we return to the family exchange. Thinking that the daughters of Jerusalem do not rightly assess her true maturity, the bride takes matters in hand. She assures them that she is ready (39) and then – perhaps unlike Milanese girls of her age – she goes through with the wedding as she sees fit (40).

Just as Christ out of love for his spouse was urging the solemnization of their spiritual union, so also the Church, captivated by the beauty of the Word was hastening to their nuptials. And so, impatient at the tarrying and delay that the daughters of Jerusalem were trying eagerly to devise, she says, “I am a wall and my breasts are towers” (Sg.8:10); that is, “Have no doubt that I am a wall” – they had said, “If she is a wall” (Sg.8:9) – “I,” she says, “am a wall and I do not have small breasts,” but my breasts are like towers. How do you say that I have no breasts? I have powers of understanding of wisdom like towers in which there is abundance, as it is written, ‘...and abundance within your towers’ (Ps.121:7).” With these breasts, that is powers, she judged herself to be ready, or apt, for so great a marriage. Yet the daughters of Jerusalem still could not [rightly] assess, because they did not perceive the abundance of her powers and understanding.⁵²

Without belaboring the point, it seems to me that Ambrose can carry on this little story of the bride and the matrons as far as he does only because conflicts and exchanges of this sort did in fact take place during the negotiations leading to the marriage of a young bride. Here, the bride herself is eager and finds that the matrons underestimate her abilities and impose unwanted restrictions. She is confident that her emotional, psychological, and intellectual maturity compensate for any physical development of which she may still stand in need. How many teenagers have said as much?

And she adds, “I was in his eyes as one finding peace” (Sg.8:10b), that is: “You take counsel with regard to my capabilities, though I have found the peace of God that

⁵² Sed quemadmodum sponsam suam diligens Christus urgebat ad copulae spiritalis sollemnitatem, ita et ecclesia Verbi decore iam capta festinabat ad nuptias. ideoque morarum et dilationis inpatiens, quas filiae Hierusalem innectere gestiebant, dicit: *ego murus, et ubera mea turre* (Sg.8:10), hoc est: nolite dubitare utrum murus sim – illae enim dixerant: *si murus est* (Sg. 8:9) – ; ego, inquit, murus sum et non parua ubera habeo, sed ut turre ubera mea sunt. quomodo dicitis quia non habeo ubera? (cf.Sg.8:8) sensus, ut turre, habeo sapientiae. in quibus est abundantia. sicut scriptum est: *et abundantia in turribus tuis* (Ps.121:7). his uberibus, id est sensibus, habilem se tantis nuptiis aestimabat, sed filiae Hierusalem adhuc non poterant aestimare, quia sensuum eius abundantiam non uidebant. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.39*)

surpasses every intelligence and guards both the heart and the understanding in Christ Jesus (cf. Eph.3:19). I was such,” she says, “in the eyes of the bridegroom as one having peace; for it is written, ‘those who seek peace in the right way, will have it as a witness.’ (cf. Prov.12:20?).” They hasten, therefore, the lover and the beloved. Their spiritual marriage is celebrated, sought by mutual consent.⁵³

So the marriage is celebrated, Ambrose is careful to add that it is by mutual consent, an essential requirement for a valid Roman marriage.⁵⁴ Far more important, however, is the fact that the bride knows she is making the right decision. She is at peace; and the bridegroom, who loves her dearly, sees that peace. And so they hasten. There is even an epithalamium, sung with exultation.

And so the Spirit exults as if singing the marriage song through the prophet, saying, “A vineyard has been planted for Solomon in Belamon; he gave his vineyard to those who will keep it” (Sg.8:11). The Spirit, therefore, cries out, “The congregation of the peoples is planted and founded on the root of the eternal vine and she [the congregation - bride] has submitted the spiritual necks of her people to the yoke of the Word with a gentle heart. She is planted in the multitude of the nations.... The old union that could not bring forth fruit has been repudiated; the vineyard has been given to new and faithful cultivators, who not only can bring forth fruit but also preserve it.⁵⁵ One sheep wandered, but once she was called back, she filled the circuit of the entire world. Error led one sheep astray, but the grace of the Lord gathered a multitude of peoples. Man sinned but now the Church is a wall, a strong and mighty wall. Adam sinned; David is a wall, who did not forget the commands of God (cf. Ps.118:176b).⁵⁶

⁵³ Et addidit: *ego eram in oculis eius tamquam inueniens pacem* (Sg.8:10), hoc est: deliberatis de meis sensibus, cum pacem Dei inuenerim, quae superat omnem mentem et custodit et corda et sensus in Christo Iesu. talis, inquit, eram in oculis sponsi qualis quae habet pacem; scriptum est enim: *qui recte quaerunt pacem, habebunt eam testimonium* (cf. Prov.12:20?). festinantibus igitur dilecto atque dilecta celebrata coniunctio spiritalis est mutuo expetita consensu. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.40*).

⁵⁴ Consent is required for a valid marriage: Grubbs, 141-2.

⁵⁵ This passage is dense in Scriptural allusions, yet no passage in particular is cited. See Jn.15:1-5; Eph.3:17; Ps.79:8-11; Is.5:1-4; Is.27:6; Mk.12:1-11; Col.2:7; Mt.11:30.

⁵⁶ Ideoque tamquam nuptiale canens carmen exultauit Spiritus in propheta dicens: *uinea facta est Salomoni in Belamon; dedit uineam suam his qui seruant* (Sg.8:11). clamat ergo Spiritus: plantata est congregatio populorum et uitae aeternae radice fundata et spiritalia sub iugum Verbi corde mansueto colla subiecit; plantata autem in multitudine nationum. hoc enim intellegendum 'Belamon' Symmachus, Aquila aliaeque traditiones Graeco sermone docuerunt. repudiata est uetus copula quae fructum adferre non poterat, data est uinea nouis fidelibusque cultoribus, qui non solum facere fructum possent, sed etiam custodire. una igitur ouis errauit, sed reuocata totius spatia orbis impleuit; unam ouem error abduxerat, sed multitudinem populorum domini gratia congregauit. errauit homo, sed ecclesia iam murus est et murus ualidus. errauit Adam, murus est Dauid qui mandata dei non est oblitus. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.41*).

The Holy Spirit exults and inspires the prophet to sing a nuptial song (from the *Song of Songs*): “A vineyard has been planted....” (Sg.8:11). The Spirit cries out that the Church has been established on the eternal vine that is Christ (Jn.15:1-8) and that henceforth this new vineyard will be fruitful and faithfully kept. Note that here and in the next paragraph the vineyard, the bride, the Church, and the sheep brought back into the fold: are all identified with the congregation of the faithful; and they are drawn from the nations. They are Ambrose’s congregation, standing before him in the basilica. Ambrose drives home for them the richness and the grace of their identity. If they step into this identity and take on the responsibilities of guarding and tending the vineyard – that is, of preserving the faith and living the life of the Church – they will live in the vineyard and receive the perfection and plenitude of Christ as their portion (42).

This vineyard, therefore, guarded and fortified with spiritual defenses yields fruit for Christ a thousandfold, but two-hundredfold to her guardians. And so the Church says, “My vineyard is in my sight; a thousand for Solomon and two hundred for those who guard the fruit” (Sg. 8:12). The perfection and plenitude of Christ is the portion of his lowly servants.⁵⁷

The last three paragraphs of the commentary cover the last two verses of the *Song of Songs*. Ambrose proposes two different versions of verse 8:13. These both differ slightly from the interpretation he gave of the same verse in the *De Bono Mortis*. As often happens with the metaphorical and typological interpretation of Scriptural texts, there is a certain latitude. There is not one “right” interpretation to the exclusion of others.

Delighted by these fruits the Church says to Christ: “You who sit in the gardens, while your friends listen to your voice, let me hear your voice” (Sg.8:13); for she was delighted

⁵⁷ Custodita igitur et uallata haec uinea munimine spiritali mille fructus dat Christo, ducentos autem fructus custodibus. ideoque ait ecclesia: *uitis mea in conspectu meo; mille Salomoni, et ducenti seruantibus fructum* (Sg.8:12). perfectio et plenitudo Christi est portio seruulorum. habes hoc mysterium in Genesi, ubi quinque partes Benjamin fratri iuniori tribuit Ioseph, singulas reliquis fratribus (Gen.43:34). domino igitur quinque sensuum portio et praerogatiua defertur, quam illi utique tribuit ipse quem diligit, sicut dilexit et Paulum (Eph.3:8), cui dedit ad euocandas gentes sapientiae principatum. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.42*)

that Christ was sitting in her gardens and that friends settled in the gardens were listening to his voice. But since those friends were heavenly, Archangels, Dominations, and Thrones (Col.1:16) – men have been expelled from Paradise because of disobedience to the divine commands and so the Church still could not hear his voice as she wished – she said, therefore, “Let me hear your voice. Whence, we also: if we wish him to be seated within us, let us be a garden enclosed and fortified, let us bring forth the flowers of virtues, the sweetness of grace (Sg.4:12-5:1), so that we may hear the Lord Jesus as he discourses with his angels.”⁵⁸

The gardens are those of Paradise, but they also belong to the bride, the Church: they are the vineyard planted for Solomon, cultivated and guarded by Christians. The fruits they harvest are those the bridegroom and his friends enjoy in the bride’s garden. Even so, she cannot quite hear the bridegroom and his friends speaking, and she says, “Let me hear your voice.” This is a collage of images in which Paradise, the Church, and Heaven are superimposed. It is not an illogical jumble but a poetic whole that points to a spiritual reality within the soul of the Christian: the Church is the milieu within which the Christian both recovers Paradise and learns to hear the voice of Christ conversing with his heavenly friends. For Ambrose this is not just a beautiful image; it is the goal of a well lived life. Ambrose concludes, therefore, with an exhortation to his audience to cultivate the garden within, so that Christ may sit there and they may hear within themselves his heavenly conversation. Once again, Ambrose localizes the magnificent imagery of the *Song of Songs* and places it in the minds of his congregation. The Church hears the voice of the bridegroom more clearly, as each individual Christian progresses in interior perfection.

⁵⁸ His igitur fructibus delectata ecclesia dicit ad Christum: *qui sedes in hortis, amici intendentes uoci tuae; uocem tuam insinua mihi* (Sg.8:13). delectabatur enim, quod in hortis Christus sedebat et in hortis positi amici intendebant uoci eius. sed quia amici illi de caelestibus erant archangeli uel dominationes et throni (Col.1:16) – homines enim expulsi de paradiso fuerant propter inoboedientiam caelestium mandatorum atque ideo adhuc ecclesia uocem eius non poterat quam cupiebat audire –, ideo ait: *uocem tuam insinua mihi* (Sg.8:13). unde et nos, si uolumus eum in nobis sedere, simus horti clausi atque muniti, feramus uirtutum flores, gratiae suauitatem (Sg.4:12-5:1), ut disputantem cum angelis dominum Iesum audire possimus. (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.43*)

In the *De Bono Mortis* the voices also belong to the bridegroom and his friends. These, however, are the wedding guests accompanying the bridegroom, not specified as angels and heavenly powers. The bride is the individual soul who has already traveled a long road to perfection. The garden is the Church – though it is also the soul – where the fruits and flowers of the sacraments and the Scriptures nourish and fortify her; they inebriate her and the guests, so that they come to the state of drunkenness, a metaphor for the life of the Spirit, and in Plotinus the ecstasy of the union of the soul with Intellect or the One. The scene in the *De Bono Mortis* is similar, therefore, to this first interpretation, though the working out of the details and the identity of the characters differ somewhat.

Here in stanza 22, after continuing with the last verse of the *Song*, in paragraph 44, Ambrose mentions as an afterthought (in 45), a second interpretation (of Symmachus and Aquila).⁵⁹ For them, it is the bride who is seated in the gardens conversing with her friends. The bridegroom enters and says, “You are already seated in the gardens; you are worthy now of the high Paradise – [higher than the original, in Genesis] – and so direct your voice, to which our friends listen, to me also. I too wish to hear it.” Ambrose concludes this paragraph and his commentary: “The Church came to be in the gardens, after Christ had suffered in the gardens.” Thus, the gardens of the *Song of Songs* provide also the poetic link between the passion of Christ and the genesis of the Church.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ambrose attributes a Christian interpretation to Symmachus and Aquila. In fact, this would have been impossible. Here is Ambrose’s text: Symmachus tamen et Aquila interpretati sunt, quod Christus dicit ad ecclesiam: quae sedes in hortis, hoc est: iam in hortis sedes superno digna paradiso, et ideo uocem tuam insinua mihi cui amici intendunt; ego quoque eam audire desidero. coepit in hortis esse ecclesia, postquam in hortis passus est Christus. (*Exp. Ps.* 118.22.45)

⁶⁰ This is also reminiscent of the birth of Aphrodite in the gardens.

Again, we may ask ourselves with Augustine why it is more delightful to hear these truths laid out in an image than it would be to hear them in a logical exposition. The answer lies in the deep and personal content which these images evoke in the hearts and minds of Ambrose's audience. As they have stood before his pulpit Ambrose has touched the basic realities of their lives: their consciousness of sin, their desire for a life of integrity and for eternal life, their family relations based on marriage, which for most of them are the primary framework for their personal lives, all the beauty and delight of the love story of the bride and bridegroom, and finally their personal desire for an interior life of prayer and union with Christ. At the end he ties all of this awareness and desire to the cross of Christ and the beauty of the Church that is born from it. This beauty is Christ's nuptial gift to them as members of the Church. Now it will be their responsibility to take the gift home with them from the basilica to the *domus* and to let it bear fruit as they extend the life of the Church through the reading of the Scriptures, through the *disciplina* of the moral life, and through the cultivation of the interior eye of faith that sees more keenly the mystical truth Ambrose has been presenting to them under such rich and engaging imagery from the *Song of Songs*.

Finally, returning to paragraph 44, which we skipped above, Ambrose comments on the last verse of the *Song of Songs*: "Flee, my Love, and be like a roe or a fawn upon the mountains of spices" (Sg.8:14).

Since it was bound to happen that although the Church had come to her fulfillment, she would be tried by various persecutions, therefore, even though she was delighting in the grace of the Word, suddenly she discerns the ambushes of her persecutors. Fearing more for her Spouse than for herself, or rather since it is Christ who is attacked within us by

persecutors, she says, “Flee, my Love, and be like a roe or a fawn upon the mountains of spices.” (Sg.8:14)⁶¹

In the *De Bono Mortis* the bride encourages the bridegroom to flee because she is ready to take flight with him into the joys of spiritual union. Here by contrast, she encourages him, present in her members, to flee, since he is in them the object of attack.

Let him flee on account of the weak, who cannot endure more serious temptations. And so it is written, “Let us flee from city to city, and if we are persecuted in this city, let us flee to another” (cf.Mt.10.23). On account of the weak, therefore, as we said, let him flee or rather let him flee from the weak and go over to the mountains of spices, who in return for their martyrdom are able to produce the perfume of a blessed resurrection.⁶²

This is an interesting stance for Ambrose to take with regard to martyrdom. He seems to say, “No one should be imprudent enough to invite it, yet if it comes, flee from those who are fickle and will advise you against martyrdom and flee to the mountains of spices.” Of course, fleeing to the mountains of spices means becoming one of them.

The mountains for spices are the saints.. With these Christ takes refuge, since “his foundations are in the holy mountains” (Ps.86:1). With them, therefore, he takes refuge, since they are his stable foundations. In us he flees; in *them* he remains faithfully at his post. Paul, therefore was a mountain of spices, who could say, “We are the good odor of Christ” (2Cor.2:15). David was a mountain of spices, the perfume of whose prayer ascended up to the Lord and so he said, “Let my prayer go forth and rise like incense in your sight (Ps.140.2).⁶³

⁶¹ Sed quia futurum erat, ut, cum ad plenitudinem ecclesia peruenisset, persecutionibus uariis temptaretur, ideo, cum Verbi gratia delectaretur, subito cernit insidias persecutorum, et quae plus sponso quam sibi timeret, aut quia a persecutoribus Christus magis adpetitur in nobis, ideo ait: *fuge, frater meus, et similis esto tu capreolae aut hinulo ceruorum super montes aromatum* (Sg.8:14) (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.44a*).

⁶² propter infirmos fugiat, qui temptamenta grauiora ferre non possint. ideoque scriptum est, ut de ciuitatibus ad ciuitates fugiamus et, si nos in hac ciuitate fuerint persecuti, fugiamus in aliam (cf.Mt.10.23). propter infirmos igitur, ut diximus, fugiat aut fugiat ab infirmis et transeat ad montes aromatum, qui pro martyrio odorem possint beatae resurrectionis adferre (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.44b*).

⁶³ montes aromatum sancti sunt. ad eos confugit Christus, quia fundamenta eius in montibus sanctis (Ps.86:1). ad eos igitur confugit qui sunt eius stabilia fundamenta; in nobis fugit, in illis fida statione consistit. mons igitur aromatum Paulus est, qui potest dicere: *bonus enim odor Christi sumus Deo* (2Cor.2:15), mons aromatum Dauid, cuius orationis odor ascendebat ad dominum, et ideo dicebat: *dirigatur oratio mea sicut incensum in conspectu tuo* (Ps.140.2) (*Exp. Ps. 118.22.44c*).

So the mountains of spices are the saints and martyrs. They are those who “in return for their martyrdom may bring forth the perfume of a blessed resurrection”; those who remain faithful and stable, so that Christ may dwell within them. At the end of his life of Augustine, Possidius includes a long letter Augustine had written to the bishop Quodvultdeus and then sent to another bishop Honoratus on whether a bishop could leave his post during war or persecution. One may surmise that the letter was circulated among the North African bishops during the invasion of the Vandals. The letter says, in essence, that those who can flee should do so, but the bishops must remain at their posts if their presence is required by any of the faithful who must remain behind, since when the danger is great, they come to the Church for help: for baptism, reconciliation, and the Eucharist. (*Vita*, 30). This is the logical discourse that may stand as a counterpart and an interpretation of Ambrose’s exegesis of Sg.8:14. But, surely, it is more pleasing and beautiful to think of the bishops as mountains of spices!

CONCLUSION

In this last stanza of his *Expositio*, as in the first, Ambrose has given us examples of his wonderful mastery of the art of rhetoric. They have shown just how entertaining and persuasive he could be in his presentation of the fundamental truths of the Christian life. In the prayer of the lost sheep and in the image of the bride in love, Ambrose adapted the intermediate rhetorical style to Christian purposes in order both to delight – with beauty and humor – and to motivate his audience to a deeper, more intense, and more intimate spiritual engagement, as members of the Church, with Christ Shepherd and bridegroom. Making good use of a textual ambiguity, he incorporated both images into the interpretation of the final verse of Psalm 118 and so offered his

audience metaphors by which to recognize themselves as members of the Church, under the New Law, belonging to Christ. First, “Seek out your servant”: all have sinned, some of them gravely, and stand in need of forgiveness. Ambrose reminds them that they have only to ask, in order to become “found” sheep, and then he shows them with delight how to pray with persuasion. Second, “Give life to your servant”: the bride also has sinned, but she is impelled by love to set out in search of the bridegroom. These are the governing images of stanza 22.

There are, however, secondary images added to these. Ambrose’s Christians may think of themselves not only as lost sheep seeking the Shepherd or as the bride seeking the beloved, but also as keepers of the vineyard, as men and women of Scriptures and of prayer, invited into the gardens of the new and higher Paradise where Christ dwells within them in peace and where there is the best of banquets. Finally, by embracing all the vicissitudes of the Christian life, they may become in the end like the mountains of spices. Ambrose commenting on the Scriptural images presents a large palette.

In stanza one, Ambrose began his panoramic development of the image of the bride – betrothed, unfaithful, repentant, longing and finally married – with the simple, mundane description of a young Roman virgin, betrothed to an absent fiancé, delighting in his gifts and longing for her marriage. We said there that this was like the weight in the pulley, which kept the far flung metaphors anchored in the minds of Ambrose’s audience. So also, in stanza 22, the deep consciousness of sin, the repentance and disarray of the lost sheep, the excessive banquets, the exchanges in the complicated affair of Roman marriage, these also keep the spiritual images of the bride and bridegroom anchored in the lives of Ambrose’s congregation. The anchor is not a logical connection but a poetic bond between the metaphors and the spiritual realities they

represent. By representing spiritual truth under the veil of a metaphor, Ambrose tied down the truth, so to speak, to the life experience of his audience. What the audience would have grasped, therefore, was not so much an abstract idea as an experiential knowledge of something good and beautiful that they would wish to make their own. Ambrose understood perfectly how this process worked. Through the use of the shepherd and the bride, therefore, in stanza 22, he created in his audience an identification with the Church that was rooted in their personal, interior experience. His little drama of the marriage of the Milanese high society bride added just the right touch of humor to his presentation; it allowed him to end the *Expositio* with the final verses of the *Song of Songs*; and most important, it took an idealized image of happiness with which they could all identify and suggested that such happiness might be theirs through their participation in the reciprocal love of Christ and the Church. An audience culturally adept at handling and decoding metaphor and allegory would get the message.

CONCLUSION TO PART THREE

To compose a commentary on Psalm 118 was a major exegetical challenge, as the comments of Augustine indicate. Augustine had said that after commenting on all the other psalms, he had approached this one last, only because requests had been made that he complete the Psalter. Ambrose, on the other hand, wrote commentaries on only twelve other psalms but undertook a complete commentary, or *expositio*, on this one. It would seem that he had a particular goal in mind and, as we suggested earlier, that a parallel commentary on Psalm 118 and the *Song of Songs* was part of his master plan, indicated by parallels between the two texts throughout the commentary.

We mentioned a number of reasons why Ambrose might make such an extended use of the *Song of Songs*. He himself understood his relationship to his particular church in terms of nuptial imagery; his church was the bride and he represented Christ. He, clearly, had a special love for the *Song* on both a spiritual and a literary level. He was probably familiar with it when he came to the episcopacy. Thinking of Christ as the perfect, wholly divine, bridegroom of an immaculate, mystical Church fit his general ‘pro-Nicene’ culture. Most important, it was the sacraments that both made the Church and incorporated Christians into the Church. Portraying the Church as the beautiful, pure bride, washed clean by the sacrifice of Christ applied through baptism was, therefore, a natural move for Ambrose and one that gave his people an imaginative, experiential sense of their identity as members of the Church. This aspect in particular – the identification of Christians as members of the Church through the sacraments – is one of

Ambrose's fundamental ideas we have seen him work out in each of the stanzas analyzed.

There is, however, a fundamental reason that lies behind these motives and governs much of Ambrose's exegesis of the *Song*. Christ himself is the dispenser of sacramental grace and the one who renders the Church pure and beautiful. For Ambrose Christianity was not just a way of life, a religion of reading the Scriptures and of receiving the sacraments. It was the insertion into and the cultivation of a relationship of love with Christ, a *reciprocal* relationship. This is the key word. We have seen Ambrose come back to this fundamental aspect of reciprocity again and again. As we saw earlier, there is nothing new in the idea that love, of one form or another, is the prime motivator in human life and perfection. For Plato, and Plotinus after him, it is the first principle of the ascent of the soul, though they cannot speak of a love of God for mankind manifest in Christ. Only in the Judeo-Christian tradition does the idea of God's love for mankind – and consequent reciprocity – stand as the foundation of spiritual ascent. The Scriptures are filled with the theme: in the Old Testament the prophets continually rebuke Israel for her infidelity; in the New, Christ presents himself as the bridegroom. Then, in a key passage from Romans Paul said that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom.5:5). This is the New Law which has superseded the Old and it is based on God's love poured forth and man's response made possible by the indwelling Spirit and the economy of the Church.

Returning to Augustine's dilemma with regard to Ps.118, the precepts of the Law will always be precepts. One may, of course, explain them in greater detail and give examples of brave and holy men and women who lived them to the full. To show Christians, however, the Law as distinctively theirs requires a vision of the interior life under the guidance and inspiration of the new law of the divine life. Paul presented such a vision in his transition from Romans,

chapter 7 to 8: from the bondage of sin to life in the Spirit. As we saw earlier, he begins chapter 7 with the image of a married woman bound to her husband by law till death (Rom.7:1-3). Then he turns to the Christians he is addressing in the letter and tells them that now death has intervened so that they may belong to another, namely Christ (Rom.7:4). This is the same imagery, signifying the same bond and love that Ambrose presents by appealing to the Scriptural imagery of the *Song of Songs* and applying it to the marriage between Christ and the Church, established and maintained by the sacraments, the foundation for the practical, institutional life of Christians in their local churches.

This is the positive side of the allegory of love. Yet, there is a negative side as well, represented by Ambrose's attempts to address a measure of duplicity in his congregation. They enjoy his homilies, they like the poetry and the imagery, but then they leave the basilica and get on with life as usual. Though this is a reflection of human nature, it is also a risk inherent in the use of poetic imagery. Perhaps this is one reason why Augustine wished in the *De doctrina christiana* to redirect the middle style towards a higher end. This worry may also have been at the back of his mind when he wondered why he loved so much the image of the bride's teeth.

Some of Ambrose's pastoral challenges surfaced in the stanzas of Psalm 118 we analyzed. In stanza one, there was a complex problem of adultery, and presumably other sins, combined with a good, respectable appearance at the liturgies in the basilica. Ambrose tried to awaken the sinner (calling him the sleeping bride!) to an awareness of spiritual presence (of angels, demons, and his own conscience); he suggested that disinterest in the Scriptures was one major reason why the sin of adultery had entered his life. In stanza eleven, Ambrose seemed to be rallying his troops, trying to put more intensity into their Church lives. He made his point by

appealing to their common – both emotional and literary – experience of love and desire and by challenging them to transfer that desire to the moral and mystical life, nourished by the Scriptures and the sacramental life of the Church. He faced the problem there also of disinterest in the practice of a meditative reading of the Scriptures; some in his congregation seemed to prefer a life of action. In stanzas sixteen and seventeen we encountered the lukewarm, content with a mere “baptism of John,” Finally, in stanza twenty-two, we encountered those who compromised themselves with sumptuous banquets and finally, more generally, all who need to confess their sins – the lost sheep – in order to return to life as full members of the Church. These are the main lines, though there are of course many other elements that come into play; in stanza twenty-two, for example, we glimpsed various social networks in Ambrose’s audience: those who would respond to his rhetoric and those who would recognize themselves in his allusions to marriage; and in stanza seventeen he criticizes various groups in the church: the fickle bishops, the disloyal wealthy, and the humble and faithful laity, the beautiful shoes of the bride. We should also add to these groups those who do not convert and those finally who, like the young Augustine, stay on the periphery. These would have read or listened to Ambrose’s homilies; and he, no doubt, thought of them as part of his audience. Ambrose tackles these moral problems with a combination of the *Song of Songs* and sustained reprimand. Since our primary focus has been Ambrose’s use of the *Song of Songs*, we have not considered other passages from his *Expositio* dedicated to non-allegorical, moral exhortation, though in an analysis of the whole, this would stand as the indispensable complement to the *Song*.

In conclusion, we may say that, looking out at his congregation at Milan in the 380s, Ambrose saw Paul’s dilemma at work in the souls of the Christian community.

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.... I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom.7:14-5, 23-4)

References to Romans 7 appear throughout the corpus of Ambrose's writings, either as representative of the working of sin in the mind and heart or as indicative of the human condition in general subject to mortality and physicality. In the *De Bono Mortis*, for example, he associates the "body of death" with life in a body subject to the deception of the physical senses (3.11) and life in this world with all its trouble, as opposed to the life of freedom, after death (12.56). In the *De Isaac* Ambrose represents Paul arguing to the identity of human nature with the soul on the basis of Romans 7 (part 1, ch.2, no.2). Finally, in the *Expositio*, stanza twenty-two, where Ambrose reproaches some in his congregation for over-eating and neglecting the better food of the Scriptures, he says, "How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land? (Ps.136:4), where we are assailed, where we are captive under the law of sin (Rom.7:23)?"¹

With poetic genius, and deep mystical insight, Ambrose applied a remedy with which his audience could readily identify on multiple levels. In his hands it was a genial tool, both spiritual and practical, at times entertaining. Though we have already given a spiritual, theological summary of the message, there is one final aspect I would like to mention. It is the part of the message that comes from the fact that the bride of the *Song* as a poetic metaphor is a woman in love. Within the context of the moral commandments of the Law (Psalm 118) and without minimizing the obligations that stem from the Law, Ambrose offers a deeper reason for wanting to seek lives of holiness and spiritual growth. The reason is not that the Law is beautiful, or that it is the right

¹ quomodo cantare potest grauium sibi conscius delictorum, nisi prius fiat ueniae securus? denique in posterioribus [a later psalm] habes: *quo modo cantabimus canticum domini in terra aliena?* (Ps.136:4), in qua inpugnetur, in qua captiuetur in lege peccati, in qua defleat atque deploret suae captiuitatis aerumnas (Ambrose, *Exp. Ps. 118.22.18*).

thing to do, or even Christ himself, though of course he is the beloved. It is simply that happiness lies down that path. This is why Ambrose, the poet, invited his Christians to think of themselves imaginatively – but knowing that the truth lay behind the image – as the fresh and lovely, the pure and holy, the incomparably happy bride. Some, clearly, will have an easier time than others in identifying themselves with her. In a sense, however, that is beside the point. The process of decoding and assimilating the image is meant to reveal both a subjective element, that true happiness is at stake, and a more objective element, that salvation and eternal life – all that is at the base of the Christian faith – does not come from moral precepts or from oneself alone. It is a gift from Christ given through the Church and the sacraments. So the effort of the Christian life is, on the one hand, to prepare for and then to receive the gift and on the other, to grow in a knowledge of Christ – this is where the Scriptures come in – who is the Giver of the gift.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

“The formidable Ambrose” and “this passionate little man” such are the epithets given him by Peter Brown in his life of Augustine.¹ These were two sides of the bishop Augustine knew, and they continue to fascinate and confuse. Why would such a strong minded and able bureaucrat have had such a great love for the *Song of Songs* and why parade it from the pulpit? In an age where public *decorum* combined with private reserve was a high art, why all of this sensual passion? These questions take us beyond an inquiry into one man’s participation in the social and political institutions, as well as the theological developments and controversies, of the fourth century, though all of these come into play. These questions do not take us into the private life of Ambrose. Yet, they place us on the threshold of all of these elements that made up the life of this governor turned bishop: the *Song of Songs* has been a fascinating lens from which to view him in action, in his preaching, his writing, his exhortation, and finally in his interpretation of what for him and for his audience was the definitive source of light and truth – shed by divine providence over the centuries of Christian enlightenment – the holy Scriptures.

Although the *Song of Songs* made its way into virtually all of Ambrose’s writings, in the interest of space and time, this inquiry has focused on three treatises which were destined for Ambrose’s congregation at large and in which the *Song of Songs* belonged to the structure of the whole. Some of his writings, therefore, which one might most expect to be analyzed in this

¹ Brown, *Augustine*, 71, 73. Ambrose appears to have been rather short (Dudden, 114). Also the earliest portrait of him from the 5th c. shows him as slight, with large eyes, holding a codex. This is as much a reflection of the era as it may have been of him personally.

dissertation are absent, though they are part of the conceptual framework and so they come into the discussion. These are the treatises on virginity, the sacramental catecheses, and the funeral oration for Valentinian II.

This dissertation began with the second of Ambrose's patriarchal treatises, the *De Isaac*. It is a description of the spiritual itinerary of the soul, placed in the double framework of the *Song of Songs* and the Biblical figures of Isaac and Rebecca. Since it is relatively short and self-contained, a number of scholars have studied it; and a brief look at their analyses brings us to a first insight into the role of the *Song of Songs* in Ambrose's writings. The *Song* is an allegory of love and as such it is a story. The structure of the *De Isaac*, therefore, is not that of a theological, rational development, but an unfolding story into which the reader is invited to enter. Ambrose follows fairly closely the sequence of verses in the Biblical book of the *Song*, and takes us through the windings of the heart of the bride, seeking, finding, and losing her beloved, until she finally succeeds in attaining a permanent union with him. From time to time Ambrose reminds his readers that this is also the story of Isaac and Rebecca; but as the treatise proceeds this Biblical pair recedes from view, until at the end of the treatise we are left with an elaborate development of the image of the winged fire of love, which leads to a final exposition in which Ambrose leaves aside all metaphors and allegories. In a move that may at first surprise, he has recourse to Plotinus to describe the state of final union of the soul with the highest Good. This brings us to a second insight into Ambrose's use of the *Song of Songs*. For him, as a story, it is like other traditional and Platonic myths, that lead us by the hand into spiritual knowledge surpassing the confines of normal human discourse and experience, though the story itself grows

out of our experience of true love and our need of this experience as an indispensable base for the spiritual ascent.

The second treatise examined was the *De Bono Mortis*. Ambrose included it in his series of patriarchal treatises as a sequel to the *De Isaac*. Where the *De Isaac* considers the growth in perfection of the soul in this life, the *De Bono Mortis* is an exhortation to prepare well for death. Interestingly, the *De Bono Mortis* contains a middle section devoted to a description of the final garden scene from the *Song of Songs*, a rather startling contrast to the otherwise highly Platonic discourse. Though the imagery from the *Song of Songs* comes into the treatise to give a description of the perfected soul as a paradise of beauty and goodness, the Eucharistic and Scriptural overtones are also unmistakable. During the course of his description of the garden-bride, Ambrose reminds his audience of the debt Plato owed to Scripture, since – as the apologetic argument goes – Plato took his own garden of Zeus from the description of Paradise in Genesis and in the *Song of Songs*. This might look like another example of the “Who borrowed from whom” argument – and it is that – but there are two added elements. First, Ambrose assimilates Plato’s soul to the bride of the *Song*; so regardless of the question of who received his wisdom from whom, in Ambrose’s view Christ is the ultimate, if hidden, source of Plato’s wisdom. Second, as we realize by the end of the treatise, Ambrose attempts in the *De Bono Mortis* to show his readers the best of Plato and then to subsume it under the authority and the higher, purer light of the Christian Scriptures. Not until the end of the treatise do we realize the full import of the middle section devoted to the *Song of Songs*. This brings us to a third insight into Ambrose’s use of the *Song*. Under the guise of a myth, like Plato’s final myth in the *Phaedo*, the myth of Eros, and Plotinus’ birth of Aphrodite, the *Song of Songs* gives us the true

and ancient picture of the happiness of the soul when she has found the highest Good and can rest and rejoice in it. For Ambrose, the real, true keys to such happiness are the Scriptures and the sacraments, so richly evoked by the food and spice imagery of the *Song*. For me, one of the fascinating and poignant aspects of the *De Bono Mortis* is to see Ambrose's deep engagement with Platonism as a way of life and as a satisfactory account of the soul and of human nature. If life's courses had been a little different, Ambrose himself might have been one of those Platonists he tried to reach in the *De Bono Mortis*. It was in order to appreciate this deep connection Ambrose had with Platonism and to measure the impact of his critique of Plato, that an abridged version of the whole treatise was presented here.

Finally, Ambrose's *Expositio Psalmi 118* is a verse by verse commentary on the great psalm dedicated to the Old Testament Law. Verse-by-verse for Ambrose means something quite different from what one might expect from a Jerome or a modern exegete. It means that each verse of the psalm does receive some remarks, but Ambrose usually singled out one or two verses of particular interest in a stanza for in-depth review. So Ambrose's exposition proceeds from one point of interest to another; and in this context of short essays on particular themes, the *Song of Songs* comes in as an interpretive tool for the sentiments found in the psalm. Again, the *Expositio* is not a systematic theological argument but something more like a mosaic, in which each piece and section brings to light some aspect of the moral and mystical life, under the Old Law (the psalm) and the New (Ambrose's portrayal of Christ and the Church as bride and bridegroom). Although Christ *is* the New Law and he is also, for the entire Christian tradition, the bridegroom of the *Song*, these connections do not seem to explain fully why Ambrose would use the *Song of Songs* from one end to the other of his commentary on Psalm 118.

In order to answer this question, we returned to a consideration of metaphor, allegory, and typological interpretation, outlined in a general way in the Introduction to the dissertation. This time, however, we reviewed them in terms of Ambrose's interpretation of Scripture. What is the role of Biblical and prophetic metaphor? How does it widen the possibilities of exegetical interpretation? Since in the exegesis of the *Song of Songs*, Origen was Ambrose's primary known source, we attempted to clarify his exegetical method by comparing it to that of Origen. First, we saw that according to Origen, a text of Scripture may be read on three different levels. Using a model of human anthropology, he calls them the *somatic*, *psychic*, and *pneumatic* levels. One and the same text may, in principle, be read on each level; the soul progresses from one level to the next as it grows in spiritual perfection. The correlation between the levels of meaning in the Scriptures and the structure of the human person is essential to Origen's exegetical method. Then, we saw that according to Origen, different Scriptural texts (passages and whole books) may be classified as *moral*, *natural*, or *mystical*. His exegetical method is based, therefore, on a double grid of three spiritual levels for one and the same text, combined with a classification of texts according to type of Scripture. Applying this double grid to the *Song of Songs* in particular, Origen thought of it as an *asomatic* and *mystical* book, the highest revelation of the Word to the perfected soul: a true – not a metaphorical – *epithalamium* sung by the true Solomon, the Word, as he is revealed in the Scriptures and present among men in the Incarnation.

Ambrose reworks and adapts Origen's exegetical principles, in order to bring the *Song of Songs* out of the high realms of spiritual perfection into the mainstream ecclesial life of his congregation at Milan. Though he understood Origen's method and had a keen sense of the

different spiritual levels of interpretation of Scriptural texts, he brought together Origen's divisions of meaning and classification of texts into a simplified and largely bipartite division between a *moral* and a *mystical* sense of one and the same text. For Ambrose, therefore, the *Song of Songs* is a mystical text in the fullest sense, but it is also a *somatic* text. That is, though he does not use Origen's term, the reality of human love in all its richness, from the sensual kiss to the marriage contract, is for Ambrose, the indispensable base for a true spiritual and mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. This brings us to a fourth insight into Ambrose's use of the *Song of Songs*. The road to mystical union with Christ begins, for Ambrose and his Milanese audience, with the ordinary loves of human existence. This grounding in the ordinary rhythm of human love is especially evident in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*, and we glimpsed reasons for this in the multiple pastoral difficulties he addresses there through his exegesis of the *Song of Songs*. One of the most striking examples was the moment when he called the scandalous adulterer standing before him the sleeping bride.

Knowing how Ambrose viewed the *Song of Songs* as a Biblical metaphor and an exegetical tool, we were in a position to ask why he would use it as a parallel text in his *Expositio Psalmi 118*. We outlined some personal reasons why he would wish to use the *Song* as a counterpart to Psalm 118. In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Ambrose likens himself to Joseph the foster father of Jesus and says that he (Ambrose) stands to his church in Milan as a proxy for Christ in his marriage to the Church. In the context of Luke, this is an aside. Yet, it shows how deeply Ambrose configured his self image to his duties as bishop. Commentary on the law and the aspirations of the Christian life using the *Song* would fall naturally into the hands of a bishop who saw himself and his own duties in terms of Christ's love and care for the

Church. There were probably other reasons as well that disposed Ambrose towards a use of the *Song of Songs* in his commentary on Psalm 118. Though he seems always to have maintained a reserved exterior, in his writings we find traces of a deep and personal attachment to Christ. He grew up in a pious household, with a mother who remained a widow, though her children seem to have been young when her husband died. His older sister was a consecrated virgin and if Paulinus may be believed, they entertained ecclesiastical visitors regularly during his childhood and youth in Rome. So he would have learned young the rudiments of Christian piety. This seems to be reflected in the fact that his earliest writings were for his sister Marcellina and the topic was virginity. A third aspect was his Nicene faith and what Lewis Ayres has called a “Nicene culture”. Put simply, if Christ is “true God from true God,” he is both the goal and the guide in the spiritual ascent. Thinking of him as the bridegroom of the Church fits this theological focus on his full divinity. Finally, Ambrose sees the sacraments as the indispensable foundation and nourishment for the Christian life. One’s full Christian identity comes from living as a member of the Church. As we have seen at many points throughout this dissertation, his sacramental catechesis is essentially linked to the *Song of Songs*. He uses it to show the baptized who they are as Christians and what kind of life they will lead as members of the Church. For Ambrose, therefore, the *Song of Songs* encapsulates the essential beauty and happiness of the Christian life.

This foundation clarifies much of the detail of Ambrose’s approach to the *Song of Songs* in his exegesis of Psalm 118. He clearly intended a correlation between the *Song* and the psalm, since the first and last stanzas of the Psalm commentary both contain large amounts of *Song* commentary: the beginning verses of the *Song* in stanza 1 and the final verses in stanza 22. Throughout the commentary on the psalm Ambrose proceeds in an informal progression through

the *Song of Songs* more or less in tandem with the psalm. We looked at stanzas 1, 11, 16, 17, and 22. In all five Ambrose used the *Song* to address particular issues and challenges he faced as he directed the church life of his congregation: the regular attendees who lived in sin, the lukewarm, the perpetual catechumens, the fussy matrons. It is surprising how much we learn about the climate of Christian Milan from these stanzas. They also give a magnificent, at times beautifully narrated, panorama of the institutional Church as the bride of Christ and as the community of the redeemed spanning frontiers of time and space, and even eternity since the bridegroom sits at the right hand of the Father. For Ambrose, the bride – both the institution of the Church and each individual member of his congregation – lives on all levels at once. Remembering the heady days after his baptism, Augustine writes:

Nor could I have enough in those days of considering with marvelous sweetness the depth of your wisdom for the salvation of the human race. How I wept at your hymns and canticles, moved to the quick by the sweetly resounding voices of your Church! Those voices flowed into my ears, and the truth melted into my heart, and from this burned the ardor of love, and my tears flowed, and I was happy in them.²

Who was the orchestrator of those canticles and tears if not Ambrose?

One interesting aspect of the commentary on Psalm 118 is the presence of literary features either absent from or incidental to the *De Isaac* and the *De Bono Mortis*. Virgil and Ovid both enter into the imagery in subtle but unmistakable ways. Phyllis and Dido mirror by contrast the successful and reciprocal love of the *Song of Songs*. In stanzas 1 and 22 we also find elaborate rhetorical set pieces, an *ekphrasis*, a mock judicial inquiry, a prayer rich in rhetorical figures, verging on poetry, even a representation of the kind of marriage arrangements any

² nec satiabar in illis diebus dulcitudine mirabili considerare altitudinem consilii tui super salute generis humani. quantum flevi in hymnis et canticis tuis, suave sonantis ecclesiae tuae vocibus conmotus acriter! voces illae influebant auribus meis, et eliquabatur veritas in cor meum, et exaestuabat inde affectus pietatis, et currebant lacrimae, et bene mihi erat cum eis (Augustine, *Conf.*8.6).

number of Milanese families would recognize as their own. These literary elements indicate a wider audience for the *Expositio Psalmi 118* than for the other two treatises. One thinks of the pagan husbands of Christian wives, who might accompany their family to church, hear about the sermon second-hand, or pick up a copy of the bishop's commentary.

Finally, Ambrose placed the *Song of Songs* in his commentary on Psalm 118 because it represents the definitive divine response to the intolerable waiting for the advent of a savior (stanza 1) and the failure of the Law to bring freedom from sin and true life (stanza 22).

Ambrose dwells at length on the last verse of the psalm: "I have wandered like a sheep..." After composing a memorable prayer for the sheep, he expands the metaphor to include the whole of fallen humanity and shows how all the damage and suffering caused by sin have been redeemed and reversed by the marriage of the bride. In this way, stanza 22 forms the inclusive counterpart to stanza one.

In general, therefore, what was the significance of the *Song of Songs* for Ambrose? First, it is an allegory of love. It is a story, and this fundamentally poetic element was naturally appealing and useful to Ambrose who instinctively knew how to make metaphors speak. Different early Christian writers have different excellences. Ambrose was not an Augustine and not a Jerome; his excellence lay in an intuitive understanding of the close bond between poetic image and the lives and hearts of his people. This is why he was such a great motivator, why he could bring Augustine to tears, why he could mobilize the city in 386. He knew how to touch that deep layer of knowledge where knowledge and life meet. Second, the love story of the *Song of Songs* has a happy ending. Though it contains the ache of desire that sometimes waits indefinitely and the sorrow of loss, the love described in the *Song* finally triumphs over all

obstacles and unites the bride and bridegroom in a joyous and permanent love. So it is an apt image for the triumph of Christ and the winning of his bride through the cross and Resurrection. This is also one reason why I think Ambrose brings his lovers to marriage in every treatise where they play a central role. Third, since the love of which it tells surpasses all human understanding, the *Song* encapsulates both the highest goal and the farthest reach for the human mind and heart. So Ambrose can use it, as we saw in the *De Isaac* and the *De Bono Mortis*, like any other Platonic myth. But unlike the Platonic myths, the *Song of Songs* has behind it the full authority of divinely revealed truth; and it speaks of a union of love that will come to full fruition in an eternity of happiness.

The final question of this inquiry is what do we learn about Ambrose himself from his use of the *Song of Songs*? In a sense, Peter Brown has said it already. The formidable Ambrose was also a passionate man. We should perhaps suspect that this is the case in one who has such a deep love for this most sensual book of the Bible. As we have seen, however, Ambrose's love for the *Song* stems from a deeply ingrained poetic sense, beyond personal taste. For me, again, this all-pervasive poetic view of and connection with reality is the "genius" of Ambrose. In a young man of privileged status and education, this innate gift of the poetic sense might have gone in many directions; but in Ambrose's case it was combined with a long formation in the faith of Nicaea and the ideals of the Platonic ascent.³ This unique combination allowed Ambrose to walk a narrow path between a Christian life based on the Nicene faith, the Church, and the sacraments, on the one hand, and a Platonic view of the soul, on the other. It also allowed him to see the role of conscience in the formation of a man. Think of his admonition to the adulterer in stanza one of

³ Although in recent years Ambrose has been thought to have a more or less hostile disregard for philosophy (Maded), I think our analysis of the *De Bono Mortis* has shown clearly that this is not the case.

the *Expositio Psalmi 118*, where he concludes that even if no one else sees him sin, his conscience does; it is the interior and ultimate witness. Finally, this combination enabled Ambrose to see the absolutely fundamental role of love in the growth and perfection of the human soul. Plotinus himself had said that if one wished to understand the joy of union with the Good, one should look at one's human loves.

The "formidable" side of Ambrose also throve on the imagery of the *Song of Songs*. As bishop, he saw himself as standing in for Christ in the affairs of the church of Milan. As such he was duty bound to protect the rights, property, and freedom of his church as the most precious and sovereign bride of the Heavenly bridegroom. As he faced down Valentinian II and Theodosius he may not have been thinking at the time in these precise terms, but his sense of the inviolable sovereignty of the Church came from his view of it as an institution divinely instituted and divinely maintained.

His use of the *Song of Songs* reveals other qualities of Ambrose as well. This is his remarkable ability to synthesize his own spiritual self and his culture into a coherent whole. For reasons having to do with his personality and with the period in which he lived, he could envision the Church and the Christian life in the Church as a harmonious and unified effort in holiness under the guidance of the bishop and most especially under the guidance of Christ acting through the Scriptures, through preaching, and through the sacraments. Ambrose did not need to look farther into the relation between body and soul, for example, than Plotinus had seen. The troubling waters of original sin had not yet shown just how damaged the soul could be by the unruliness of the body. Even if one knew it by experience and by observing the comportment of individuals in one's congregation, the disorder had not yet reached canonical status, so to

speak. Infant baptism was not yet the norm. Just think of how this development would have changed Ambrose's sacramental catechesis!

On a more personal level, Ambrose never seems to have undergone the kind of crisis and conversion of an Augustine. Granted that the account we have in the *Confessions* is stylized, and groomed for public view, even so Ambrose's transition from catechumen and provincial governor to baptized and bishop seems to have been relatively smooth, as far as one may judge from the outside. The transition required no sacrifice on his part of Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Plato and Plotinus. They all came into the episcopacy with him, though he was most careful to sanitize them with the authority and the exemplars of the divine Scriptures. So, by letting Dido in her unhappy love come into his commentary on Psalm 118, he shows Christians through a beautiful and poignant image the contrast between the false and the true God of love; but he also at the same time – and most happily – presents Virgil as a treasure to be kept and cherished by future generations of Christians.

In the Introduction to this dissertation we mentioned the phenomenon of the double portrait of Ambrose: the Churchman in the gilded frame and the adroit politician. This distinction is only partially covered by Peter Brown's distinction between the formidable and the passionate Ambrose. But the point is that for a man of this stature, historians will always be groping for a synthesis they only partially see. I hope, however, that these two new insights of the poetic "genius" of Ambrose and his marvelous ability to create syntheses have added something to a more unified portrait.

Though the dissertation ends here, there are still many questions. I would like to end with two that have arisen over the course of this study. The first is connected to Ambrose's absolute,

uncompromising commitment to the life of the soul over that of the body. In one sense there is nothing new in this. But in Ambrose it is combined with a deep Roman sense of the practicality and the necessity of the institutions of human life, of the Church and marriage in particular. I think we glimpse a measure of sympathy and real compassion in the urbanity and humanity with which he approaches questions of marriage; and may we not think that Ambrose knew by experience what it meant to be in love? So we stand before a man, who, in the context of an urban and secular environment, is personally and pastorally committed to keeping the soul free of the demands and fetters of the body. He has a deep sense that the life of the soul may be beautiful and rich beyond compare. In this he is more like Plotinus than has perhaps been recognized. This deep love of beauty and purity is one of the driving motives behind both his love for the bride of the *Song of Songs* and his love for virginity in general. Thus, we see here in Ambrose's personal life and in his recommendations for his Christians a high level of personal spiritual asceticism in combination with a life fully engaged in the social networks of city life. I end this dissertation, therefore, with the question of Ambrose's approach to the interior life of asceticism. I am not speaking of institutions and of a general desire to step back from the life of the flesh, but of the deep sense of alienation (*alienatio*) as Ambrose uses the term in the *De Isaac*, in which the soul strives continually for union with the God, or with the Good, as Ambrose often says in sympathy with Plato.

The second question comes from the more or less hidden presence of Plotinus in Ambrose's thought in general and in his vision of the Church. The two men had radically divergent ideas of the structure of the universe. I am not suggesting, therefore, that Ambrose saw the Church as anything remotely like a Platonic form or one of Plotinus' spiritual hypostases.

Still, if one thinks habitually of intellectual and spiritual being as what is most real and within, then the idea of a mystical and spiritual reality existing truly but wholly within the mind and soul of each Christian – and this is where Ambrose places the Church – is more readily understood. The metaphor of the bride and bridegroom may be the only adequate image for such an idea.

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